

It's a real conundrum...send a quick email because you don't have time to stop and talk. Yet, by sending the email, you eliminate the opportunity to make eye contact, show you are a good listener, and engage in an ongoing conversation that will strengthen your professional and personal growth. You know you can contact many of your colleagues through social media but does that make you more or less social?

Instructional coaches experience this challenge every day. They ask themselves if they should send out emails inviting their colleagues to collaborate and then try to meet either one-on-one or in small groups or should they interact with their colleagues on a personal level first and then let that experience generate more professional collaborative work and then follow up with emails? To answer the question, they need to think about how that mode of communication either enhances or impedes interpersonal communication skills as they work with their colleagues.

Coaches need to balance the reinforcement of engaging in an intentional conversation with the notion that a quick "drive by" may be all the time a teacher can manage for that conversation.

Communication either makes you or breaks you! Working with colleagues is like having an arranged marriage. Teachers don't often get the opportunity to choose their grade level partners or the other teachers in their content areas. They are expected to work together and manage their differences quickly, automatically, and without anticipating any controversy. The hope, of course, is that teachers will focus on student improvement and not need to navigate the more personal aspects of communication with their colleagues. We know that is a bit naive. Coaches, too, must engage in conversations with teachers on staff who are personal friends, professional colleagues, and those with whom there is no relationship. They must negotiate these relationships and create opportunities for ongoing discussions with colleagues whether they are familiar friends or newer coworkers. So, how is this accomplished efficiently and appropriately in ways that encourage ongoing interaction among colleagues and is respectful of time constraints?

Instructional coaches keep the lines of communication open by creating an environment that is conducive to ongoing conversations that are inviting, nonjudgmental, and non-threatening. They are skilled colleagues who remove the barriers of communication by keeping teachers connected in an era where disconnection and disenfranchisement can easily occur. By helping teachers recognize the importance of deliberate conversations around increasing student engagement and building teacher capacity, they reinforce the idea that time to collaborate, plan, think, and work together is made, not found in the hallway, parking lot, rest rooms, or teachers'

lounge. And, the time, place and method of communication must be differentiated according to the topic and need.

Now I really have your attention because many of those conversations start in those very places just mentioned! But, here's the thing... they are conversation starters, not the whole of the conversations. Those places may be where the "before" phase of the BDA cycle is scheduled but they are not the places where the most meaningful conversations, those that involve deeper thinking, occur.

Coaches need to be mindful of schedules and the daily interactions that teachers encounter several times every day. They need to recognize that sometimes conversations are about content and pedagogy; sometimes the conversations are stress reducers; sometimes the conversations are check points. The nature of these conversations determines the mode of communication. For example, a quick "How are you" conversation is a doorway or hallway "ping"; the "How can I introduce this topic" kind of conversation minimizes the importance if it occurs in the hallway, rest room, or mailroom. The coach needs to identify the kind of conversation that the initial question spurs and decides on the spot how to approach the dialogue in ways that are appropriate, relevant, and productive.

It's a no-brainer... coaches are the gatekeepers of persistent and organized networking. They build relationships, engage in collective problem-solving, are critical friends, and keep the professional "juices" flowing. They help teachers implement effective instructional practices and most importantly, help them become reflective practitioners who take ownership for learning. They decide when to nag and when to nurture, when to pat and when to push; they determine how to connect with their teaching colleagues and explore a multitude of ways to help teachers grow as professionals and share their beliefs, their passions, and their knowledge. They even decide how best to communicate... virtually, face to face, or a combination of both. Don't just differentiate your support to your colleagues; differentiate how you communicate with them in this era of limited time and increased need.

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