



Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

Coaching Grab Bag

Hello colleagues and welcome to the Assistant Principal Podcast. I'm your host Frederick Buskey. The goal of this podcast is to help improve the life and leadership of assistant principals. This podcast compliments APEX, the Assistant Principal Exceleration program, but you certainly don't need to be an APEX member to find value in the podcast.

Today we are doing a coaching grab bag. Today's episode was inspired by my ongoing work with assistant principals from several different school districts. With these APs we've already looked at different types of teacher observations (there are four), some basic observation tools, and some post-observation conferencing strategies. Last month each AP chose one thing to focus on helping a single teacher improve on. Earlier this week we unpacked their experiences and there was so much to talk about.

One of the things that we did was a gallery walk in which the APs answered five questions:

- a. What did you feel best about?
- b. What impact did your coaching have on...?
 - i. You
 - ii. Teachers
 - iii. Students
- c. What barriers to success did you face?
- d. What coaching skills do you want to grow?
- e. What questions do you have?

As I said, there was a lot to unpack. So much that I was inspired to record this podcast. To be clear, this is not an episode on "How to Coach." This is an episode that examines a number of the issues that shape, influence, and arise from coaching. First, I'll set the context for coaching in general, we'll talk about some barriers to coaching, and then we will explore a number of tips and techniques.

Part 1: The Coaching Context

As I say every episode, this podcast is built around the principles of strategic leadership:

- Prioritizing purpose over urgency
- Addressing problems not of symptoms
- Driving incremental progress rather than big change
- and focusing on people instead of tasks

We are going to spend a couple minutes reviewing those four principles now, but for a deeper dive listen to the first episode of the podcast. If you are a visual person, I've uploaded the video

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for the podcast that includes all the graphics that I discuss. You can find that at frederickbuskey.com.

The first principle of strategic leadership is focusing on purpose instead of urgency. This is a huge challenge for most APs as everyone wants or needs something from you and they want/need it NOW! Great APs refine their systems and act intentionally to create time to focus on what is really important.

One way to create that time is to focus on solving problems instead of treating symptoms. A typical example of this is dealing with multiple discipline referrals from a single teacher for minor infractions. Over and over again. Student referrals are the symptom, but the real problem is that the teacher cannot manage their classroom. until we help the teacher, we will be trapped on the discipline treadmill – working, working, working, but not really making anything better.

Speaking of making things better, the third principle of strategic leadership is making progress instead of trying to fix things. In the example with the teacher, if I try and “fix” that teacher by trying to correct all their faults, it will be a long time before that happens. On the other hand, if I can help that teacher establish one simple classroom procedure, things will get a little better. Incremental improvement today, no matter how small, is more valuable than a bigger change later.

If we can spend more time being purposeful, solving problems, and making things a tiny bit better each day, then we can do the most important thing of all: grow our people. The first three principles of strategic leadership are important because, when we execute them, we are then able to focus on the fourth principle, growing people.

Let’s take this one step further and contextualize your work.

As a school leader, you have two responsibilities:

- Keep everyone safe
- and maximize student learning.

You don’t actually teach students, so the primary way to increase student learning is to improve teacher quality.

So, you have these two huge rocks: keep everyone safe, help teachers get better. Everything else is pebbles. That doesn’t mean the pebbles aren’t important, many of them are critical, but they aren’t THE most important thing.

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I think I know what some of you are thinking right now, “That’s nice theory Frederick, but we live in the real world where it is crazy out here.” To which I reply “Yes, but...”

I sit in meetings where the principal, assistant principal, and instructional coach discuss teacher growth. They share their observations of a given teacher specific to the growth goal they have for that teacher. They discuss how to support individual teachers and they look for patterns that influence what the instructional coach is planning for professional development.

I’m not talking about wealthy suburban schools. These are rural schools with struggling economies, high poverty rates, and all the negative things that are impacting our rural communities right now. Saying that a focus on growing teachers isn’t possible is not true, I have seen it.

Saying it might not be possible - yet – in your school is legitimate. So part of this podcast is about coaching, but part of it is also about the yet, about how we start to shift our school structures so we can get to the important work of helping our teachers grow.

One of the other critical conceptual frameworks for today is leverage, which also has four principles. Yes, I like things in groups of four. It makes balancing the diagrams easier.

The four principles of leverage:

- $0 > 1$: This is the fulcrum, and the closer we get to treating a problem (instead of a symptom) the closer we move the fulcrum to the load.
- A-B: means incremental change. This might be THE most critical concept for today. Think of one of your struggling teachers and you can come up with 15 things they need to improve on, but we can only work on one thing at a time and one step at a time. A-B is just the first baby step.
- MVP: is a minimally viable plan. This works with A-B because when we are only taking a small step, or moving a small load, we can use a very simple plan
- Finally, $M = V/E$: or motivation equals value divided by effort. When it comes to helping teachers grow, there is no such thing as a motivation problem. It is simply a calculation – is the value (or benefit) worth putting in the effort it will take to achieve it? If we want to increase motivation, we can increase value, decrease the effort required, or do both.
 - Specific to helping teachers, an A-B step means a lighter load, so it requires less effort. In addition, A-B steps can be achieved quickly resulting in immediate incremental improvement. Immediate change, even if it is small, increase value.

So in looking at growing our teachers, it is absolutely critical to apply leverage by focusing on one critical area, identifying baby steps, and then engaging in the process of incremental change.

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Another way to think about this is through the train analogy. Think about a train engine and 30 cars sitting idly on a track. When the train first starts, it would be impossible for one engine to pull all the cars at once – there is too much weight behind the engine and too little friction on the rails. So how do trains start?

When a train stops, each coupling on every car relaxes and creates slack. When a train is standing still, each car, even though it is coupled to adjacent cars, is not in tension with them.

When the engine first moves forward, the slack between it and the first car is eliminated so the engine is pulling that car. The slack still exists between every other car. As the first car begins to move it then takes up the slack of the second car, so now two cars are moving. This process repeats until finally that engine is pulling the entire train.

So, to move a train, or a school, you need to start with one car, or one teacher. Much of this podcast is predicated on the assumption that we are only talking about helping one single teacher to grow. Yes, all your teachers need to get better and yes, some of your teachers need to get way better, but if you can help only one grow, that is still improvement and therefore success. Once you are growing one teacher you can look at the next one, but let's try and stay focused on the first car today.

So, how do I pick the first car? Consider $M=V/E$. What teacher would yield the most growth (value) with the least effort? Here are some things to consider:

- A teacher who wants to get better is less effort to work with
- Helping a teacher who has lots of discipline issues will ultimately lower your workload, so that is a high V

So, if the whole teacher coaching thing is new to me, if I'm working on my own and not as closely with my P and IC, or if I am very busy all the time, then, generally, the ideal person to work with is an early career teacher who wants to improve but who has poor classroom management skills. As an aside, consider that this year, 2021-22, you may have first year teachers who actually never had student teaching!

There is one more thing to think about before we get to some nuts and bolts.

Ideally, all teacher development should be a part of a systemic approach. There should be an instructional leadership team in place, consisting of the P, AP, IC and maybe other people. That ILT should meet weekly and should discuss the growth of individual teachers as well as groups of teachers. Observations and feedback should be coordinated as should professional development. That's the ideal. I'm not saying that principals who don't do this are bad. I am saying that in the schools where teachers grow and improve, this is what those principals are doing.



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Whether you are in a school that takes a systemic approach to teacher growth or not, most of this content should apply to you.

One of the common challenges is knowing which coaching stance to begin with. There are three basic stances:

- Reflective, in which the coach basically serves as a mirror. The outcome is that the teacher tells the coach what the teacher will do next. This is usually best for high performing or highly reflective teachers.
- Collaborative is where the teacher and coach work together, with each leading the conversation at different times. In this stance, the next steps are mutually agreed upon. Most teachers can benefit from this form of working together.
- In directive coaching, the coach leads and determines what the next steps will be. We generally think of directive coaching as being for teachers who are “in trouble” or facing an action plan. While directive coaching usually is a good match for poorly performing teachers, it doesn’t need to be adversarial or negative. If I am drowning, I don’t want you to teach me to swim and I don’t want to talk about what stroke would be best. I need you to throw me a life preserver! In the same way, a teacher who is struggling may want the coach to come in and direct the teacher towards a better path.

There are many different models for coaching. I’m working on my own, but it’s not ready yet so the source I rely on the most is Elena Aguilar’s *The Art of Coaching*. I’ll include a link in the show notes.

For the rest of this podcast I’d like you to consider using the perspective of a directive coaching stance. It is easier to move from directive to collaborative than from collaborative to directive. I’m assuming that you have chosen a newer teacher who wants and needs help, most likely with classroom management, so the directive approach is very appropriate.

One of the places we get into trouble when coaching is in trying to get the teacher to change too much at once. For example, we might direct the teacher to implement a procedure for how kids come into a room and start class. At the elementary level this might be equivalent to how kids transition from one activity or subject to another, but I’ll continue to use the starting class example as that’s more of my background.

There are three fundamental steps to coming into class:

- Entering the room
- Preparing to work
- Getting to work



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For someone who is struggling with procedures, or who perhaps has never even been exposed to them, trying to attend to all three of these things AND learning how to teach and reinforce them is overwhelming. It feels like a huge effort (and risk) with an unsure outcome (value), so motivation is low.

In contrast, we can focus on an A-B step. Let's just teach kids how to enter the classroom. Let's just teach the teacher how to teach the procedure, or maybe we even teach the kids the procedure.

Once that's working, we can move to the next A-B step, which might be how students should prepare to work (how they sit down, where they put their stuff, what should be on the desk) and how to reinforce positive execution of the procedure. But we do this step only after the teacher has successfully gotten kids to walk into class the right way.

It is easier to just focus on one piece of the implementation, so effort (E) is lower. Because we can create an immediate improvement, V is greater. It doesn't matter that the improvement is small, it is improvement.

In the process of moving from A-B a couple of things happen:

- We get incremental improvement
- We also build trust. Trust that what we teach them is helpful. Trust that we really are on the teacher's team.
- We also learn how to better support them. Do we need to be more directive and provide more intervention or support? Can we loosen up and become more collaborative?

As you can already see, coaching is an ongoing process, not a one-off event. We first do A-B, then B-C, then C-D and so on.

We aren't walking step-by-step through the entire coaching process, that's too complex for a podcast. But I do want to say something about how we kick off a coaching engagement.

When you coach a teacher, you should be doing it for the teacher, not for the kids. You are free to disagree with me, here is my reasoning:

- We work in a great profession because we shape the future.
- We also work in a really difficult and frustrating profession because... well, you already know why.
- The positive parts outweigh the negative parts when we are effective at helping kids grow.
- Ineffective teachers don't help kids grow so their career is not rewarding.



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- As leaders, we have an ethical obligation to help our teachers achieve one of two things:
 - Get good enough at helping kids that the teacher has a rewarding career or
 - Help the teacher identify a better career option and transition out.
- When we see a teacher who is 10-20 years into the profession and they can't teach and are miserable, that is our fault, that is our failure to help that teacher.

Of course, the greater purpose behind teacher improvement is for the kids, but when working with a struggling teacher, do it for that teacher. It completely changes the dynamic of the relationship, and if in the end that teacher needs counseled out, it is easier for you to help them do that because you care about them, as opposed to trying to get rid of them.

As I said, you are certainly free to disagree, but in my experience, prioritizing the teacher's well-being in a coaching cycle is a win for everyone.

Let's imagine the same conversation from these two different perspectives.

Perspective 1:

Mr. P, I know from your teacher observations and test scores that you are struggling with student engagement. Your kids need you to be better, so I'm going to help you implement some engagement strategies.

Perspective 2

- Mr. P, your passion for your subject is evident and you clearly would like to have an impact on your students.
- At the same time, only one of your students appeared engaged and was responding to your lecture.
- I know you care and I imagine this is a frustrating situation. I'm confident that I can help you get more student engagement, have fewer discipline issues and begin to have some fun teaching. You work too hard for that not to happen.

Remember, we have chosen to work with someone who wants to get better, so either approach should work, but which approach sounds like you are on the teacher's team?

There is a lot more to cover, but I think we will begin wrapping this up.

I've made the assumption that you have chosen ONE teacher who wants to get better.

I realize there are resistant teachers who need to get better, but you can get more bang for your buck by focusing on those who want to grow. It like putting the lightest train cars in the front.



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I also want to reiterate that if you have a high functioning instructional leadership team, this whole thing becomes easier. If you don't have that kind of a team, maybe consider forwarding this podcast to some other leaders in your building. You can blame me for stirring up trouble.

Even if you don't have a team, you can make a difference for one teacher, one small, tiny difference in the next seven days. How cool would that be? And in the process, maybe you'll have one fewer office referral a week, which gets you 10-45 minutes of time to reinvest in helping that teacher or maybe another.

This isn't a magic bullet. It is hard, its messy, and it can be intimidating. But there are leaders who are doing this, who are helping their teachers and, in the process, helping their kids and having a better life and leadership.

As we close, I have a request. This podcast is for you, so please let me know what you think. Send me an email and tell me what's working. Tell me how to make it better. If you want to hear a specific topic, let me know. If you know someone who would be a great guest, connect me with them. You can email me at frederick@frederickbuskey.com

If you enjoyed today's show, please subscribe and rate this podcast. If you'd like more content tailored towards the needs of assistant principals, you can head over to my website at frederickbuskey.com. You might want to consider looking into APEX to accelerate your journey in instructional leadership and you can find more about APEX on the website.

That wraps up today's show! I'm Frederick Buskey and I hope you'll join me next time for the Assistant Principal Podcast.

Links:

My email: frederick@frederickbuskey.com

The Assistant Principal Podcast website: <https://www.frederickbuskey.com/appodcast.html>

Elena Aguilar, The art of Coaching, <https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/the-art-of-coaching-effective-strategies-for-school-transformation-elena-aguilar/8984956/?resultid=4908afea-0d19-4a8d-adb5-3f2c69e8a81d#edition=8265430&idq=5291743>

Link to a video of a teacher that is interesting to think about (this is not my video):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frK7UoNo8Og&t=8s>

<https://www.frederickbuskey.com/apex-members-page.html>