

The Right Fit

Janice M. Rey, Ed.D., Curriculum Resource Teacher, St. Charles, Illinois

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As a child I was fascinated with my mother's dress shoes. I can still visualize with great clarity my slipping into the small attic closet where my mother stored her party shoes. On long rainy summer afternoons I would slip on shoe after shoe looking for just the right look and feel. Sometimes the fit looked just right, but the shoes felt a bit awkward as I tried to walk about. Implementing new teaching strategies and wearing new shoes is similar. Both can appear to be a good fit, but they can also be a bit awkward at first. Coaching with a colleague provides the safe place, similar to the attic closet, where I have been able to figuratively try on and explore new strategies before actually incorporating them into my teaching practice.

Coaching is one way of checking for the right fit before actually teaching a lesson. The coach mediates a teacher through cognitive reflection aimed at building the teacher's desire for the right fit. A teacher's capacity is deepened as she explores and adjusts the fit, or refinement of a new strategy in a supportive environment. In a dynamic school district where change in curriculum and instruction happens in an ongoing manner, teachers in one school found reciprocal coaching to be effective. This is the story of one elementary school with an on-site peer coaching structure that benefits from this transitioning too!

Peer coaching began with four teachers as a part of a field test for a doctoral study. Each teacher utilized peer coaching as a tool to refine her teaching practice. Now the staff is planning its fourth full year of implementation with approximately twelve members of the full-time faculty involved, including the principal. Based on a voluntary relationship between two people, each pair focuses on refining teaching practices so that student learning is positively impacted. Each member of the pair sets an instructional goal and agrees to participate in four three-step cycles per year. The three-step cycle (Art Costa and Bob Garmston, 1994), includes an initial planning conference, an observation and a reflective conference. Teachers have commented positively about the planning conference: "Developing a list of specific behaviors for another teacher to observe helps me identify those student behaviors for my lessons when I'm teaching on my own." Time is scheduled to follow the planning conference, so that the coach can observe the lesson and guide the reflection phase. "It was so good to have that extra pair of eyes and ears to share what had occurred," was shared by another teacher. During conferences the coach's skill at listening, paraphrasing and asking questions promotes self-regulating and self-reflective behaviors.

Annually, the members of this peer coaching committee have met to revise and customize the operating structure for the upcoming year. As a standing committee in the building we adjusted and changed the operating model through group conversations so as to ensure the best fit for us. We would examine what had worked well and make adjustments to what needed revising. We decreased the number of three-step cycles for each member from six to four. Scheduling time for two cycles per pair during each quarter was a better fit for us. In addition, we abandoned the floating substitute plan and initiated an individual plan for requesting release time. Each teacher involved in coaching was entitled to one half day per quarter. Teacher pairs requested their own release time and appreciated the comfort of the increase in flexibility. The same kind of thoughtful dialogue that occurred between pairs permeated the membership of the committee.

As a building group committed to the peer coaching process, we annually customized the implementation of coaching for our group at this site so that the fit was more comfortable. A member of

the group, who had received some specialized training, assumed the role of the facilitator. With the concentration of the members at one site, we were able to make adjustments that ensured continued success. Members voiced concerns and recommendations often by virtue of being together at one site. In addition, the active participation of an administrator allowed for a quicker response to questions and decisions.

At the completion of the third year, the peer coaching committee wanted to refine questioning skills. Therefore, we planned on focusing on questioning during monthly meetings. The facilitator scheduled monthly forty minute meetings and planned the agenda. The meeting contained a team building activity to strengthen community among the group and a forum to bring concerns to the group. There was also a concentrated focus on questioning skills. The focus for the year provided all of us with an opportunity to refine our coaching skills.

Where participation and interest in peer coaching at the district level has waned, the coaching practice continues to be maintained and cultivated at this building. What characterizes this one building that promotes and cultivates this practice? The coaching shoe that was once new and a bit awkward, has stretched and become more comfortable. The peer coach coaching shoe has been customized to fit our culture and our needs. Wild Rose Elementary profits from on-site facilitation. Peer coaching is one of four building committees with regularly scheduled meetings each month. The participants meet at the end of the year to make recommendations toward modifying the peer coaching structure. Existing members personally invite fellow colleagues to participate in order to expand the membership. Central administration continues to endorse this type of site-based staff development, and the building principal has remained a supporter and an active participant.

Because change is inevitable, the revisions in our structure change, but the purpose--to positively impact student learning--and the goal--to enhance reflective teaching--remain the guiding force. Through coaching we unleash the power that lies within each individual to select the shoe that fits.