**Coaching Teachers & Students: Establishing a Culture of Trust**

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Abstract

No one curries favor with the prospect of being evaluated, whether one is an administrator, teacher, or student. Yet, evaluations are necessary and can be viewed from a positive perspective in a congenial, trusting relationship. When we feel secure, the guidance of a peer or more knowledgeable person can truly be welcomed. This paper presents research and strategies to cultivate a climate of trust and steps toward indoctrinating the whole school in a transformative process that has been proven to benefit students academically, emotionally, and to improve administrator and teacher retention, especially those who are superstars to make a better school.

Biography

**Susan Labadi** believes that education is the solution to many world challenges, and through her company, **Genius School, Inc.**, she develops teachers and administrators, counsels boards for private parochial schools, and designs curriculum content for the Halal industries. Recognized as a notable instructor, administrator, public speaker, and coach, she is a leader orchestrating the ISNA Education Forums in Chicago and LA. Susan’s other company, in which she collaborates with her husband, is **Actionnet Trade, Inc.**, which specializes in reverse logistics and exports. She is project coordinator of the **American Halal Association**, managing their website, social media, editing and writing for *HalalConnect* magazine. Susan also edits for Thomson Reuters, handles press releases and articles for the **American Muslim Consumer Consortium**, and writes for ISNA’s *Islamic Horizons* and her blog at *It’s A Halal Life*.

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Performance evaluations make us cringe and they provoke anxiety, whether we are the administrator, teacher, or student. Viewed as a cat and mouse game, we understand that someone in a supervisory capacity has to make judgments to justify their position and to find angles to keep the subject under scrutiny motivated to improve. We know that there is plenty of room for bias and personal politics can be inherent to the outcome. Yet, we acknowledge that they are a necessary means of qualifying and sometimes quantifying performance, but what if we could change our mindset from one of feeling defensive about a microscopic analysis of who we really are and what we verifiably know toward something more positive, nurturing, and genuinely enriching?

Several researchers have worked on a model that is transforming school climate and helping build better schools. They use a coaching approach to work with administrators and faculty, and there is relevance to using this model to foster better, more personal and targeted relationships with students as well. As Isaac Newton stated, “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants” (Isaac Newton, n.d.). We can better our schools by working collaboratively and sharing knowledge and experiences that help us learn.

**Research on the benefits of coaching**

Going back to the 1960s, it was understood that although principals may have *told* teachers where they should improve, no one was asking the teachers. Citing further research between the 1980s through 2002 with the work of Joyce and Showers, Marzano writes that there was a statistically demonstrated improvement in teachers actually *implementing* their training when coaching was applied, and he further explains, “In other words, coaching provided the most effective means of helping teachers transfer newly acquired knowledge and skills to their classrooms” (2013, p. 5).

Jim Knight compared the traditional lecture approach of teacher professional development to what he terms a “Partnership Learning” model. This Partnership Approach features equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity (Knight, 2007, p. 37). In teachers’ self-reports, they indicated that they “learned more, engaged more, and enjoyed themselves more than in the traditional sessions” (2007, p. 39) Additionally, he qualified that the teachers were four times more likely to implement teaching practices they learned in partnership sessions than in traditional ones. (Knight, 2007, p. 39).

**Sounds Good, But How Do We Change?**

As creatures of habit, some perspective on resisting change is relevant. Loehr and Schwartz found that desire and willpower are not forceful enough to elicit change in many people (2003). Think about dieting, exercising, quitting smoking, and other habits, and the saying, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” If we think the current situation is sufficient, why risk change? Many of us can relate to this because we typically cling to the status quo. Transitioning professional development from the traditional experience to a coaching paradigm is often met with resistance until people understand more about its benefits, process, and a climate of safety is secured.

Arneson describes an amusing anecdote in her chapter titled, “Evaluations done ‘with’ Teachers, Not ‘to’ Teachers,” she was summarily given her evaluation in her faculty mailbox which described how she controlled the students but was remanded to not give them a break during class time (2014, p. 30). That evaluation was done ‘to’ her by a district employee unfamiliar to her, and she had no opportunity to discuss or learn anything from it which could realistically better her instructional practice. Hence, acknowledging this worst case scenario and honestly detailing the rationale for why a change toward coaching is preferred in part of the buy-in to transition.

**Getting Trust In Coaching**

Criticisms, sometimes impassioned, fly against the process when teachers feel that administration is not fair and sincerely helpful, but that is a two way street when administrators sense a mutinous climate from their board members, staff, faculty, and students’ parents. Yet, sometimes we must not give into this sense of vulnerability and show true leadership. Either strike out because you tried, or you’ll strike out anyway if as the leader of your school, department, or classroom-whatever your role-you do not utilize the authority inherent to your position. There is a fine line between leading and bossing, and the requirements to finesse this are detailed herein.

**Build Trust, Confidentiality, Respect, Vulnerability**

Coaching research expresses the need to establish a willingness to be supportive in relationships, to be willing to give the choice to the client being coached, to consistently meet to discuss and track measurable performance, and to in turn help others learn from successful achievements as well as failed attempts. The coach-client relationship is delicate but powerful, and a commitment to adhere to the school’s mission is the overarching motivation to drive professional growth and school success.

The best way to initiate coaching is at the first in-service. Descriptions of the benefits, process, and assurances of having choice give a sense of security and autonomy to all. Making coaching an elective gives time and opportunity to work out the initial resistance. Knight has found that when resistance is widespread, it is best to introduce the concept again in small groups or even in a one-to-one meeting (2007, p. 95-98). With a core group the program will have time to evolve naturally and gain followers.

With teachers examining their own performance interests, they can direct goals setting. These are delineated by Knight as The Big Four: behavior, content knowledge, direct instruction, and formative assessment. Danielson has extrapolated conversation topics from her Framework for Teaching, which guides many schools professional growth plans and offers ideas from which to create goals and initiatives (2009). In fact, one of them is the common implementation challenge of finding enough time. This could be the ideal entry topic to see if the challenge can be approached from a collaboration of teachers who can brainstorm and thereby use this as a trust building exercise. As equals, administration, staff, and faculty can work for the collective benefit to find solutions.

Collaboration has been recognized as the precursor to coaching as described by Lipton and Wellman in their Four Stances of calibrating, consulting, collaborating and coaching (2012, p. 7). Each of these has a supervisory function and each is a critical element of progressing. For example, calibrating serves the function of identification of the target; consulting entails deciding what tools and resources are relevant; collaboration examines what the supervisor can do to help guide the client; and coaching refers to the mental and emotional support the client needs. The term client is mentioned here because this model can also be applied to teacher-student development. The teacher-student learning development orientation can run in similar pattern to the administrator-teacher paradigm. The climate of trust and that it is normal to make mistakes as vulnerable humans is achievable when senior ranking people can demonstrate their imperfections. This carries a significant social credit in relationships.

An example of how to build trust is mentioned by Lipton and Wellman as referenced by Arneson (2014, p. 34) when a post-observation meeting review details that the administrator did not simply state what was “right” and what was “wrong.” Instead, the administrator asked the open ended question, “What are some thoughts you are having about your lesson?” The evaluation reflected not the actual incidents; rather, acknowledgement was given to the teacher for using the reflective process to improve practice.

The application of coaching does not necessarily mean that it is also restricted to a hierarchy because even fellow teachers and administrators can really be helpful to their peers. In a climate of trust, this can be impactful. Teachers observed each other’s classes where they share the same students, and one teacher can really relate and point out something about their practice or a student that is insightful. It takes a willingness to be observed and trust that observations will be constructive.

**How Do You Approach a Negative?**

There will be times when something negative must be addressed and corrected. The best means of getting in on the agenda is to find a couple of positive things to acknowledge. Then pull up the negative topic and state that you *wish* it was different. If you’ve established rapport, hopefully the details of the negative topic can be discussed in a non-threatening manner. Be sure to bring up the subject in private and when there actually is time, not rushing to the next class in the hallway. It’s all about honesty, respect, and communication.

**True to Our Mission**

It is with a commitment to the school’s mission that an authentic climate of growth and trust can flourish into consistent school improvement. It is not about the self, it is about the mission and sincerity of all stakeholders to care for each other and help better the school. Coaching has proven to be an effective means, but it is predicated on trust and cooperation. Together, all challenges can be faced, and many resolved while bonding each of us to a noble cause, raising healthy minded and physically capable students to contribute to our global society and further collective knowledge of our faith.

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