

Peer Coaching for Principals

Principals in a Pennsylvania district are voluntarily observing one another to overcome their feelings of isolation and to improve supervision in their schools.

The principals of Donegal School District, Pennsylvania, felt our isolation had a detrimental effect on our growth as instructional supervisors. Isolation, at best, permits only maintenance of skills and, at worst, contributes to the perpetuation of poor supervisory techniques. Therefore, following discussions at our regular principals' meetings, our group enthusiastically and unanimously accepted the embryonic idea of peer coaching.

We were excited about our potential to improve by using the clinical supervision model selected by Donegal School District. The district had trained its supervisors in the model espoused by Ernie Stachowski and his associates.¹ But we sensed that without guided practice in its use, the potential of the model would be lost. We realized, too, that since Stachowski was not available to "mentor" us, we would have to "mentor" ourselves. We used the model as the framework for our peer coaching improvement efforts and as the vehicle for communicating about them.

Our Coaching Program

From our training we understood the concepts theoretically, but we wanted independent confirmation that we were communicating our points to the teachers. We decided that our goal should be to improve the quality of

two aspects of the postobservation teacher conference:

- *Postobservation data analysis.* Our plan called for the two principals who had jointly observed a teacher to compare their script tapes and collaboratively label, group, and analyze



When principals observed and compared notes on each other's supervisory skills, they found that new ideas about effective communication emerged.

Observer	Semester 1		Semester 2	
	Observee	Observer	Observee	Observer
H.S. Principal	Elem. Principal-1	Elem. Principal-1	Elem. Principal-3	—
J.H. Principal	—	Elem. Principal-3	—	Elem. Principal-3
Elem. Principal-1	H.S. Principal	H.S. Principal	Elem. Principal-2	Elem. Principal-2
Elem. Principal-2	Elem. Principal-3	Elem. Principal-3	Elem. Principal-1	Elem. Principal-1
Elem. Principal-3	Elem. Principal-2	Elem. Principal-2	J.H. Principal	J.H. Principal
H.S. Assistant	H.S. Principal	H.S. Principal	H.S. Principal	H.S. Principal
J.H. Assistant	J.H. Principal	J.H. Principal	J.H. Principal	J.H. Principal

Fig. 1. Peer Observation Grid for 1986-87

the data. This step required intensive interpretation, discussion, and decision making on the part of the principals.

● *Planning postconference with the teacher.* Using the results of the analysis of labeled data, the two principals determined the "reinforcement" and the "teaching" objectives that should be addressed with the teacher in the postconference.² The actual planning of the phases of the postconference (deciding on the strategies, modeling, ways to check for understanding, and practice activities) was the responsibility of the principal conducting the conference.

Next, we identified teachers who were willing to have several principals present during an observation and a postconference. We wanted to observe jointly only teachers who had been trained in the Essential Elements of Instruction (derived from the work of Madeline Hunter). Our district had trained many teachers in the Elements, and some of them had already allowed us to sharpen our supervisory skills by working with them.

When we had made these decisions, we were ready to establish times for the two principals to observe the teacher, label the data, conduct the teacher postconference, and then hold the principal postconference. It was easy to set these times with the teacher. It was much more difficult for the principals to set these times; this may have been our biggest challenge. If these dates and times are not established and locked into schedules after initial teacher contact, we have found

that the time between the teacher observation and the postconference becomes too long. Therefore, to help each principal plan for a peer coaching cycle, we developed the grid shown in Figure 1.

Principals Need Feedback Too

Now, all Donegal's principals have participated in at least three full peer coaching cycles. After hearing comments about how his body language had changed during the conference and questions about whether he really meant to say what he had said, one principal observed, "I liked it because I never had anyone give me feedback on conferencing skills before."

Another principal noted, "It was both interesting and helpful to get

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another's perspective on the same lesson and on planning the postconference. Together we were able to think of different ways of communicating strengths and needs."

When asked about continuing peer coaching during the next school year, all the principals agreed it was a worthwhile activity that we are eager to maintain. Voluntary peer observation has been an excellent tool for improving our supervisory conferences with our teachers. Mentoring ourselves has proved to be the single most effective means we have encountered for furthering our own professional development as supervisors. □

1. Ernie Stachowski, "Clinical Supervision," seminar conducted at Muhlenberg High School, Reading, Pa., 5-7 December 1984.; "Advanced Clinical Supervision," seminar conducted at Buena Park Hotel, Buena Park, Calif., 18-22 August 1986.

2. Using only one or two objectives allows the supervisor to clearly focus his or her reinforcement and/or teaching efforts and does not overwhelm the teacher. A reinforcement objective is used to encourage the teacher to continue the use of a skill used effectively in teaching. A teaching objective is used to teach the teacher either a skill the teacher apparently does not know or a skill the teacher has not thoroughly mastered.

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