



# Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver



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## Send Me In Coach!



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* He is the author of *Points to Ponder* and also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning: Your Guide to PLCs and More..*

“Send me in coach!” is a phrase that is part of the American sports lexicon. The phrase evokes a mental picture of an eager and excited individual full of confidence and optimism and ready to do whatever is necessary to accomplish a goal. When the coach hears the words, he or she is filled with a sense of fulfillment knowing that the “player” has the skills and knowledge to accomplish the task before them

Coaching, however, is not unique to the field of sports. One place in which the concept of coaching has not been as pronounced is in our classrooms. In response to the need for educational reform, the concept of educational coaching has become more and more prevalent in school districts across the country. Educational coaches have been called the “new pioneers in public education.” The definition of coach as well as how coaches are assigned differs from district to district depending on the needs of the system as well as the funding available to support a district’s initiative. Titles such as school-based staff developer, instructional specialist, lead teacher, master teacher or mentor have been utilized in some school systems to describe the role of the instructional coach. In other areas, personnel have been classified as change coaches or content coaches who specialize in a selected curriculum area such as reading or mathematics. **The purpose of coaching remains consistent and clear: To improve instructional practices of teachers in order to increase student learning.**

Coaching holds great promise in the field of education; but like any other initiative it must be carried out with much thought and careful planning. As the concept of coaching has unfolded, it has undergone many ideations. In some districts, coaches have been selected at a district level and have been assigned to a specific school based on the school’s needs. In other systems, coaches support all schools, often targeting schools with the greatest need but also helping to promote district wide initiatives. A third practice is for individual schools to select a coach from the existing staff. The coach then becomes a general support for all teachers who work in the school. In most instances, coaches participate in training in ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to support the teachers with whom they will work.

Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to work with a number of instructional coaches and to talk to them about their roles. Some have achieved great success in their jobs while others have encountered frustration

and disappointment. Their success stories are inspirational. One coach described a teacher as frustrated and angry because she didn't know how to reach her students. After modeling lessons for the teacher and having the teacher observe a more experienced colleague, the teacher developed confidence and a more optimistic outlook. Other coaches reported success with helping an overwhelmed teacher move in three months from a meager (but eager) little mouse to a confident and effective teacher, helping teachers understand standards and how to develop engaging lessons that are meaningful and real world, and calling teachers' attention to their individual data and assisting them in developing an instructional focus based on the data.

Coaches, likewise, have identified drawbacks to their roles. Lack of administrative support and not having enough time to engage teachers in more hands-on learning are common frustrations expressed by coaches. One coach noted that she was perceived as the "gotcha girl" and she had to work hard to change that perception. Other coaches felt that they were "spread too thin" by working in too many schools to truly make a difference. Still other coaches encountered resistance from teachers who were using ineffective practices and saw no need to change. One coach expressed it best when she said that her biggest frustrations were "the ones that got away."

As I spoke with coaches about how they carried out their jobs, a clear pattern emerged regarding to the skills that are essential for a coach to have a positive impact on the teachers with whom they work. Below are descriptions of those skills along with some of the feedback coaches shared with me.

In order to impact student learning, coaches should:

1. **Leave one's ego at the door.** Many instructional coaches are selected for their role because they have been effective teachers themselves. Coaches soon learn, however, that it is often difficult to translate their skills as teachers to other individuals with whom they are assigned to work. In their work with teachers, coaches experience a myriad of reactions from outright resistance to "who do you think you are?" reactions to their ideas. Until they got their footing, the rejection that some coaches experienced caused them to feel confused and dejected. As one person put it, when it comes to instructional coaching: the faint hearted need not apply. It is important for coaches to remember that conflict is part of growth. They should not see themselves as failures. The reaction coaches elicit from teachers is not necessarily personal but may be the result of other factors over which the coach has no control.
2. **Clarify the role of the coach.** The role of the coach in a school must be clearly defined at the outset of the process. A crucial mistake that can occur is for the coach to be viewed by the teaching staff as an extension of the administration. When coaches are viewed as pseudo administrators trust is diminished and communication becomes minimal or non-existent. It also must be made perfectly clear that coaches are not evaluators. Clarifying the role of the coach in writing for the entire staff will help to alleviate some of the initial concerns the teaching staff may have about who the coaches are and what they have been assigned to do.
3. **Build relationships.** It became apparent to many coaches that they could not have any impact at all on student learning until they developed relationships with teachers. Some coaches who eagerly "charged into schools ready to make a difference" encountered negativity and passive aggressive responses to their efforts. One coach explained that "...it was naïve of me to think that I could make a difference without building a sense of trust with the teachers." Another coach soon realized that it was more



important to know when to back down in order to make progress as the relationship improved. A third coach learned that it was important “not to rush to judgment or be too critical or impatient” in his work with teachers. In short it is essential for coaches to possess strong interpersonal skills in order to fulfill the role of coach properly.

4. **Have an observable strong work ethic.** Coaches must be seen as hard working, dedicated individuals. As one coach explained, they cannot be viewed as someone who simply sits around the teachers’ lounge engaging in idle conversations with teachers. Although these conversations may have value, the perception may soon proliferate that coaches may not work as hard as classroom teachers. The most successful coaches carry out demonstration lessons, provide immediate and practical support for teachers, and quickly follow up requests made by staff members. One coach assigned to a single school took on the role of administering learning styles inventories to all students early in the school year and sharing the data with each teacher. From the start she was perceived as a hard worker.
5. **Listen, listen, listen.** As coaches become more comfortable in their roles, they soon learn how important it is to listen to the teachers they are supporting. One coach shared that she quickly learned that she could not go into a meeting with a teacher with the answer. Another coach explained that having an impact on changing the practice of a teacher required an investment of time to learn as much as possible about the teacher and this required a great deal of listening to their stories and personal experiences. As one coach put it, “Nothing was going to be accomplished until I heard the teacher’s point of view.”
6. **Encourage the use of data to influence practice.** Some teachers have little idea how to gather or use data on a routine basis. Far too often data is synonymous with an annual test score. Teachers are not trained to see data as on-going information that can help them to make instructional decisions and better meet the needs of students. Coaches must help teachers see the usefulness of data. In addition, the coach must assist the teacher in determining the next steps to take after analyzing classroom data. Coaches must emphasize again and again that the focus must always remain on student learning.
7. **Keep the focus on student learning.** When coaches schedule conferences with selected teachers, they find that certain teachers will quickly “get off task” in order to detract from the problem at hand. It is important for coaches to remember that their purpose is to promote and increase student learning. As one coach said, “I realized early on that I had to return again and again to the data before us, and to keep our discussions centered on the children and their learning.”
8. **Keep an open mind.** Although coaches are selected for their roles because of their expertise or demonstrated skills as a teacher, they must not make the mistake of advocating only instructional practices with which they are familiar. New coaches should approach their jobs with the understanding that they will learn just as much as they may teach. As they work with teachers, they should promote and model collaborative, reflective practice at all times.
9. **Admit what you don’t know.** None of us have all the answers. There is no shame in admitting when you don’t know the answer to a question presented to you. Although coaches should be grounded in best instructional practices, they should not be seen as the ultimate experts. A good practice is to admit what you do not know and turn the question posed into a learning experience for both parties. When a coach admits that they do not have “the answer,” it will show their human side and potentially



make them more appealing to the teacher with whom they are working. It will also demonstrate an important quality of a true professional: We should all be lifelong learners!

**10. Be an optimist.** I recently heard the phrase, “Optimism is our oxygen” by someone undertaking a new challenge. As coaches work with staff members, they may encounter negativity from teachers who see instructional coaching as “one more educational initiative that won’t work.” Although coaches may experience criticism and negative reactions, they should do their best to maintain an optimistic outlook.

One coach expressed her job satisfaction this way: “Helping the teacher to persevere and not give up and celebrating their successes, no matter now small, is very satisfying. It is hard work but ultimately it is worth it. I have to keep believing that I can and will make a difference.”

When the concept of instructional coaching is carefully developed and implemented, it can have a powerful effect on the climate of a school. In order for coaching to work in a school, it must have the support of a visionary leader who is willing to nurture and support the coaching initiative. From a coach’s perspective, there can be no greater satisfaction than opening the mind of a teacher to try new approaches, to embrace new ideas, and to become excited about students and their learning. When a teacher leaves a coaching session full of enthusiasm and confidence, ready to face their students, the message they are conveying to their coach is clear: “Send me in coach!”

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