

Words are tricky. They convey tone, mood, and attitude. And, once written or spoken aloud, they cannot be taken back!

We all know the adage, “Sticks and stones will break our bones but names will never hurt us.” True or false? I say, “False.” Many a time, words become the daggers that evoke responses that might not be the intended outcome. On the other hand, sometimes we want our words to provoke action. If that’s the case, we must be ready for the consequences of our words.

Coaches need to know the appropriate ways to engage in meaningful conversations with their teaching colleagues. Words and body language send quite a message and sometimes, they are misconstrued. Remember, perception is reality. How someone perceives the intent may create a lasting impression and may not be so easy to alter.

The coach’s words must be professional, respectful, and welcoming, not negative, inflammatory, impatient, or mocking. If the same question is asked five times, the answer is given five times - all with the same amount of seriousness, reassurance, and passion as the first time the question was asked and answered. Think about being in a classroom and working with a student who needs extra support on something. A teacher’s response is not demeaning or condescending; the teacher’s response is compassionate and caring, providing as much support as possible, helping the student to gain confidence and empowerment. These are the same feelings that a coach must project and elicit from the teachers with whom s/he works. Lack of patience or a negative tone when working with teachers is a recipe for disaster. Coaching is nonjudgmental so sincerity in asking questions without having a hidden agenda goes a long way in building trust and opening a dialogue about teaching, learning, beliefs, and practices.

We need to ensure that what we say is appropriate, non-evaluative, and relevant. We need our words to stimulate conversation, create teachable moments, and give voice to our colleagues.

We need our words to be diplomatic, valuable, and honest without being misleading, disingenuous, or hypocritical. Coaches cannot advocate for reflective practice if they are not engaged in that practice; coaches cannot promote change in instructional practice if they are not willing to make changes in their own practice. Coaches must offer descriptive feedback to their teaching colleagues but also open themselves up to receiving feedback as well. All of this is accomplished through conversation, both written and verbal, with the goal of introspection and reflection, which strengthens relationships that will lead to long-term instructional coaching interactions and change over time.

It's not what one says but rather how one says "it" that makes a difference in communicating with peers. While a coach and teacher might disagree on topics to teach or materials to use, the questions asked and resulting conversations are dignified, respectful, and honest. We all want our words to resonate and generate thinking but we can't afford to have our words spoken or perceived as intimidating, arrogant, or unrealistic. Our words should always be inspiring, motivating, and helping our colleagues think about, establish, and sustain meaningful changes in practice. "You never know when a moment and a few sincere words can have an impact on a life" (Zig Ziglar). Coaches know when and how to create that moment!