



# Overcoming Resistance



## *to* Change



Content coaches often feel that their efforts to improve instruction are thwarted.

Although most teachers do not actively resist change, competing demands make compliance with new teaching methods difficult.

To be effective, content coaches can concentrate on learning about research that supports their efforts, building rapport with teachers, and implementing change.

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**R**esistance to change is a major obstacle in developing and implementing effective instructional programs, yet it is rarely considered, discussed, or addressed. The school leaders who are responsible for improvement frequently feel that their efforts are being blocked or thwarted. For the most part, they are correct, but they may not realize that the resistance usually has a systemic basis and is not inherent in teachers.

The people who are responsible for student achievement have a variety of job responsibilities. Some focus on specific content; others are responsible for different curriculum areas or have managerial, supervisory, policy, safety, or school law responsibilities. Vast differences of opinion and approaches exist among these individuals. Rarely does everyone meet to coordinate their efforts for change and improvement.

The multiple layers of responsibility produce a lack of clarity, compound miscommunication, and cloud expectations—significant problems to overcoming resistance to change. Such a lack of clarity about expectations causes problems for coaches and teachers who are trying to understand which directive, suggestion, or request to follow. To clarify their expectations, principals need to maintain an open dialogue with content coaches and help them focus on their areas of influence.

### **Content Coaches and Resistance**

Content coaches are often classroom teachers one year and coaches the next. What at first seems to be a fairly straightforward

job—working with colleagues to improve instruction—quickly becomes frustrating and overwhelming as they encounter resistance.

For example, a newly hired coach met with Bill, a 25-year veteran middle school teacher, who told the coach that her services were not wanted and definitely not needed. Bill further said that his retirement was soon approaching, so he was not interested in making changes to his instructional habits.

The coach affirmed that Bill's career had been long and prosperous. The coach further stated that she was very sure there was a great deal of knowledge to be learned from so much experience. She then asked whether Bill had students who struggled to learn content. Bill agreed that it was challenging to reach every student. The coach stated she would like to visit the room to help Bill work with those students during guided and independent practice and also to observe some of his effective instructional techniques. He reluctantly agreed. After visiting the classroom, the coach wrote a positive note to Bill remarking on a vocabulary wall in the classroom. The coach asked when she could return to learn more about word walls. Additional times were set, and from these positive interactions, successful coaching continued.

Some teachers, like Bill, are resistant to coaching, but rarely is this the situation. Usually, teachers are doing their best to maintain control and to cope with ever-increasing pressures to succeed. In their opinion, teachers need more support and



fewer interruptions, not additional work or interaction with supervisors.

Although teachers may not be actively resisting change, the system truly is. The systemic structures (e.g., isolation and independent lesson planning), the school and classroom contexts (e.g., schedules, assignments, and materials), and the different rates at which individuals adopt change can impede progress. To successfully do their jobs, coaches must understand those dynamics and become invaluable resources in various contexts.

In overcoming resistance, coaches need to concentrate on areas beyond communication: learning about the research that supports their work, building rapport with teachers, and supporting change in the classroom. Excellence in those areas is developed concurrently. Coaches cannot build rapport unless they are directly working with teachers. Coaches are not successful unless their work is based on effective learning strategies.

### RESEARCH

Can coaches make a difference in classrooms? That's a question in an ongoing debate about the value of content coaching. According to the National Mathematics Advisory Panel (2008), research supporting coaching is sparse and inconclusive, but so is research refuting it. The question should not be, Does coaching work? but, Under what conditions does it work? The answer is supported by several important findings and accepted practice from research and professional experiences (Hull, Balka, & Miles, 2009):

- Professionals in many fields rely on coaches to help them perfect skills (Knight, 2007)
- Teacher isolation is a deterrent to improving professional skills (Short & Greer, 2002)
- Professional development that is specifically related to classroom instruction and student learning is effective (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry, & Hewson, 2003)
- Opportunities to learn appropriate content and curriculum alignment help teachers close the achievement gap (Adelman, 2006; Marzano, 2003)
- Students can achieve when they have access to high-quality teaching and effective programs (National Research Council [NRC], 2004; Loucks-Horsley et al.)
- Student learning is increased when high-quality programs are adopted, implemented, supported, and sustained (NRC, 2004)
- Monitoring progress through immediate corrective, affirming feedback results in empowered students and staff members (Stronge, 2007).

According to the research, content coaches:

- Work directly with teachers to improve student achievement
- Manage curriculum and instructional materials
- Manage and regulate professional learning
- Monitor program implementation
- Build an instructional program by using its strengths and reducing its weaknesses
- Maintain and share best-practice research
- Build collaborative teams and networks
- Gather, analyze, and interpret data from a variety of sources to inform instruction.

By concentrating on those essential responsibilities, coaches can avoid being distracted or marginalized. Research and responsibilities also form the basis for positive communication between principals and teachers, with coaches serving as the vital link in the chain.

### BUILDING RAPPORT

Few of the responsibilities delineated can be met unless coaches work directly with teachers. This requires rapport. Unfortunately, professional rapport is not conferred on a new coach; it must be developed over time. Following these recommendations (Hull, Balka, & Miles, 2009) will help coaches build rapport:

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- Be professionally friendly
- Be persistent, visible, and accessible
- Listen respectfully
- Keep confidences
- Maintain content knowledge
- Give teachers choices
- Stay on task
- Look for teachable moments.

Building rapport with teachers is a complex undertaking. It is achieved not through a single event, but through a connected series of events. Some of these events are brief, and others occur in stages.

Building rapport was especially important with Kate, a novice teacher who taught a lesson about decimal place values. Her middle school students did not do well on the related textbook assignment, and all failed the chapter test. Her colleagues suggested that Kate send home additional drill pages, rather than spend more class time on the topic. Kate was afraid that she would get fired if her students did not master decimal place value objectives for the state assessment, but she was told not to spend another day on the topic and instead follow a long-range pacing calendar that tells her what to teach each day. After much worry, the only thing that was clear to Kate was that she needed help, so she turned to her school's mathematics content coach.

After gaining an understanding of the problems, the coach started coplanning lessons with Kate and building trust. The coach discussed the need to stay as close as possible to the pacing guide and explained scaffolding with embedded reteaching as distributed practice. The coach helped Kate understand the mathematics skills and concepts that were involved in the lesson and write more-effective lesson plans. After helping Kate with planning and revisiting the classroom to work with struggling students, the coach began coteaching difficult lessons. Realizing that the coach was supportive, caring, and trustworthy, Kate was able to share her insecurities and began to effectively address them.

To build rapport, coaches must interact with teachers in positive, supportive ways, including recommending changes and suggesting strategies. Without established rapport, including trust, efforts are often disastrous. Ideally, coaches develop a strong enough rapport with teachers to help them reflect upon lesson results by analyzing student work. This goal is reached through a series of sequential steps:

1. Coaches explain that they are available to help

teachers with struggling students.

Teachers are encouraged to teach the lesson as usual. During guided and independent practice, coaches move around the room with teachers to provide assistance and monitor student understanding.

2. Coaches continue to help with student monitoring but become more active in assisting teachers in planning their lessons. This is preferably done in professional learning teams.
3. Coaches begin coteaching lessons. They may say something like, "This is one of my favorite sections. May I teach this part during the lesson? This helps me stay connected with students."
4. Coaches allow teachers to discuss the results of student learning during coaches' coteaching sections. Coaches willingly discuss what worked well and what needs modification.
5. Coaches expand conversations to include all parts of lessons. Without identifying who taught which section, questions focus on student learning. What was happening when students were highly engaged? Where did students seem to falter? What information or activity may have helped them better understand? How can we use what we are learning when we coplan our next lesson?

#### IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Coaches must use effective classroom research to determine what strategies they would like teachers to adopt. They need to plan for implementation, carefully sequencing the strategies. Because teachers adopt and use multiple strategies at various stages and different times, coaches must work with individual teachers to support where



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they are and what they do next, thus encouraging continual improvement.

Coaches must remember that change takes positive pressure and support and that it occurs over time. Without positive pressure, time, and support, teachers will quickly forget or ignore new strategies in the hectic pace of day-to-day teaching.

The research identifying stages of change has been well established and affirmed over time (Hall & Hord, 2001). Although people change by going through the same stages, they do not go through those stages at the same rate. Failure to understand this leads to several problems:

- Coaches do not maintain positive pressure until a high degree of adoption is reached
- Coaches repeat early stages over and over and do not help teachers reach higher levels
- Coaches do not know where individuals are in the process at any given time and do not supply appropriate recommendations and support
- Coaches and teachers continually implement and discard strategies that never reach proficiency or improve students' learning.

## Conclusion

Resistance to change is not inherent in teachers, but rather in systemic factors. Feelings of resistance emerge from miscommunication, misunderstanding of change, and lack of rapport. Although research that directly relates to the positive effects of coaching may not be abundantly available, research on effective strategies and techniques that are directly related to a coach's

responsibilities is available and clear. Coaches must communicate and clarify actions and responsibilities to leaders and teachers to remain focused on their primary goal: student success. **PL**

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