

Getting More from Coaching: A Mentee's Perspective

by Amelia Richardson Dress

My first experience with coaching was something of a challenge. On the receiving end of 10 weeks of job-related coaching, I found myself frustrated and apprehensive about each weekly session with my coach. The coaching I was receiving was part of a certification that I was anxious to earn. Despite this, I sometimes doubted the benefit of the coaching experience. I was ready to learn new skills, but instead I received questions upon questions: "How did that work?", "What could you have done instead?", "Was that helpful to the parent?"

Much of my frustration during those weeks was due to my unfamiliarity with the process of coaching. Used to classroom settings, I was puzzled by much of what happened in our coaching sessions. Years later, working as a coach myself, I rediscovered how challenging coaching can be for the trainee. Coaching simply feels different than other ways of learning. Getting the most from the experience required that I first learn how coaching worked.

Coaching Isn't Training or Consulting

I entered my first coaching session expecting to be trained in the usual teacher-student format. The skills I learned would, of course, be determined by the coach and her area of expertise. Instead, I was expected to participate in what coaches call 'reflective practice'; I was asked to try something, think about how it worked, make new plans, and try again. At the time, it seemed like a highly inefficient way to learn something new (see vignette below).

What begins as a simple question — "How do I teach this child not to scratch?" — can easily take 15 minutes and several rounds of questioning. This experience left me feeling like we were chipping away at an iceberg. Eventually,



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the coach and teacher together might decide to give the child extra one-on-one attention during especially busy times of the day when the child is most likely to be frustrated. The coach and teacher agree to meet again in a week and see how this strategy is working.

For those of us who like solid answers and expert opinions, this process can be exasperating. It took several conversations with my coach to realize that although I rarely got a quick answer to a problem, this process improved my ability to apply my skills in real-world settings. After all, no two situations are ever the same. Being able to apply a breadth of knowledge — about a family, a circumstance, and a child's educational goals — to a particular situation is a long-term skill I can apply anywhere.

React Differently to Questions

In our lives, we've learned to hear questions in a certain way. Our parents might have asked us things like: "Why did you do that?" and "What should you have done?" Teachers asked us: "What's the state capital of Alabama?" and later "What are Piaget's stages of development?" With these questions, my brain starts spinning. I'm desperately trying to figure out the right answer. However, the anxiety produced by focusing on figuring out the right answer is counter-productive to coaching. Much of coaching relies on questioning, but there is seldom a 'right' answer. Instead, there are a variety of possibilities. Imagine this conversation as the teacher and coach meet a week later to follow up on the child who was using physical aggression to express frustration.

"How did it go this week?" the coach asks.

"Well, she scratched several children. All three times happened when we were lining up to go outside."

"Did you try giving her a 'time-in' before it was time to line up?" As the coach asks the question, the teacher starts squirming inwardly. She might wonder if she gave the child enough attention. Perhaps she begins to worry that maybe

A typical coaching conversation might begin with the trainee describing a child exhibiting physical aggression. "I have no idea what to do! She scratches any time she gets angry. Other children are getting hurt and parents are getting upset."

"What have you tried?" the coach might ask.

"I've put her in time-out. I've explained to her that she can't hurt other kids. We've read *Hands Are Not for Hurting*."

"What happened?"

"Nothing! I don't see any improvement. I'm not sure what to do next." The teacher's frustration is clear.

"Are her parents seeing this kind of behavior at home?"

"They said they're not. They said she's fine at home."

"Why do you think she behaves differently at home than at the center?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's more stimulation here. Or maybe there are fewer boundaries at home so she gets frustrated less easily."

she failed somehow. She might start feeling frustrated or defensive. "Is this coach questioning whether I'm a good teacher?"

Even when we know, as I did, that my coach's intentions were never to lay blame, the intensity of the questioning can be uncomfortable. Coaches rely on questions to help us examine our own actions so that we can become better teachers and directors:

■ "Why did you try that approach?"

■ "How did that work?"

■ "Is there another approach that might work?"

These questions are important because the answers are critical to making the necessary changes in our attitudes and behavior to be more effective in our roles. Unfortunately, there's probably no way around the sometimes uncomfortable aspect of what coaches call 'powerful questioning.' Powerful questioning requires us to take a look at our actions. It took a lot of practice for me to hear questions about my actions, my reactions, my plans, and my goals without being defensive. A good coach will do her best to reassure you that they're not judging you, but the ease with which we can examine our own practices only comes with experience.

Learn to Navigate New Roles

My first experience with coaching was on-the-job, so my coach was also my work supervisor. This had its pros and cons. Coaching was a built-in part of my work schedule, which made it easy to fit in. It also meant that my coach was intimately familiar with our setting, my co-workers, and the families. The challenge was that I had to switch roles frequently between trainee and employee. I was initially skeptical about how this would work:

- Could I share the ups and downs of my work with my boss?
- Would I really tell her about the skills I needed to practice?
- Would I receive a poor evaluation or suffer if I was honest in sharing challenging situations I'd faced in the classroom?

Fortunately for me, few of my worries ever came true. Although, if they had, I am confident that my supervisor and I would have been able to navigate the sticky areas. My coach was skilled in distinguishing her roles as coach and supervisor; it was always clear whether a conversation was a coaching conversation or an employment conversation. Coaching time was scheduled for each week. If something came up outside of our scheduled times, my supervisor/coach was clear in saying, "I want to talk about this as a coach, it's not a job-performance issue."

I've since discovered that this isn't an uncommon situation in the early childhood world. Many of my friends and colleagues working in early childhood juggle multiple roles. They may be both a director and a coach. Or a college level teacher and a consultant. As the awareness of coaching grows, many directors implement coaching practices in employee supervision, meaning that their staff often move between roles of employee and trainee. The key to making this work seems to be keeping the distinction between these roles clear at all times.

In the county where I later coached, the licensing specialist managed a multi-faceted quality support program and provided training and coaching under the auspices of a statewide infant/toddler program. A preschool teacher recently remarked on how well the licensing specialist juggled her many roles:

"What I like about her is that she's clear about what she's there for. If you run into her in the street, she's your friend. If she visits you for a licensing visit, she's clear that she's checking on things. She doesn't overlook anything just

because she knows you. When she came [to coach], we really got to talk about my teaching and she was very supportive.”

The Homework Really Does Matter

“How’d it go this week?” my coach asked.

I squirmed, grateful that we were meeting by phone and she couldn’t see my blushing face. Now working with a new coach, I knew what to expect. Coaching was no longer built into my job, so it was harder to fit my coaching time into my packed schedule. Now, years later, I don’t remember what I had promised to work on that week. I do remember what happened when I said I hadn’t done it.

“Okay,” said my coach. “What would you like to do with the hour we have together today?”

It was suddenly clear: the coaching time was mine. It wasn’t about the coach setting goals or dispensing wisdom, it was all about my practicing new skills. Yes, unexpected things pop up in the classroom and outside of it. Trying new things takes extra time and practice and it’s easy to revert to our old ways. In the end, though, conversations with a coach only work if there’s something to talk about.

It’s a Great Time to Try New Things

A wise and more experienced co-worker once told me that he always saved his most challenging teaching sessions for times when his coach would be observing. His approach struck me as simultaneously brave and backwards: What

if nothing went as planned? How would it look to fail in front of someone? Wouldn’t it be better to work out the kinks on my own and then demonstrate my skill during an observation?

I still hesitate to try something new or challenging in front of others. It takes a certain amount of courage to overcome the fear of looking foolish. Now, though, I’m more willing to take advantage of the opportunity to try something new with a coach. As I’ve come to a better understanding of the coaching process, I’ve appreciated how invaluable this initial advice was.

Let’s revisit the teacher who is working with the child who is frequently frustrated to the point of acting out with physical aggression (see vignette below). Without the coach’s observation and support, the teacher might have been discouraged by her initial experience and given up too soon. While it was hard, letting a coach observe even when it was new territory meant that the teacher received the encouragement to keep going.

The beauty of coaching is that it is personal. This also can make it a challenge. In asking the trainee to share her successes and failures, learning to trust the coach is crucial. For me, as for many people being coached for the first time, this can be the hardest part. However, it’s worth pushing through the initial discomfort. While I experienced a lot of painful — and exhilarating — feelings in my first experience with coaching, it paid off in the end. The depth of learning and skill development far exceeded what I could have achieved otherwise.

“So, you want to teach the children new ways to respond when they’re angry or sad. What strategies do you think would work?” the coach asks.

“I’d like all of them to get better at talking about their feelings. I think I’ll restock our bookshelves with books about emotions. I also remember a workshop I took. The trainer said it’s important to recognize and label children’s emotions so that they can learn to express themselves.”

“Great!” the coach says. “Why don’t you work on that this morning and I’ll observe. That will give you time to practice.”

The teacher feels nervous as she thinks about her coach watching her. Still, she agrees to try it. Later when they meet to discuss how it went, the teacher admits she doesn’t think it worked. “It was really hard to take the time to talk about emotions when the children were upset. I kept forgetting that was what I was supposed to do. I don’t think this is the right approach for me after all.”

The coach sees something different. “I actually think it was a great first try. This is a change for you and the children. Even with the little bit of time you’ve spent reading and talking about feelings, I hear them talking more when they’re resolving problems. Let’s try it a while longer and then check in again.”

They agree that the teacher will continue with her plan for another week. When they meet again, the teacher comments, “It’s getting easier for me to respond to the children when they’re upset. I hear them using their words more. We went one whole day without any scratching!”