

A New Way of Thinking: Beginning Teacher Coaching Through Garmston's and Costa's States of Mind

by Jennifer Abrams

A couple of months ago I was having a difficult time seeing a problem from my supervisor's point of view. Cranky, flustered and getting a bit self-indulgent, I called my coach. "Athena, I can't see beyond myself. I need to get flexible. I need a shift." Athena acted as me in a quick role-play. It took no more than a few sentences from her mouth before I screamed, "Stop! I sound awful. I sound ridiculous. No wonder she can't see my perspective. I wouldn't be willing to work with me either!" Having stepped outside of my own filter, I worked with Athena to design a compromise that made sense for both my supervisor and myself.

Sounds like a coach's dream, doesn't it? A conscious and willing colleague who knows what is wrong with her thinking and then asks someone to help her do some effective problem solving? Not necessarily. When I have taught Robert Garmston's and Arthur Costa's States of Mind to new teachers the same shift in understanding took place. The new teachers were able to see within which of the states of mind they most likely got stuck and could ask coaches to help them out.

Bob Garmston and Art Costa wrote up the States of Mind for their work in Cognitive Coaching, a coaching framework based on the premise that teachers have the capacity to reflect upon their teaching and self-direct their actions based on new information brought forth through work with a coach. Said another way, through a deliberate and focused series of questions in a conference, a coach can lead a teacher to a different level of thinking, and therefore, better practice in the classroom.

The piece from the Cognitive Coaching training I utilize most in my work is the States of Mind. Teachers, no matter how far into their careers, can get "stuck" working on organizational, personal or professional problems. Issues with a parent, an inability to help a particular student, a bad day when teaching seems like the worst job in the world; these concerns affect all of us at some point during the school year. Looking at problems through the filter of a certain state of mind might be the way to see beyond the particular issue into what type of thinking might be halting the process of coming to a solution.

I teach the States of Mind in my new teacher trainings in an attempt to help new teachers to articulate more effectively what might be getting them "stuck" in their work. In a 15 minute

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Post-it lecture enhanced with stories from teaching or the work of colleagues, I welcome them into the world of problem solving through the five States of Mind.

Below is a description of each of the five States of Mind, a few ways a new teacher might signal to a coach where he or she needs to shift within a state of mind, and then a question or two a coach might use to move a new teacher onto a different level of thinking.

EFFICACY: Knowing that one has the capacity to make a difference and being willing and able to do so.

New teachers often wonder if they are doing anything right. Kids might talk out during a lecture, declare they didn't understand a thing said about Shakespeare, or might yell when given a lower grade than expected. New teachers might say, "I don't know what to do," "The students are so unmotivated," or "I can't deal with those kids." New teachers often feel unable to make a difference, but by working through a series of questions coaches can help new teachers shift towards competency, a change of behavior or a choice of options. Questions like "What have you done in the past that seemed to be successful?" or "What might you do in that situation next time that would make you feel in control?" or "I am sure many things went through your head as the discussion went in that direction. What choices did you consider and why did you choose to go with the one you made?" are all questions that put a sense of ownership and empowerment back in the teacher's conversation and assist the teacher to feel more capable and in charge.

FLEXIBILITY: Knowing one has and can develop options to consider and being willing to acknowledge and demonstrate respect for empathy for diverse perspectives.

We are all chiefs in our classrooms and sometimes just cannot see beyond ourselves. There are times when new teachers think to themselves, "How do the kids all think like that? I don't get it." Inflexible thinking can come across in comments like "I don't understand how anyone can work with this kid," "Everyday there is something else to attend to instead of my curriculum. A rally, a test, an assembly, a new schedule. Doesn't anyone see I am trying to teach around here?" and "I know this child has a 504 accommodation, but is extra time on every assignment really necessary?" All of these statements signal a coach to assist a new teacher to look at the issue with a new lens that helps the teacher see the value in another person's choice or rationale. As coaches we should not play "devil's advocate" to get the teacher to see our "correct" perspective, but we do need to assist the teacher to see there is another perspective. Questions like "What might the administration be thinking was best for students when they made the decision to shorten classes to create time for the assembly?" or "What might the student be thinking about in this situation?" move the teacher to another angle, and seeing from more than one perspective is always helpful in resolving a problem effectively.

CRAFTSMANSHIP: Seeking precision, refinement and mastery. Striving for exactness of critical thought processes.

New teachers in a mad dash to answer a question as they rush off to another class have been heard to say, "I am starting All Quiet on the Western Front tomorrow but I don't know what I will focus on exactly. Maybe theme or character," or "Yeah, the kids left the room today a few minutes early. I know that my colleague next door gets angry but, hey, sometimes I finish early and it seems silly that they just sit around." This is the one state of mind around which I suggest coaches need to tread carefully. Coaches are expert practitioners who have honed their craft and they need to know how to assist others without becoming too intrusive or consultative. Asking questions about the specificity of assignments ("What are the key points on the rubric for this type of paper?"), the scaffolding done to make the assignment a successful one ("What skills will you be teaching this week so the students feel successful on the paper?") and the outcome of a lesson ("What will the students take away from today's lesson?") continue to put the responsibility of refining lessons in the hands of the new teachers and make them successful educators.

CONSCIOUSNESS: Monitoring one's own values, intentions, thoughts and behaviors and their effects.

Some new teachers have a "with-it-ness" in the classroom and it shows. They have eyes in the back of their heads, sense when someone is off task, and know when they are getting angry and ready to blow up. Others carry on with a lecture as students glaze over and don't bat an eye as side talk affects a classroom discussion. New teachers needing a little "wake up call" in this state of mind have said, "Man, the period got away from me. I looked up and the hour was over," or "Wow. I didn't notice he went to the bathroom for that long." Coaches can assist new teachers by asking them questions that allow teachers to metacogitate. Key questions in this state of mind include "As you look back on the class, what do you think went well?" "I noticed you paused when the student made a rude comment. What were you thinking?" and "What might you do differently next time?" Knowing where you are internally and externally has a great impact on your effectiveness as a new teacher.

INTERDEPENDENCE: Contributing to a common good and using group resources to enhance personal effectiveness.

Often times in teacher education programs we are taught to work with children and not taught how to work with adults. Then more often than not, we go into a class isolated from the rest of the school and become chiefs of our own domain. If we are to work effectively with our colleagues we need to see beyond our classroom and into the school itself. When it comes to this state of mind coaches might hear a new teacher say, "I am getting some flack for not coming on time to all the meetings, but I have so much work to do," or "I feel like I am doing all the work at my grade level meetings." Coaches can assist new teachers by asking questions such as "What were the factors in your decision to give more time to lesson planning than to meeting with the staff?" or "How might you find ways to ask for more help at the grade level meetings?" Becoming a systems thinker and seeing one's role in the school is a crucial part of becoming a professional educator. Coaches can

expand the thinking of the new teacher by introducing the need to be interdependent and collegial.

As beginning teacher coaches we work to help new teachers reflect upon and refine their practice. If we assist others to think more effectively about their thinking, help them make responsible choices, and then support them as they take action, we have been of service to our students and our profession. Garmston's and Costa's States of Mind offers us one framework in which to work and assist new teachers in becoming self-directed, responsible educators.

References:

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