

Overcoming Obstacles to Peer Coaching for Principals

With guidance from qualified trainers, administrators can work through the initial barriers to productive coaching relationships and become more reflective about their practices.

The idea that professionals can assist one another by observing and coaching each other is gaining widespread acceptance in the education community. Early proponents of peer coaching, most notably Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, believe this process can help teachers implement the new ideas introduced in workshops in their classrooms (Joyce and Showers 1980, 1982; Showers 1984, 1985).

Interestingly, little attention has been given to peer observation and coaching for administrators, even though they experience the same difficulties as teachers: isolation, lack of collegial relationships, and infrequent discussions of educational practice. An exception is Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL), a program originated at the Far West Laboratory (Barnett 1987). A major premise of PAL is that by observing and being observed by their peers, school administrators, especially principals, can become more reflective about their practices.

First, participants learn the procedures underlying *shadowing* (an observational strategy for collecting information about a peer) and *reflective interviewing* (a technique used to obtain information about a peer's observed behavior). Then they practice

these strategies with a partner. Throughout the process, they are urged to suspend judgment about what they are seeing and hearing, thus allowing their partners to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their own actions. In this sense, principals engage in what Garmston (1987) calls "collegial coaching," as they become more self-evaluative about their own practices.

This article highlights some of the difficulties administrators experience when observing or being observed by their peers and concludes with suggestions for trainers responsible for overseeing a peer observation program.

Getting Started

The novelty of observing their peers causes administrators some discomfort and hesitancy as they begin the process. Although many administrators observe and supervise teachers, rarely do they themselves observe a peer for purposes of personal professional growth. When they are introduced to the concept of peer observation, they have many questions. For example, they want to know whether they should be matched with someone they already know quite well or with someone they are unfamiliar with, with someone who has similar or dis-

similar job responsibilities. Administrators are encouraged to select their own partners, taking into account factors such as distance between work sites, previous associations, and school level and setting. Having the trainer or the superintendent make these matches precludes administrators from taking ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

Administrators also want to know what they can gain by observing a peer, how to act when being observed, and how to be an effective observer. To answer these questions, next we look at the roles of the partners in a peer coaching relationship.

Being observed by a peer. Once they make their selections, administrators may be unsure how to respond appropriately while someone else is shadowing them. Because the purpose of shadowing is to allow observers to see how their partners normally conduct their daily activities, situations are not to be staged, altered, or rehearsed. In short, administrators are to engage in their usual routines and responsibilities as if no one were watching them.

But acting naturally while someone is watching one's every move is not easy. Administrators have difficulty ignoring the observer, often feeling compelled to explain each action as it

is occurring, thus interrupting the natural flow of events. Rather, the reflective interview, conducted a day or two after the observation, is the appropriate time for the observed administrators to explain the background and reasons for their actions. Administrators prepare questions that allow their partners to examine the consequences of their actions, to explore the feelings associated with an event, and to compare and contrast their reactions to similar situations.

Administrators express other concerns about being observed; for example, they:

- feel obligated to make certain that observers see interesting and worthwhile events;
 - fear that they will handle a situation poorly in the presence of their peers;
 - worry that they may not know what to do if a sensitive situation arises;
 - are anxious to obtain observers' immediate reaction as to how well they handled a particular situation.
- Observing and providing feedback to a peer.* Taking on the role of peer observer and interviewer also creates some anxieties in administrators, especially at first. For example, in this role, many administrators:

- want to know specifically what to look for during the observations;
- have difficulty being objective and nonjudgmental about what they see and hear;
- may think they already know why their partners acted in certain ways and therefore do not inquire about these situations during the reflective interview;
- have a desire to ask the "perfect" question that will stimulate an insight in their partners' thinking;
- become so involved in what they are seeing and hearing that they have difficulty taking notes during observations and interviews.

Alleviating Concerns

To reduce their fears and/or to overcome old habits, administrators need to experience several iterations or phases of the processes involved in

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peer observation. These phases are as follows:

Phase I. First, administrators need time for practice in shadowing and in reflective interviewing in order to feel at ease with these processes, to create trust and open communication, and to get to know one another's work settings (Seller 1987). The initial shadowing and reflective interviewing experiences should be thoroughly debriefed so partners can determine how to improve the process in subsequent observations.

Phase II. Once administrators begin to feel comfortable with these processes, they can focus future observations and interviews on activities of mutual interest (Garmston 1987). For example, partners have decided to observe faculty meetings to see what communication strategies are used or, in another case, they have discussed how staff development activities are linked to teacher evaluations.

Phase III. As these subsequent observations and interviews are conducted, administrative partners need to consider how the process is meeting their intended purposes and, if necessary, determine what corrections need to occur.

Phase IV. Finally, partners need time to determine how the shadowing and reflective interviews have met their original purposes or have affected them personally and professionally, and whether they can be used or expanded in the future. Exploring these questions individually and collectively with other administrators validates their learning and demonstrates how the coaching process is influencing their actions and attitudes. Thus, administrators can see the relevance of the process and how it is

making a difference in their professional lives.

Besides addressing the typical concerns arising in peer observation programs, these four phases provide a mechanism for implementing the major dimensions—technical, human relations, learning—needed in any successful peer observation and feedback program (Barnett 1988).

To build *technical* competence, administrators must practice such skills as note taking, active listening, and remaining unobtrusive during observations. In developing *human relations*, administrators need time to talk openly with one another, without fear that their ideas will be harshly judged or told to others outside the group, in order to develop trust among partners. Finally, for *learning* to occur, administrators need time to reflect on the substance of their observations and to decide how they will adjust their future actions.

The Road to Success

Adjusting to their new roles as observers and observees takes time, and most administrators need guidance in overcoming their initial apprehensions. Therefore, trainers responsible for overseeing a peer observation program must help administrators overcome the early obstacles to success. Besides incorporating a four-phase process of peer observation and the three critical dimensions necessary to a successful program, trainers should clearly communicate the attitudes administrators need to obtain the greatest benefit from such a program of professional growth and development. For example, administrators must be willing to:

- devote considerable time (several

months or an entire school year) to the training, practice, and implementation of peer observation and interviewing:

- experiment and take risks by publicly exposing their actions and ideas;

- keep an open mind and respect different ideas and practices of school administration;

- accept a reciprocal commitment of effort to help others, as well as themselves, learn and grow.

Finally, trainers need to provide the direction and structure for such a process to flourish. With all of these elements in place, peer observation can become one of the most professionally rewarding experiences in a school administrator's career. □

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