

keying IN

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Teachers Teaching Teachers: *The Why, What, and How of Peer-to-Peer Coaching*



Jodi Adams, a business educator at Eastern High School in Louisville, Kentucky, was frustrated. She'd planned a project for her class, Principles of Business. And she was concerned the project was going to bomb. Again. For the third time.

"The learning outcomes for this project depend on how well the projects are implemented," she said. So, when Adams delivered the introductory lesson, she took great care setting up the students for the work they were going to do. But, even though her plan worked on paper, something was off. "Maybe it was the kids," she thought.

The second time she introduced the project, Adams tweaked a few pieces. Then she got stuck—and nervous. "It's going to bomb again," she worried. And she was right.

The third time, she decided to ask a trusted colleague to observe her. She wanted to see what she was doing through someone else's eyes.

That's when things began to turn around.

Why this, why now?

When Adams decided to ask a colleague for specific feedback on how she was delivering a particular lesson, she was engaging in a form of peer-to-peer coaching. Peer-to-peer coaching is a concept that has been promoted by renowned business educator and leadership expert Marshall Goldsmith as a way for companies to cultivate positive changes in behavior—and in business (see sidebar "Coaching in Business" on p. 3). Peer-to-peer coaching is now being tried in schools as a cost-effective form of professional development that can foster excellence in teaching.

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INbox

- **Did you know NBEA is turning 125 in 2017?** Plan now to celebrate by attending NBEA 2017 in Chicago, April 11–15.
- **Curious about the intersection between ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) and Perkins and how that might impact funding your career and technology programs?** Check out the PowerPoint available from the Perkins Collaborative Resource Network (<http://cte.ed.gov/cal/intersection-between-perkins-and-essa>).
- **Given the events of the summer, you might want these two resources for helping students talk productively about race, politics, and violence:** one for K–12 from *Education Week* (<http://tinyurl.com/ho646h9>) and one for older students from The Public Conversations Project (<http://www.publicconversations.org>).
- **Watch for highlights from NBEA's Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, March 22–26, 2016,** appearing in the October 2016 issue of the NBEA Business Education Forum.
- **And don't miss the *Business Education Forum* redesign, debuting in October 2016,** with more articles by business educators for business educators.

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“For a long time, many school districts were investing in what I would call more ‘expert’ coaching. We were funding district-level instructional coaches who were content experts,” said John Waller, director of secondary curriculum and instruction for the Office of Student Learning in Marietta, Georgia. “As resources have become more strapped and as we continue to build capacity in schools, more emphasis is being placed on helping peers who are in the same job support each other.”

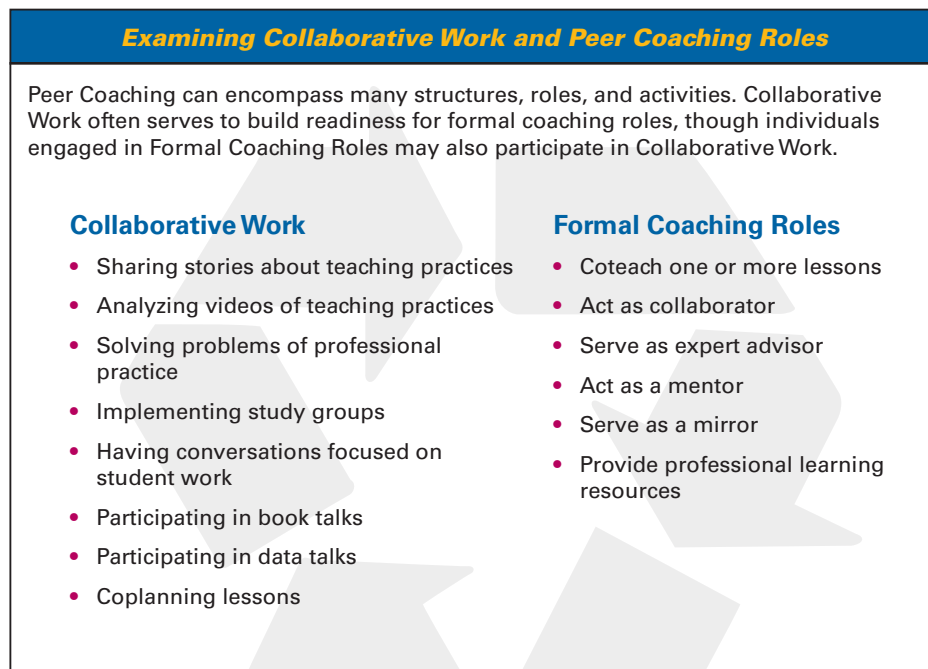
Teachers do want to improve their practice, Waller believes. Peer coaching is effective because the feedback is coming from “someone who knows my context,” Waller said, “someone in the same school, teaching the same kinds of kids, someone who knows what I’m dealing with.”

In business parlance, peer-to-peer coaching is contextual and perfectly job embedded—a hallmark of effective professional development. Educators don’t have to wait for a training *event*; instead, they can engage in a *process* that occurs over time. Its foundation in reflective questioning also aligns with the philosophy that often the people closest to a problem are best able to solve it (S. Gladis, personal communication, June 29, 2016).

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Figure 1



Adapted from *Peer Coaching to Enrich Professional Practice, School Culture, and Student Learning* (p. 24) by Pam Robbins (Alexandria, VA: ASCD). © 2015 by ASCD. Reprinted with permission.

The other piece that makes it so impactful, Waller remarked, is that it’s a form of vicarious experience. “If I can observe in your classroom and see how you are successfully managing transitions, for example, you are modeling that for me,” he said. “That is a powerful tool for change.”

And it’s another set of ears and eyes—“a safe and trusted set, the voice of a person I know and respect,” Waller said. “That’s comfortable for me as a teacher.”

The “aha” moment

That second set of ears and eyes was exactly what Adams needed to get her lesson unstuck. When she and her colleague discussed the lesson later that day, she learned that her presentation had given the impression that the project was too difficult for students to do. For example, she’d used phrases such as *You’re really going to struggle with this*.

“In my mind I was telling them that struggle was okay,” Adams said, “but I was not communicating the ‘okay’ part out loud.”

The next day Adams engaged the students in a discussion about how Albert Einstein had often failed before he succeeded, and how Shark Tank businessman and investor Mark Cuban had experienced multiple failed business ventures on his path to success. She emphasized that failure—and learning from failure—was how you get better at what you’re doing.

“[The previous project failures] came down to [my] communication,” Adams said. “I would have never realized that without another teacher being in the room.”

What coaching can “look like”

Waller thinks that observation of instruction (like what Adams requested of her colleague) is probably the most logical and appropriate form of peer-to-peer coaching. But peer-to-peer coaching can take many other forms, according to Pam Robbins, an independent educational consultant who speaks on this topic nationally and internationally. These forms include collaborative work outside the classroom that may serve to build

readiness for formal coaching roles, though individuals engaged in formal coaching roles might also engage in collaborative work (see **Figure 1**).

Robbins literally “wrote the book” on peer-to-peer coaching in education. She is the author of *Peer Coaching to Enrich Professional Practice, School Culture, and Student Learning* and

How to Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program (ASCD, 2015 and 1991 respectively). As the two publication dates attest, Robbins has been thinking a long time about peer coaching as a method of enhancing professional practice through professional development. She favors models that give educators opportunities to take ownership

of how they choose to engage in peer coaching and the focus of their peer coaching work, so that the professional growth needs of each educator are addressed.

“Ideally, coaching should be of, by, and for teachers,” Robbins said. “Instead of coaching being based on a specific instructional or curricular model, [a teacher] should be able to decide the focus of the observer’s feedback. The focus of formal coaching [such as classroom observation] should be steered by the person being observed, not the observer, so that the data collected by the observer address the interests and needs specified by the teacher being observed.”

Robbins does believe, however, that the observer has an obligation to ask for feedback about the practices associated with his/her role. “The notion is that I’m going to work just as hard in the coaching/observer role as you will work in the teaching role,” she said. “This creates a measure of reciprocity.”

For Robbins, working hard in the coaching role doesn’t mean doing the analysis associated with a particular observed experience or providing solutions. It means asking questions that will lead the person being observed to take an active role in the analysis by helping the person to reflect on what was successful and what could be done differently, because “any time you do something for someone else that they can do themselves, you’re handicapping them,” she said.

Essentially the postobservation conversation would go like this:

- “You asked me to observe how many students were engaged during the practice activity using Excel spreadsheets. What do you recall about that?” (The coach is referencing the teacher’s words from the preconference and invites the teacher to reflect on his/her behavior and unpack his/

Coaching in business

Coaching is a popular, though not new, technique for developing business executives and other leaders. It’s been around—at least in the literature—since 1937 (Grant & Zackon, 2004). Early research refers to managers and supervisors who “coached” their direct reports. More recently, businesses have hired professional coaches to develop their executives and “high potentials.”

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) has no definitive research about the prevalence of coaching in business. However, the ICF estimates that approximately 47,500 professional coaches (as compared with 2,100 in 1999) work in business worldwide and their cumulative annual revenues approach \$2 billion (ICF, 2012). More recent data show that one of six coaches (16%) works as an internal manager or a human resources or talent director who uses coaching skills to work with others in their organizations and that three out of four coaches (76%) ply their trade in group or team settings (ICF, 2016).

As a professional development tool, coaching’s future seems bright. Executive coach Steve Gladis predicts that “in the next 10 years, coaching will become the most widely used and popular leadership model.” Gladis attributes this to the influx of millennials into the workplace. “Millennials are requiring a lot more leadership from their employers,” he says. “As they become a larger percentage of the work force, coaching for leadership will be more in demand.”

Despite or perhaps because of coaching’s popularity, some people are cynical about its value, says Magus Group’s Holly Williams. “[That’s because] people don’t know how to coach or what to expect from one another,” she explained. Williams is therefore careful to make expectations crystal clear, even offering information about different coaching models to provide context for the group coaching she is hired to do.

Regardless of the model, all coaching shares certain commonalities: it is client-centered, goal-focused work that happens in the context of a trusted relationship and uses a discrete process to achieve those goals. Surprisingly, neither the format (one-on-one, group, team, or peer) nor the coach is the critical variable for the achievement of positive long-term change. Instead, change results from the participants’ ongoing interaction and follow-up with colleagues (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2004).

Because one-on-one coaching is expensive—world-renowned business educator and expert coach Marshall Goldsmith, for example, charges \$250,000 for an 18-month contract, though he gets paid only if the business sees results—businesses looking for cost efficiencies would be fine implementing a quality peer-to-peer coaching paradigm.

“A peer coach can do just as well as an external coach,” Goldsmith says. “The key to changing behavior is ‘learning to learn’ from those around us,” he says, “and then modifying our behavior on the basis of their suggestions.”

her thinking about what students were doing during the lesson.)

A follow-up question might invite the teacher to reflect. For example, the coach might ask:

- “What do you think you did to promote this student behavior?” (This process invites the teacher to make connections between teaching practices and student behavior.)

Only after the teacher has an opportunity to reflect does the coach share the observational data. The data would not be shared before the

teacher has had a chance to unpack his/her thinking, because seeing the data first could bias the reflective process.

Not the approach, but the work...and the person

Though Adams asked the questions and her coach-colleague provided feedback, Adams was ultimately steering the experience and taking responsibility for the follow-up, a key attribute correlated with whether or not coaching is successful.

“If people put forth the effort, you’ll usually see results,” said leadership expert Goldsmith, who maintains that we erroneously fixate on how great the coach or the training method is.

“The key variable is not the approach but what work you do...and the person being coached. People have to be motivated to change.”

Adams was, and as a result she found that the coaching she received from her colleague was transformational. “That project turned out to be my most successful project ever,” she said.

How to get started

Whatever the model, peer coaching that is successful generally adheres to these key principles:

- Peer coaching has nothing to do with evaluation.

checkIN

What’s your experience with peer-to-peer coaching?



I am the only business education teacher at my school, so any peer-to-peer coaching I do within my school is cross-curricular. My “suite mate” of 15 years is a biology teacher, and working with her has resulted in better classroom management for us both and allowed for an easier transition for incoming freshmen since [policies are] consistent between our classrooms.

Peer-to-peer coaching does not have to happen within school walls. The business teachers [in our district] try to gather at least once a year [to] exchange ideas. The Internet also provides opportunities through online FREE programs that establish learning webs—Edmodo, Edpuzzle, and Blendspace—and I use these to share with both teachers in my district and teachers worldwide.

—Lynne Elliott Burgess, NBTC
White Plains High School
Anniston, Alabama



During professional development (PD) sessions at conferences and summits, [I structure one-on-one sessions and also] break down large groups into small groups to problem solve and dissect the information so they can truly learn. I also use [peer coaching] with my students. It flips the teacher’s role to facilitator.

Peer coaching increased communication. In a PD session, teachers were able to get more out of their PD and apply what they learned to their classroom and [student test] scores increased on content they [had] struggled with before.

—Nicole Reynolds
Lexington Senior High School
Lexington, North Carolina



I use peer coaching with my students. They present mini-lessons in front of class and meet with others afterward to get feedback. Sometimes [student feedback] is more important than what they get from the professor.

One concern is that the advice [they give as feedback] might not be correct. They’re learning as well. [When this happens] I try to clarify the point a student is making to be sure he understands, and if it is off, try to guide and make [what they say] beneficial for the other students.

It’s important to get feedback from peers because, if you’re experiencing a problem, more than likely someone else is as well.

—Timothy Thornton
Emporia State University
Emporia, Kansas

- Peer coaching is voluntary.
- The best results occur when the coaching is focused around a specific goal or outcome.
- Formal coaching should incorporate pre- and postconference meetings to set context prior to the observation and build in reflection afterwards.
- Trust is the foundation for any coaching.

Beyond those five principles, consider the following steps for establishing a peer-to-peer coaching practice in your school:

1. **Don't go it alone.** There's strength (and good morale) in having at least one other set of coaches in the same building, noted Waller.
2. **Consider pairing up with someone you don't know well (but whom you do trust).** Holly Williams, founder and president of Magus Group (Broad Run, Virginia), swears by this technique. "You build more capacity for change if you pair up people who haven't worked together before," she said. "It's a free ticket to ride because [neither one of you] has put the other 'in a box.'"
3. **Find and apply very specific resources to help you create a useful peer-coaching structure.**

If it's good for the goose...

Can peer-to-peer coaching be taught to and work effectively with students? We asked our sources that question, and here's what they said: "Yes, but..."

- Experience coaching yourself before you try it with someone else (Steve Gladis)
- Teach them the process (Marshall Goldsmith)
- Role play the process to clarify what the coaching conversation is supposed to look and sound like (Jodi Adams)



We had an opportunity to have instructional coaching. [At first] it was really intimidating; we were not sure about

expectations and were afraid it was going to be evaluative.

We set goals in different areas and the coach would observe our teaching, give us tools, and suggest areas where we could improve. It was beneficial once you got used to the process. The more you engaged, the more opportunity you had to engage.

Once we were able to share benefits, we saw growth and improvement in students—and the process made me want to try peer coaching with them.

—Julie Keaton
Ohio Virtual Academy
Perrysburg, Ohio



I had a department chair when I [was first hired]. She walked me through everything we were going to do. That helped me

understand the processes, [because] I came from a non-education background. Sometimes I would feel like a grain of sand on the beach with all the things that were demanded of me. [My department head's] coaching allowed me to become more organized and more compassionate. Now it's part of my responsibility to help make a [new] teacher more effective than they ever thought they could be. Hopefully, they understand they're not alone; someone does have their back.

—Michael Bruner
Lithia Springs High School
Lithia Springs, Georgia



We [peer coach] informally by reflecting on the day's lesson or offering up new ideas/suggestions to improve

classroom efficiency and student involvement. Observation works well for me. I welcome a fresh, new perspective in order to continue to improve as a teacher and lifelong learner. We're all on the same team and our end goal is for every student to come out of our class with more knowledge of business than they [had coming in].

Also, my experience as president-elect of the Alabama Business Education Association and planning our 2017 conference has [allowed me to] see what a difference it makes to be able to coach each other into being the best teachers we can possibly be.

—Tiffany Stonecipher
Muscle Shoals Career Academy
Muscle Shoals, Alabama

Andrea von Biberstein, whose dissertation explored the nature of teacher knowledge through reciprocal peer coaching, recommended “Principles of Coaching” by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy and *Coaching Matters* (see sidebar “Learn More” on p. 7).

4. **Be intentional about results.** “[The question] isn’t ‘Is this person a good coach for me?’ but ‘Does this process produce good results?’” Goldsmith said. “If the focus is on the coach, then it becomes a coach critique and the person is off the hook. If the focus is on getting better, then you can focus on results.”
5. **Know what you want to achieve.** “This isn’t just getting together and looking at data or [talking] about kids,” Waller said. “This is *what I want to accomplish.*”
6. **Ask for common planning times.** If these are not built into the schedule, collaborating might become too difficult and the effort might collapse. If common planning times are not possible, von Biberstein said, hold each other accountable for carving out time and prioritizing learning.
7. **Learn to ask “broadening and building” types of questions.** These are the questions that are considered open ended. Retired Stanford Professor David Bradford, who has trained coaches and performed informal coaching with colleagues, offered this example: A person might say, “I don’t know whether to use this IT system or that system.” The coach might say something like “How are you figuring that out?” The person might respond, “I’ve been doing it on my own.” The coach might then ask, “Are there other ways to figure out what system to use?” and so on.
8. **Be open minded and reflective.** Students aren’t the only ones who



get to have aha’s and teachable moments. “Appreciate where new learning might take you,” Waller said. “It might take a while to find the payoff, but stick with it.”

9. **Respect confidentiality.** This is huge, von Biberstein emphasized, and essential for building trust.
10. **Remember that coaching is not a cure for ignorance.** “Going to school can solve that,” said Steve Gladis, an executive coach in Fairfax, Virginia, who’s coached business persons and educators. “Coaching is not the best cure for abusive behavior or for breaches of ethics or trust. Indeed, some people will simply need a reprimand of one level or another, including being fired if the circumstances warrant it.”
11. **Check your motivation—and maybe your biases.** The only agenda a coach should have is to help the person s/he is observing to find an answer or solution that feels like a good fit for the problem the person is trying to solve. Bradford’s view: “If you’re the observer, [ask yourself] ‘Am I try-

ing to make them like me, or am I trying to understand their skills and their approach?’”

12. **Be sensitive to the school’s socio-political web.** “Someone [whom you don’t really respect] might ask you to peer coach,” Robbins said. “You don’t want to hurt this person’s feelings, but there may be others whose observations you would value more. Consider creating a trio or a team of four and rotate the partnerships to address this dilemma. This provides a way to engage in coaching yet avoid causing hurt feelings in those with whom you work daily.”

What’s in it for you?

High school business educator Adams has been involved with peer-to-peer coaching since her pre-service training and now as part of a statewide accountability model. The process has become one of her most effective professional development activities. “It’s so personalized and so specific to my classroom that it almost *makes* me improve my game,” she said. “Someone taking the time to listen to you really helps shift things around.”

She admits that her appreciation for peer-to-peer coaching didn’t happen overnight. “We had to become comfortable with the process, comfortable with being open with each other,” she said. “Trust is key.”

Executive coach Gladis agrees, but what he finds interesting is that as long as one of the peers is not trying to “fix” the other, the coaching process can benefit *both* parties.

The evidence comes from studies in neuroscience (Jack et al., 2013; Betz, 2012). Gladis explained that using a “broadening and building” questioning technique (see no. 7 above) reduces a person’s apprehension (triggered by the release of adrenaline and cortisol)

and increases the person's sense of well-being and significance (causing a flush of oxytocin and serotonin—neurotransmitters that contribute to happiness).

“The coach ‘catches’ those vibes and also benefits from the coaching experience,” Gladis said. “Nobody ever considered that before.” Gladis added, “Someone who listens to you in ways that don’t compete with your talk time is a very nurturing way of relating to another person. It’s not always hearts and flowers, but it’s always in the person’s best interest.”

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Learn more

COACHING IN BUSINESS

Books

Deaton, A., & Williams, H. (2014). *Being coached: Group and team coaching from the inside*. Washington, DC: Magus Group.

Gladis, S. (2012). *The coach-approach leader*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

Goldsmith, M., & Reiter, M. (2007). *What got you here won't get you there: How successful people become even more successful*. New York, NY: Hatchette Books.

Goldsmith, M., & Reiter, M. (2015). *Triggers: Creating behavior that lasts—Becoming the person you want to be*. New York, NY: Crown Business, a division of Random House.

Electronic resources

International Coach Federation

<http://www.coachfederation.org>

A nonprofit, 20,000-member organization focused on support and growth of the profession and one of the first to establish core competencies, curricula, and a code of ethical behavior for coach practitioners.

Marshall Goldsmith's Website

<http://www.marshallgoldsmith.com>

<http://www.marshallgoldsmith.com/?s=peer+to+peer+coaching>

Marshall Goldsmith, top business coach and influential business thinker, offers free access to multiple articles, podcasts, videos, and links with his books on business leadership.

COACHING IN EDUCATION

Books

Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). Designing training and peer coaching: Our need for learning. In B. Joyce & B. Showers (Eds.), *Student achievement through staff development* (pp. 69–94). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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Electronic resources

Learning Forward

<https://learningforward.org>

The association for those engaged in developing professional educators. Resources include conferences, publications, and standards for professional learning. Offices in Texas, Ohio, and Washington, DC.

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) Mentor Teacher Group Guide

http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/mentor_b.pdf

Collection of handouts and articles on classroom observation, peer coaching, and mentoring from both the National Staff Development Council and NCSALL. Key resources include a comparison of peer coaching and evaluation, coaching principles and rules for peer-to-peer coaching, guidelines for classroom observation, and questions for pre- and postobservation.

The Teacher Innovation Project

<http://tinyurl.com/zk8vdz7>

Slides from a presentation given by Lindsay Bryan, Andrea von Biberstein, and Hema Ramanathan at the Learning Forward International Conference in Nashville, Tennessee (December 10, 2014). Explores how a peer coaching protocol can guide the teacher learning process.

Teachers Teaching Teachers

NBEA 2017 ANNUAL CONVENTION

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In 2017, on its 125th anniversary, NBEA returns to the heartland with new, innovative, thought-provoking, and cutting-edge sessions for all teaching levels. A complete listing of upcoming sessions will be available at www.nbea.org, but here’s a quick preview:

- Financial Literacy for Life
- Adventures in YouTubing
- Technology Tools for Formative Assessment
- The Wow Factor of Emotional Intelligence
- Customer Service Success Strategies
- Being Successful in a Multigenerational Workplace
- Introvert 2.0: Technology and the Quiet Student
- Technology in the Middle School Classroom
- School Violence
- Professionalism—Yesterday, Today, and Forever
- Teaching in a Google World
- Business Law Resources Aren’t Just for Business Law Classes
- Happy Hour
- Personal Branding—You Can’t Move Up If You Don’t Stand Out
- Integrating Global Business Throughout the Business Education Curriculum
- Bullying/Cyber-Bullying

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**Received on or before
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