



# What Is a Coaching Conversation?

*The conversation is the relationship.*

—Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations*

**I**magine you have just visited a classroom where the teacher is presenting the best math lesson you have ever observed. The room is attractively decorated with stimulating resources and learning centers. Students are actively engaged with each other as they test their hypotheses about why some of their math problems have more than one correct answer. The teacher has placed her pupils in groups differentiated by their skills and learning styles. She moves from table to table, asking the students to explain their analyses of the problems and the conclusions they have drawn. Their responses demonstrate a deep understanding of both the problem-solving processes and mathematical concepts involved. When the bell rings signaling the end of the period, the children reluctantly put away their materials and linger to discuss their thinking in more depth with the teacher.

You leave the classroom exhilarated and excited by what you have just observed, and you are looking forward to discussing the lesson with the teacher and providing her with feedback.

Let's examine two different conversations you might have with the math teacher.

### Conversation 1

**Observer:** I really enjoyed observing your fourth period math class today. You definitely know how to keep your students engaged in the lesson. They seemed to have a lot of fun, yet they also understood the math concepts you had taught them. It's amazing how you even differentiated their instruction. I was as sorry to see the class end as your pupils were. In fact, I think that was the best lesson I have ever seen taught in our school. I know if I were your supervisor, I would be giving you an outstanding rating for that lesson.

**Math teacher:** Thanks for visiting my class and for your kind compliments. Come back any time.

### Conversation 2

**Observer:** That was an amazing math lesson you taught to your fourth period math class today. You clearly emphasized higher order thinking skills that caused them to reflect deeply about their hypotheses rather than just have them practice a page of problems. I am interested in trying a similar approach in social studies and wonder what steps you took to get your students to this level of thinking.

**Math teacher:** As I plan my lessons, I always think about ways to engage students in reflective thinking rather than just parroting back to me a bunch of memorized information. Last year, I decided to focus on asking my classes open-ended questions rather than ones that had just a one-word answer. I emphasized that I wanted their best thinking and that there were many possible answers to my questions. I utilized this technique for at least ten minutes in every class.

**Observer:** What else did you do?

**Math teacher:** I knew I also wanted students to be active learners and to begin to differentiate their instruction. That's when I decided to place the students in small, but flexible

work groups. I also encouraged them to help one another to think about and solve problems together rather than compete against each other.

**Observer:** But how do you grade the students if they are helping each other and working together?

**Math teacher:** That was originally a dilemma for me. Then I had a discussion with the principal about an alternative assessment process. Instead of giving the typical numerical or letter grades, the principal gave me permission to develop rubrics for each set of skills and to provide students and parents with feedback about where individual students were on the rubric scale as they moved toward mastery of the content.

**Observer:** Wow! That sounds like a lot of extra work. How did you get the support of students and parents for this new rating process?

**Math teacher:** It was difficult at first, until I refined the rubrics and the students and parents learned and became accustomed to the new rating process. While it takes more thought on my part, you observed how engaged the students are in their learning. And because they are really thinking about the content, students understand concepts more quickly. They are actually working about four weeks ahead of students in the traditional math classes in this school! Moreover, they performed exceptionally well on the state math test last March, and I never hear my students say "I hate math."

**Observer:** I am really anxious to begin a similar teaching process in my social studies classes. Over the weekend, I plan to think about and sketch out some lessons to teach later next week. What would you be willing to do to provide me with some feedback about my plans and ideas?

**Math teacher:** I would be happy to meet with you during our common planning time on Monday.

**Observer:** Thanks! I'll see you on Monday.

#### 4 Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations

What do you notice about the two different conversations? Which conversation would you prefer to participate in? The first conversation was typical of the kind of feedback excellent teachers receive, with some statements about how good their teaching is. Average and marginal teachers often receive similar feedback except they also receive a long list of recommended changes for improvement in addition to a couple of statements about the lesson.

The first “conversation” was not really a conversation at all. A conversation implies that at least two people are talking with and listening to each other. In addition, the first example provided the math teacher with positive, yet very vague feedback about her teaching. Consequently, the observer’s remarks provided no clues as to what teaching skills she should continue to reinforce and what processes she might wish to modify for her students. The social studies teacher knew he had observed exemplary practices, yet he had little insight as to how he, too, could develop such excellent lessons.

The second conversation included a number of coach-like behaviors on the part of the social studies teacher, including committed listening, paraphrasing, powerful speaking and open-ended questions, and reflective feedback. The observer really paid attention to the teacher and students during the class period and he listened fully as the math teacher described her thinking and processes for developing her lesson plans. Instead of asking questions that could be answered with a one-word response, such as, “Did it take you a lot of time to plan your lessons?” the observer asked several open-ended questions that provided the math teacher with an opportunity to reflect on her thinking and to share relevant information. For example, when the issue of grading came up, the math teacher explained in detail how she solved that dilemma. Instead of just saying that the teacher’s lesson was great, the observer provided her with very specific feedback, stating that she “clearly emphasized higher order thinking skills that caused them [students] to reflect deeply about their hypotheses rather than just have them practice a page of problems.” This reflective and specific feedback cued the math teacher that her efforts were on the right track and that she would want to continue such practices in the future. Her students did not just enjoy math class, they actually engaged in the higher order thinking skills that the teacher wanted them to practice.

The second conversation was a true dialogue between the math and social studies teachers. The math teacher benefitted from the opportunity to reflect on her practices, and the social studies teacher gained insight into how he might implement similar exemplary practices with the guidance of his colleague.

## DEFINING A COACHING CONVERSATION

Not all conversations are coaching conversations. First, a coach-like conversation is very intentional and often includes prethought. Second, a coaching conversation focuses on the other person, his strengths and challenges, and the attributes he brings to the conversation. Third, the purpose of coaching conversations is to stimulate thinking, growth, and change that lead to action.

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Of course school personnel already engage in many types of conversations such as supervisory conferences and mentoring sessions. Teachers engage in joint planning discussions and often have interactions that are just friendly dialogues.

Twenty-first century schools require collaboration and clear communication among all of the school's constituents. Coach-leaders "believe in others' ability to grow and excel. They communicate through their coaching conversations that they see themselves as partners—not bosses" (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010, p. 15). Recent brain research (Rock, 2006) demonstrates that motivating self and others to change requires transforming our long-established brain patterns. The deep reflection fostered by coaching conversations enables us to create and deepen new neural pathways in the brain. Through coaching conversations, both parties leave the dialogue feeling competent and confident in themselves and appreciative of the support from the other person.

Sometimes you may find it difficult to hold certain conversations for fear that you will harm a relationship, cause anger, or that your words will be unproductive. However, true coaching conversations open the space for yourself and others to reflect deeply, understand each other's viewpoints, and provide feedback that does not

attack an individual, but rather, creates room for personal choice and productive action. The more you practice being intentional and invitational in your conversations, the more often you will experience positive results from your dialogues with others.

Next, we will examine several very specific, essential coach-like skills that you will be able to incorporate into your daily conversations. We recommend that you practice these skills first with a trusted colleague, friend, or family member until you are comfortable integrating the skills into your daily interactions. We also recommend that you consult our prior book, *Coaching Conversations: Transforming Your School One Conversation at a Time* (Cheliotes & Reilly, 2010) for more in-depth discussion and practice of the fundamental skills employed in coaching conversations.

## THE FOUR ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR HOLDING COACHING CONVERSATIONS

### Committed Listening

Committed listening connects you powerfully with others because you intentionally focus on the other person. Your full attention conveys that you value the speaker and that you sincerely want to engage in a dialogue rather than a monologue. Committed listening helps build trust relationships. In fact, committed listening is foundational to all coaching conversations.

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When you are a committed listener, you pay close attention to both the verbal and nonverbal cues of the person speaking. For example, if a colleague shares that he is happy about working on the district's new data committee, yet his facial expression and tone of voice convey otherwise, he has given you important nonverbal cues about his

real feelings. At that point you might respond, "You have said that you are excited about being on the data committee, yet your voice and facial expression seem sad. I am wondering what you are really thinking about your new assignment?" Then the other person may

choose to share his real feelings because you have provided a space for him to do so. As a committed listener, you would be silent as the speaker reflects on your question. Because you are being a committed listener, you would avoid giving your colleague advice, stating how you feel about the situation, eschew judging his decision, and keep quiet about what you have done in similar situations. You would just listen and encourage deep reflection in your colleague by paraphrasing his statements.

### Paraphrasing

The second essential skill in coaching conversations is paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is a short-hand statement or summary of what another person tells you. It helps the speaker clarify his thinking and aligns the thinking of both the speaker and listener. In the example above, when you said,

“You seem sad,” the speaker might have responded, “Yes, I really am feeling down about this extra assignment.” On the other hand, he also might have stated another feeling, such as, “Actually, I am feeling more angry than sad about this appointment because it will take valuable time away from my family activities.” Now you have a clearer picture of his thinking and are better able to hold a productive conversation with him. At the same time, by listening to him and paraphrasing his statements without giving advice or interrupting him with your own judgment or story, you have deepened the level of trust between you.

Paraphrasing sends the message that you are fully listening, care about what he is saying, and understand, or are trying to understand, his point of view.

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### Presuming Positive Intent and Asking Powerful Questions

The third essential set of skills in coaching conversations is presuming positive intent about the other person and asking powerful,

open-ended questions. Our language is filled with negativity. *You are wrong. That is incorrect. Why don't you think before you act? You must be mistaken. How could you possibly say that?* In fact, from his own anecdotal research, David Rock (2006, p. 59) estimates that the average person engages in thousands of hours of self-criticism each year as well as countless hours of perceived criticism from others. In addition, he found that most people receive positive feedback a total of *three minutes* on average per year. These are astounding statistics! Is it any wonder that many of us are afraid to take risks, change our behaviors, or trust our self and others?

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Presuming positive intent is a totally new frame of thinking for many of us. Presuming positive intent means that we enter into a conversation with a positive mindset about the other person and our language conveys this positivity to the individual. For example, a principal may begin a conversation with a teacher with the words, “Because you are someone who wants your students to excel in

reading comprehension, what objectives have you written for this week’s language arts lessons that will emphasize their understanding of character development in the novels your class is reading?” This statement demonstrates a positive view of the other person by presuming a positive intention on the part of the teacher—that she is dedicated to having her students excel in reading comprehension. Moreover, the teacher has now been invited to share her ideas for teaching her students about character development. Again, by presuming a positive intention on the part of the teacher and by asking an open-ended question, the supervisor has provided a place for reflection, true dialogue, and development of trust.

In contrast, supervisory personnel often speak with teachers by asking, “Do you have any objectives for your lesson?” This statement presumes that the teacher has no objectives for her lesson and has a high probability of building a barrier between the teacher and supervisor. Moreover, by asking a close-ended question that can only be answered *yes* or *no*, there is no motivation for the teacher to



reflect or share her thoughts with the supervisor. In addition, the trust relationship between the supervisor and teacher may deteriorate because of this negative approach.

At this point, you may be wondering how presuming positive intent may be used with someone who typically does not carry through on his responsibilities. The solution is still to make a positive presupposition about the individual. In other words, you would still take a positive approach by asking, “What objectives have you developed for the lesson?” The teacher may be a bit disconcerted at first by this positive inquiry, yet if you consistently make positive presuppositions about the person by asking him positive, open-ended questions, you are actually challenging him to grow and change within a safe space. He will eventually truly reflect on his lesson development and how his teaching processes affect students.

In their book, *Appreciative Coaching*, Orem, Binkert, and Clancy (2007) write the following:

Appreciative jolts are immediate experiences of attention, valuing, and affirmation that cause the person to change his self-expectations, bring up positive emotion, and move to a more positive self-image—all of which can lead the person to positive action. (pp. 52–53)

By taking a positive approach with difficult people, you have much to gain and nothing to lose. You have the opportunity to build trust and collaboration, improve the self-esteem of others, and provide a safe space for growth and change. The message you send when you speak powerfully through positive presuppositions and asking open-ended questions is, “I trust you, I support you, and it is okay to take risks.”

## Reflective Feedback

Reflective feedback is the fourth essential coaching conversation skill. We all need feedback to grow, to learn, and to understand the path we are following. In education, we are always giving feedback. Teachers tell students about their progress, principals give teachers feedback about their instructional practices and student achievement, and superintendents give feedback to principals about the success of their schools.

Much of the feedback given is judgmental:

- You are doing a good job.
- I think you should try . . . .
- Here are my concerns.

David Perkins, the author of *King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations* (2003), says there is both good news and bad news about feedback. "The good news is that feedback is essential for individual, community, and organizational effectiveness and learning. The bad news is that feedback often flops, yielding no meaningful exchange of information and driving people apart" (p. 42).

Imagine you are an assistant principal and the principal tells you that the new language arts instructional program you have been diligently working on with the third-grade teachers is a waste of time. The students don't seem to be achieving any better and the teachers are complaining about the extra work involved. How would you feel? Angry, defeated, alienated, undermined? In the principal's mind, she had a duty to be upfront and direct with you, yet that is of no help to you. While it is essential for you to know what is or is not working, this direct negative feedback has not helped you grow as an instructional leader. Moreover, you now are less motivated to try new ideas in the future and your trust relationship with the principal has diminished. Lay-it-on-the-line negative criticism is not the kind of feedback that helps you grow professionally or personally.

Now let's turn this scenario around. The principal has some serious doubts about the effectiveness of your work with the third-grade teachers, but she really likes you and does not want to hurt your feelings or her relationship with you. So, instead of being directly critical of you, her feedback is vague. She tells you that the project you have been working on is "interesting" and a "good effort." She then states, "You might want to talk with the teachers about how they feel about the new process. I'm sure everything will work out fine." You leave the conversation feeling positive at first and then begin to wonder what the principal was really saying to you. What is a "good effort" and what was she implying when she mentioned that you should talk with the teachers? The

principal's conciliatory feedback has, on the surface, left you feeling fine, yet at the same time, you have a nagging suspicion that something is wrong. Because the principal's comments were so vague, you have received no direct feedback about the new third-grade initiative and feel unsure about your next steps. While the principal's conciliatory feedback has preserved your relationship with her, you still do not have sufficient specific feedback to grow and learn.

Coaching For Results Global teaches coach-leaders a third type of feedback called reflective feedback in *Coaching Strategies for Powerful Leading* (2011, adapted from Perkins, 2003). The objective in reflective feedback is to give honest and direct comments while at the same time preserving relationships. There are three steps to

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this process that may require more prethought than typical feedback conversations, yet also are very intentional on the part of the speaker.

Step 1 focuses on asking clarifying questions so that it is clear to both parties what the idea or behavior under consideration is. In the conversation with the assistant principal, the principal might have asked, "In what ways do you see the new third-grade language arts instructional process different from what the teachers were doing before?" Another question might be, "How have the students responded to the new program? In other words, what data have you gathered that supports continued use of this new approach?"

The second step of reflective feedback specifically expresses the value or value potential of the idea or behavior. For example, the principal might say, "You have really put in a lot of time researching this new instructional program and sharing this information with the teachers." She might also have stated, "While visiting the third-grade classrooms I have seen specific evidence that the teachers are implementing the program. Their rooms are filled with student work containing very relevant comments by the teachers to the students about their thinking processes."

The third part of reflective feedback poses reflective questions or possibilities. For example, the principal might ask the assistant principal, “How are you aligning the new instructional system with the core curriculum content standards?” She might also say, “I have had some comments from the teachers about the amount of time the new program takes to plan lessons in accordance with the directions provided. I wonder what modifications the third-grade teachers might make to the program so that their personal teaching styles would be reflected in their lessons and they would be more accepting of the new process?”

As you see, reflective feedback is very specific. Both parties in the conversation are clear about what is being discussed, the relationship between them is preserved because there is a place for honest dialogue to take place, and both people have opportunities to reflect on the process without becoming defensive, argumentative, or evasive.

Now let’s look at how one school leader applied the four essential coaching skills to become a true coach-leader for his school district.

### **Coach-Leader Man—Feeding the Hunger!**

Vicky Dearing

Dave was a man with a passion growing from within. He was a school leader hungry for a new way of leading! He was just like you or me. He looked out across his school district—somewhere in the USA—and thought, “Why not here and why not now!” And, thus began Dave’s amazing journey toward becoming an authentic Coach-Leader—a title with which he was not yet familiar. Dave did his homework. He investigated. He realized that to increase student results in his district, he would be called to motivate and challenge others to increase their own thinking.

And so Dave began to learn coach-like behaviors. He took coach-specific seminars and included other key players in his district so that together they were creating a collaborative culture of new

ways of talking, thinking, and being, both as individuals and as a team. Together this district team of educators learned new skills for actually listening to what others were saying, without the need to interrupt, promote their own conclusions, or solve issues for the speaker. They learned how to move to a state of curiosity and wonderment. They learned language that supports others to think in free flowing and clearer ways. They learned how to be solution-focused thinking partners rather than wallowing together in the problems. In addition, they learned that this new way of being and doing had the potential to actually accelerate results. They also worked individually with a leadership coach, over a continuous span of time, which elevated their understanding about the impact of being coach-like in leading others.

So, what difference has this passion and hunger made in the life of Dave and his district? The journey's not over and yet it is making a big difference in the way thinking is done in the district. Being a coach-leader is taking hold in his district. Dave is well on his way to having every administrator, including the superintendent, and every instructional coach, both at the district and school level, trained in coach-like behaviors. Today, school colleagues are actually holding authentic conversations using a Professional Learning Community (PLC) protocol, and school leaders are showing up as coach-leaders as they interact with staff, parents, students, and the community. Today, Dave's district has created a clearer vision for the future with a firm commitment for stronger results for all students.

Hunger cries out for nourishment. When that hunger is for changes in the way we lead schools, there is no better way to feed that hunger than by feeding the coach-leader that's living inside each of us. That's what happened for Dave and it can happen for you!

## Coaching Insights

Dave's story illustrates how one person dedicated to becoming a coach-leader was able to affect the culture of his entire district. Through coach-specific training, individual coaching, and communication among the district's administrators about their goals and

values, Dave and his colleagues are well on their way to creating a districtwide culture in which every member is coach-like in their thinking, state of being, and actions.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

At the end of each chapter you will have an opportunity to review the key concepts in that chapter. You will also have a place to journal your own ideas about coaching conversations—the skills you want to utilize and how you want to be in your coach-leader conversations. The stories in the book provide you with successful coaching conversations others have used. However, the real value in this book is what you decide to do with the information, skills, and exemplars as you apply *Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations*.

### Key Skills for Coaching Conversations

- Listen with commitment.
  - Focus on the other person.
  - Invite reflection and dialogue.
  - Be nonjudgmental.
  - Include times of silence.
  - Avoid advice giving.
- Paraphrase what the other person says.
- Presume positive intent and utilize powerful, open-ended questions.
- Communicate using reflective feedback.
  - Clarify for understanding.
  - Express the value or value potential of an idea or behavior.
  - Pose reflective questions or possibilities.

Use the space on page 15 to describe your ideal self and school. How might you use the four essential coaching skills to make your ideal self and school a reality?

