



# Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

## **The Assistant Principal Podcast Episode 8: Who Should I Coach?**

If I can only coach one teacher, who should I coach?

I've been working with the APEX assistant principals on coaching this fall. Knowing that people are very busy, we've been focusing on coaching just one person.

In all honesty, it hasn't gone that well. There have been some successes, but lots of stumbling blocks as well.

What I am learning from this is just how complex coaching is. Of course, we can do very basic coaching without needing a ton of training, but every step carries its own complexities.

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. Today, we are taking a deep dive into one simple question – who should I coach?

After listening to this podcast, you might want to head over to my website, [frederickbuskey.com](http://frederickbuskey.com), to watch the video. There are several key graphics that go along with today's show and watching this show after listening to it should increase the value many fold. I will also include images in the show notes.

Before going further, please know that most of this podcast was written before I listened to Jennifer Gonzales' Cult of Pedagogy podcast from October 19, 2021. I'll include a link in the show notes, but her main point is that teachers are in an extra fragile state right now... now being the 2021-22 school year which, for many people, has been even more disruptive and challenging than 2020-21. Jennifer's podcast has forced me to reflect on my message of growing people. So, I am going to go through the podcast as I had originally intended. At the end, I will share my current thinking on how to adapt the content to this unique and, I hope, temporary context.

Okay, on with the show.

There are three main things we need to consider to identify that one teacher to focus on:

- First, what are the other avenues of professional development that teachers have open to them?
- What system of supports does the instructional team provide for teachers?
- What do you hope to gain from coaching?

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



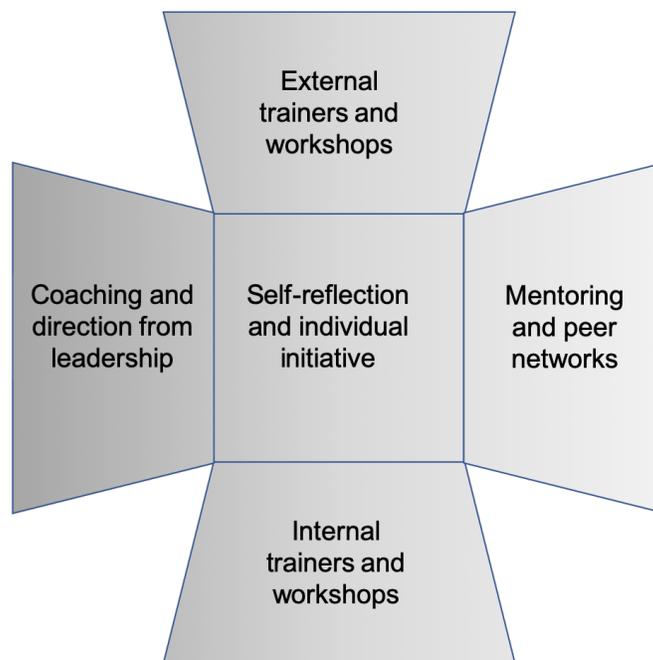
## Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

We'll explore these questions and at the end of the podcast I'll provide my generic answer to the primary question, "who should I coach?"

---

Coaching does not happen in a vacuum. Coaching is just one strategy to help teachers grow. In the ideal world where resources are infinite, every teacher would benefit from highly personalized intense coaching. However, in the real world we need to view coaching as just one way to help teachers grow.

To better understand this, let's look at what I call the cube of development.



The cube of development is simply a metaphor for the multiple ways that teachers can grow. While a cube has six sides, I've only identified five paths for teacher growth. Maybe I should call it the pentagram of development, but cube sounds much cooler and I'm sure there is one thing that I have missed. Feel free to email me if you know what the missing side is!

The most common, and most powerful, way that teachers get better is through self-reflection and individual initiative. Self-reflection is the top of the cube. Good teachers routinely reflect on their practice and when they find things they want to improve, they look for resources, learn from those resources, and work to implement that new learning.

However, many teachers are not as self-reflective as we would like. Let's be clear though, that lack of self-reflection is usually not their fault. In fact, we could say the same thing about

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



## Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

ourselves: most school leaders aren't as self-reflective as we should be. And again, it's not really our fault.

I might dedicate a future podcast to helping teachers become more reflective, but for today I will just enumerate the challenges to being reflective:

- Lack of time. If there is a magic bullet in education, providing more time for teachers to learn, plan, assess, and design is it.
- Pressure and fear both inhibit reflection and there is lots of that going around.
- The work that teachers do has become very fragmented. It isn't simply a matter of prepping for three sections of English 10. There are so many other demands that not only cost time but which also fragment thinking and erode the concentration and focus required for deep reflection.
- There is often little to no accountability or follow-up support for implementation beyond what the teachers can do for themselves. When I say accountability, I mean that in a positive sense. If we are going to put energy into learning something, then we should also put energy into supporting full implementation.

Internal training and workshops is the second side of the cube. Professional learning communities, or PLCs, are the most common example of this, but there are also book studies, lunch and learns, and a plethora of other formats. Instructional coaches and school district personnel may also lead small or whole group training. Topics may be identified by teachers, but more frequently someone else, an instructional expert or administrator, has determined the topic. It is also important to understand that these are group trainings and are rarely individualized for the needs of a specific teacher. An advantage of internal PD is that follow-up and implementation support are much more likely to exist.

External trainers and workshops are similar to internal ones except they may happen either on or offsite and the trainer is not a district employee. This allows for bringing in trainers who are true experts on a specific topic. When the trainings occur onsite, they are for a group of teachers. Typically, an expert will come to the school during a PD day or for an afternoon and do a training. The expert may also work with small teams of teachers during the school day, but when trainings occurs offsite they can serve as individualized professional development for teachers who chose to go. The biggest downsides to external PD is cost and the lack of follow-up support.

Mentoring and peer networks are the fifth side of the cube. Mentoring typically occurs when veteran teachers are paired with entry year teachers, but mentoring can happen in multiple other situations both formally and informally. Peer networks involve more than two teachers and are usually collaborative in nature. In these PD forms, teachers generally take the lead. Because they are teacher led, and often teacher initiated, mentoring and peer networks can be extremely responsive to both group and individual teacher needs. They also offer a safe environment and encourage experimentation. The challenge with mentoring and networking

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



## Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

stems from their strength. They are teacher led, so if teachers are too busy to lead them, they don't happen. They also require a supportive administration that conveys a high degree of trust in its teachers.

Finally, the fifth side of the cube consists of coaching. The beauty of coaching is that it is completely individualized. When done well, coaching provides support for implementation as well as accountability. There are a couple of things to understand here:

- Coaching is an intentional and ongoing endeavor. Doing a twenty-minute observation and giving a teacher an “I wonder” statement is not coaching.
- Coaching has a specific performance goal, and
- it consists of multiple cycles of learning, implementation, observation, and analyzing results.
- There are four stances of coaching. The stance describes the relationship between the coach and the coachee:
  - In the directive stance, the coach takes the lead. The coach determines the focus of the coaching, leads in developing the specific elements of support, and leads in evaluating progress. An example of directive coaching is what we generally see in athletics in which coaches provide very specific feedback on skills that the coach identifies. The athletic coach also structures the learning (drills) and does most of the evaluation.
  - In the collaborative stance, the coach and the coachee take turns leading. The focus of the coaching, learning activities, and evaluation measures can all be jointly identified.
  - In the reflective stance, the coachee takes the lead. The job of the coach is to listen, to ask questions that lead to deeper understanding, and to provide support as determined by the coachee.
  - Finally, there is the transformative stance, which I don't talk about often. The transformative stance focuses on creating fundamental changes to how the coachee sees the world. The transformative stance is about changing how we think more than how we act. For example, when you as an assistant principal help a teacher with strong leadership potential grow out of their classroom and begin to see the school as a whole, rather than a collection of classrooms, that's getting at a transformative experience. Another example would be bringing teachers from a deficit mindset to an asset mindset. Following the transformation, we are likely to engage in other stances to drive skill development, but the transformative stance drives these fundamental shifts in how we perceive the world.

So back to our topic. In thinking about how we should choose a person to coach, I am going to assume that your time is extremely limited. If you live in an alternate reality where you have lots of time and can do in-depth coaching with multiple people, then who you choose becomes

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



## Assistant Principal *Exc*eleration

a much less important decision. However, if you are like most school leaders and struggle just to get into classrooms to do observations, let alone engage in meaningful coaching cycles, then who to target for coaching is a high-stakes decision. If you can only coach one person, you better choose the right person.

So we've looked at how coaching is just one way to help teachers grow. In my work with school leaders, I advocate for the development of a system of teacher growth in which every teacher has growth goals and corresponding opportunities and support to meet those goals.

I know that many of you listening may say that's not possible, but I have been in schools that have such systems in place. I'm not talking about wealthy suburban schools; I'm talking about poor rural schools. With the logistical challenges and disruption of COVID, building this system is more difficult now than it was three years ago, but building it is still possible.

Here is a sobering thought. If I have no goal to get better, and I have no plan to get better, then any improvement is a coincidence. That is true for you and I as leaders, it is true for our principals, and it is true for our teachers.

Understanding that coaching is a part of a system is so important that we will take just a few minutes here to describe that system. Don't worry though because we will also consider who to coach in the absence of such a system.

The system has three parts:

1. We need to know what teachers need. To do that we need to know how well each teacher's students are learning, we need to have accurate data from teacher observations, and we need to know what the teacher's goals and perceptions are. This last point is critical. Teachers need to be the drivers of their own improvement, so they should be the ones that take the lead in setting their growth goals.
2. Once we know what our teachers need, we must develop the structures to support meeting those needs. This begins by establishing an instructional leadership team that meets weekly to support teacher growth. Members of that team collect data, mostly in the form of teacher observation, and use that data to plan for, deliver, or identify professional development opportunities for teachers. Remember that according to our cube, these "professional development activities" can take any of five forms (self-reflection, internal or external training, peer and mentoring, and coaching).
3. The final part of the system is evaluation. To know whether we've met our goals, we need to evaluate them. Evaluation then leads to the next cycle of identifying need. Were we successful? Great, let's figure out what our next growth goal was. Were we unsuccessful? Okay, let's figure what's not working and why.



## Assistant Principal *Exc*eleration

In this systems approach, coaching will usually come up as the answer to the question I just asked. “Were we unsuccessful? Okay, let’s figure what’s not working and why.” Coaching is a high-cost development option. It is high cost because your time is extremely limited and therefore extremely valuable. If participating in a PLC will lead to the desired growth, then we don’t need coaching. However, when PLCs and other sides of the cube either haven’t worked or aren’t available, then coaching becomes an important option.

So, the first things to consider in choosing someone to coach are:

- What are the teacher’s goals for growth?
- What PD options does the teacher have and what have they tried?
- Have they been successful using those other options?

If teachers are meeting their growth goals without coaching, then they don’t need coaching.

If you are working in a school that takes a systemic approach to teacher development, like what I described earlier, then it will probably become clear who would make a good candidate for coaching. If you aren’t in such a system, or if it still isn’t clear, then we move to the next factor.

If we are limited in the time we have to invest in coaching, then it is crucial that we identify a teacher with whom we can have the biggest impact for the least effort.

For example, if we can help a new teacher improve their classroom management with three weeks of coaching support, that might be a higher priority than six months of coaching to help a different teacher learn to design authentic performance assessments. It’s not that authentic performance assessments aren’t important, but an immediate improvement in classroom management for a new teacher might be more valuable in the current moment.

Another way to think of this is investing the least effort, or E, for the most value, or V. The equation is  $V/e$ , and if you can achieve a big V with a little e, then that’s a good equation. This is true for both you and for the teacher. In fact,  $V/E=M$  is one of the most important equations in leadership. That M stands for motivation, and motivation is the function of perceived value, or V, divided by perceived effort, or E. Greater value and lower effort lead to increased motivation.

So, what constitutes value, or V? There are different things, but here are some forms of V that you should consider:

- Future savings of your time. In the example above, helping a teacher to better manage their classroom may save you time dealing with disciplinary referrals later. If you had one less referral each week, that would be 20-40 minutes that you could invest back into supporting your teachers. That’s huge.



## Assistant Principal *Exc*eleration

- Short time to improvement. A small improvement today is worth much more than a large improvement a month from now. Strategic leaders prioritize consistent incremental gains, so if you can help someone grow in just a few coaching sessions, that's critical.
- The teacher's health, mental, emotional, and physical. Teachers are under more stress than ever before, and if our coaching can help them feel better about their performance or feel less stressed, then that is a win.
- Student learning and safety – because that's what we are all about.

On the flip side of V, we need to consider e:

- Is the teacher's goal one that you can help with, either directly or indirectly? Supporting development of something you know well is much easier than going outside your wheelhouse.
- Is there a reasonable chance of quick success? Or any success?
- And perhaps the biggest one, does the teacher want coaching? It may be that the chance for the most gain lies with someone who is resistant to coaching, but if you can only coach one person, do you want to roll the dice and hope that you can break through? Not if there is lower hanging fruit. This goes back to something I think I said in episode 6's coaching grab bag – coach for gain, manage for pain. We coach people so that they will grow. People who are unlikely to grow need to be managed, not coached.

Woof. I think we've covered a lot of ground today, so let's do a quick recap:

1. There are five ways that teachers grow, and coaching is one of those ways.
2. If we take a systems approach to teacher development, we work with teachers to identify goals (that is its own podcast topic) and we work as a leadership team to monitor and provide support so our teachers can be successful.
3. Coaching is a high-cost support strategy so choosing correctly is high-stakes choice because – your time is valuable.
4. We want to increase V by choosing a teacher whose:
  - a. success will save us time
  - b. will experience immediate improvements
  - c. will positively impact that teacher's health
  - d. and will improve student safety and learning
5. We want to decrease E by having a teacher whose:
  - a. goal aligns with our strengths
  - b. has a good chance of making quick improvements
  - c. Wants coaching

The biggest trap I've seen APs fall into is trying to coach someone who is either resistant, or who needs more support than the AP can give. Remember, coach for gain, manage for pain.



## Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

At the front end of this show I mentioned Jennifer Gonzalez's podcast on teacher's emotional health, and that it has impacted my thinking.

- I really believe that we always need to be getting better. If we aren't growing, then we are decaying.
- I have been advocating for meeting teachers where they are today, not where they were pre-pandemic. Most adults I talk with feel like they are not doing as well at their work as they were before March 2020. Still, we should be helping our teachers grow.
- However, Jennifer's podcast has me reconsidering. I equate growth with support, so when I say teachers need to grow, I'm also saying we need to support them. I can't bring myself to say that it is okay that a teacher has no growth goal and we should just be satisfied with letting them hang on. I can't bring myself to say that because I believe that when we get better at our craft, it helps us feel better about ourselves. Honestly though, I'm not sure. In fact, I'm rethinking the emphasis on coaching that we've had in APEX this year. I think that it is really important for you to get better at coaching this year. It will help your students and your teachers, but also bring value to your own soul. In a year that seems to be consumed with discipline and logistics, being able to walk out of the building knowing you helped a teacher get better seems more valuable than gold. I think, but I don't know.

I'd love to hear from you. Should we still be focusing on coaching? Should we stay committed to teacher growth? Or does the nature of the pandemic and other stressors dictate a different set of priorities? You can email me at [frederick@frederickbuskey.com](mailto:frederick@frederickbuskey.com)

If you enjoyed today's show, please subscribe and rate this podcast. This is the only show in world (that I can find) that is devoted to assistant principals. Subscribing and rating will help your colleagues find this series.

If you'd like more content tailored towards the needs of assistant principals, you can head over to my website at [frederickbuskey.com](http://frederickbuskey.com). You might want to consider looking into APEX, the Assistant Principal Exceleration program. You'll get weekly emails, tools, and be able to participate in monthly group coaching and webinars. I'd love to get to know you through APEX, but no worries if now is not the right time.

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](mailto:frederick@frederickbuskey.com)

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

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



## Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

Jennifer Gonzalez, [The Cult of Pedagogy](#), episode 179: The apple podcast link is [here](#), Spotify [here](#), and the link to her webpage is [here](#).

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&idig=5291743>