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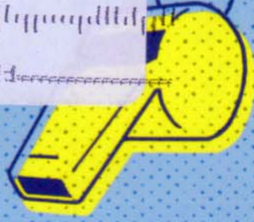
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A CULTURE OF COACHING

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A Culture of Coaching

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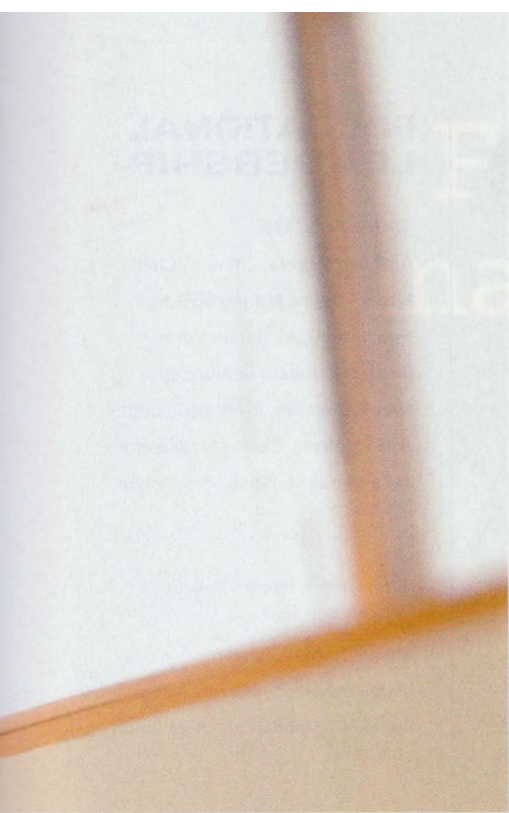
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Hand-drawn type by Donald Ely.



ASCD'S MISSION STATEMENT
ASCD empowers educators to achieve excellence in learning, teaching, and leading so that every child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

Anthony Rebola

Expanding on Coaching's Potential

In his much-viewed 2017 TED Talk on coaching, the surgeon-writer Atul Gawande noted that there are two views on how professionals get better at what they do. The first, the traditional view, is that you go to school to be trained in a particular field and then “make your own way” with the expertise you have, content to “manage your own improvement.” The second view, which comes from the world of sports, is that you “are never done” growing and that “everybody needs a coach” to hone their skills and develop their game.

Long deemed impractical or superfluous outside of sports, this second option is becoming increasingly popular in a variety of industries—prominently including education. This shift may be related to another point Gawande makes in his talk. Coaching, he suggests, is needed to help professionals improve “against the complexities they face.” As a field grows more complex, that is, workers are more in need of fine-tuned feedback and expert guidance.

In this respect, it shouldn't be surprising that coaching has gained traction in schools. As Matthew A. Kraft and David Blazar note in a recent article on their meta-analysis of research on instructional coaching, teaching today is a uniquely complex profession, comprising roles ranging from “content expert, curriculum developer, and pedagogue, to social worker, psychologist, mentor, and motivator.”¹ To develop this “inter-related skillset,” teachers need something more than the traditional,

make-your-own-way approach to improvement.

Indeed, in their study, Kraft and Blazar found that coaching has significant positive effects on both teachers' instructional practice and student achievement—comparable to the “difference in performance between a novice teacher and an experienced veteran.” What makes coaching so impactful, they write, is its “specific attention to teachers' core classroom practices”—that is, to “the complex and dynamic reality” they face in their day-to-day work.

For school leaders looking to implement coaching programs, however, there's an important catch: Kraft and Blazar emphasize that coaching doesn't necessarily “scale” well. “Looking at the size of coaching programs,” they write, “we find that the average effectiveness of the coaching program declines as the number of teachers involved increases. . . .” This suggests to Kraft and Blazar that key components of effective coaching—such as coaching quality, adequate funding, programmatic flexibility, and teacher engagement—may be jeopardized as programs expand.

This, in effect, is a big part of the current reality of coaching in schools that this issue of *Educational Leadership* seeks to address. Coaching—both at classroom and leadership levels—is increasingly seen as a critical strategy to improve practice and outcomes in schools. Yet school leaders and teachers alike are also recognizing that it can be hard to get right, especially when coaching

programs grow beyond the initial, targeted stages and become more institutionalized.

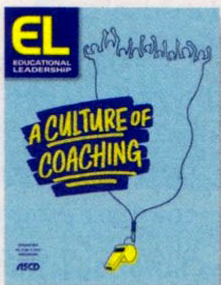
In different ways, all the articles in the issue address this dynamic. They explore how schools can build a wider “culture of coaching” without diluting or subverting the elements that make coaching attractive—and effective—in the first place. In the opening article, for example, influential coaching expert Jim Knight writes on the importance of protecting teachers' autonomy in coaching arrangements in the face of schools' tendency to presume a need for greater top-down control (p. 14).

Taking a different angle, Elena Aguilar, another important voice in school coaching, highlights the structural elements schools need to have in place—from vision statements to hiring criteria to relational expectations—to ensure the integrity of coaching programs (p. 22). “It helps to stay anchored in the potential of coaching,” Aguilar advises. “When we keep that potential in mind, we can amass the resources, capacities, and courage required to design effective coaching programs.”

We hope you'll find ways throughout this issue to honor that potential and foster educators' growth amidst complexity. **EL**



¹Kraft, M. A., & Blazar, D. (2018, Fall). Taking teacher coaching to scale. *Education Next*, 18(4).



Why Teacher Autonomy Is Central to Coaching Success

Jim Knight

“When [people] cannot choose, [they] cease to be [people].”

—Anthony Burgess

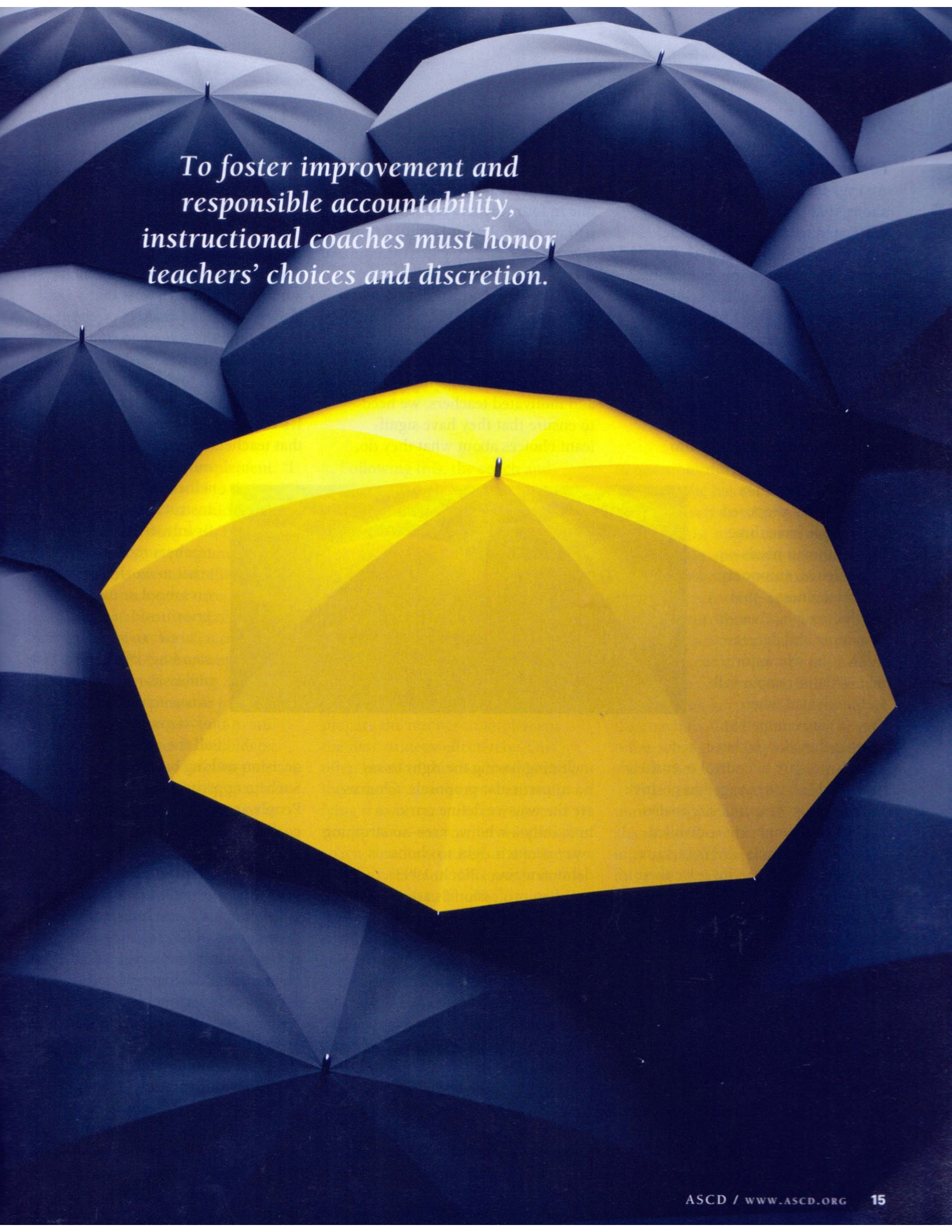
Instructional coaches often feel intense pressure to promote change. Like most everyone else in education, coaches want students to succeed, and they frequently measure their success by whether they drive changes that improve students’ learning and well-being. This pressure to move the needle can lead coaches and administrators to take a directive approach to coaching—telling teachers what they’ve done right and wrong and what they must do to improve. But in fact, as research has shown and as I’ve found in my own work on coaching, this is not the way to help teachers flourish.

Indeed, after studying coaching for more than 20 years, I have concluded that recognizing and honoring teacher autonomy is an essential and fundamental part of effective coaching.

What Teacher Autonomy Isn’t

Before discussing why autonomy is essential, it is important to recognize what autonomy is not. In any organization, there are non-negotiables that must be adhered to—rare is the school where a teacher can say “I’m not much of a morning person; I think I’ll start teaching at noon.” And choosing to be unprofessional in conduct should not be a choice available to anyone involved in educating our children. No one in a school is free to bully students, be a toxic force on teams, or decide that they no longer need to improve. Fortunately, such unprofessional behavior is rare, but when it exists, it needs to be dealt with directly by administrators. Refraining from upholding professional standards of acceptable teaching is not a matter of honoring autonomy.

But genuine autonomy is a key aspect of coaching work, one that can be complex and challenging for coaches to manage. Indeed, when coaches and leaders recognize the importance of autonomy, they may need to rethink many traditional elements of professional development, including accountability, feedback, and fidelity.

The image features a large, bright yellow umbrella in the foreground, centered and slightly lower. It is surrounded by numerous dark blue umbrellas that recede into the background, creating a sense of depth and a crowd. The lighting is dramatic, with the yellow umbrella being the primary light source, casting a glow on the surrounding blue umbrellas.

*To foster improvement and
responsible accountability,
instructional coaches must honor
teachers' choices and discretion.*

Fostering Self-Determination

An ever-increasing body of research shows that professionals are rarely motivated when they have little autonomy. Researchers have illuminated why autonomy is essential for motivation and why exclusively top-down approaches to change are almost always guaranteed to fail (Amabile et al., 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pink, 2009; Seligman, 2012).

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000) synthesized their decades of research on motivation into what they referred to as *Self-Determination Theory*. They proposed that people have three innate human needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—that will increase motivation when met and decrease motivation when not met. That is, people will feel motivated when they (a) are competent at what they do, (b) have a large measure of control over their lives, and (c) are engaged in positive relationships. The opposite is also true: When people are controlled and told what to do, aren't in situations where they can increase their competence, and aren't experiencing positive relationships, their motivation will decrease, and they will be "crushed" (p. 68). Research in education has firmly established that this dynamic applies to teachers (Sparks & Malkus, 2015).

Despite evidence of the importance of autonomy, however, research suggests that autonomy is decreasing in schools. One survey-based study found that teachers' perceptions of their autonomy decreased

significantly from 2003 to 2012 (Sparks & Malkus, 2015). Close to one in four teachers reported they had no control or only minor control over the books they used, the content they taught, teaching techniques, student evaluation, student discipline, or the amount of homework they gave students.

Coaches must work to change this dynamic. If we want engaged and motivated teachers, we need to ensure that they have significant choices about what they do,



including having the right to say no to particular proposals. Choices are the way we define our own humanity—who we are—so stripping away people's right to choose is dehumanizing (Block, 1993).

When professionals are told what to do and given no choice, the best possible outcome is likely compliance—and compliance is not enough to do the complex work needed in our schools. As Daniel Pink writes in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2009):

Living a satisfying life requires more than simply meeting the demands of those in control. Yet in our offices and classrooms, we have way too much

compliance and way too little engagement. The former might get you through the day, but only the latter will get you through the night. (p.112)

Responsible Accountability

One obstacle to honoring teachers' autonomy, in my view, is that school leaders and policymakers often misunderstand the role of accountability. Usually, the term is used to describe how educators are obligated to do something for some external reason. It's common, for example, to hear that teachers' professional learning must be driven by adherence to a mandated instructional program or initiative. Or that teachers must be told what to work on based on school or district priorities.

I refer to such understandings of accountability as *irresponsible accountability*. This kind of accountability places all the responsibility for decision making outside the teacher. Such an approach is bound to fail. People are rarely motivated by others' goals, and a one-size-fits-all model of change rarely provides helpful solutions for the individual complexities of each unique classroom.

Recently, at a coaching workshop I conducted in Kansas, an instructional coach from Texas painted a vivid picture of what irresponsible accountability can look like in schools. She told us about an interaction that took place when her principal went to talk with a teacher about her students' low test scores. When the principal raised the issue, the teacher pointed out that she was implementing the program the

If we want engaged and motivated teachers, we need to ensure that they have significant choices about what they do, including having the right to say no to particular proposals.

district had told her to implement. “I did everything I was told to do, and I did it with fidelity,” she said. “If my students aren’t doing well, I’m not the problem—it’s your program.”

Responsible accountability is different. When educators are responsibly accountable, their professional learning is driven by what *they* have determined will have an impact on their students’ learning. In this way, they are accountable to the improvement process—and to students, parents, other stakeholders, and the profession of teaching. Responsible accountability entails a genuine individual commitment to learning and growth.

An Example of Responsible Accountability

Instructional coaching, done well, should foster responsible accountability. During coaching, teachers should have a great deal of autonomy even though they are learning with a coach. For instance, a coach using the impact cycle (Knight, 2018), with stages for identifying, learning, and improving, might video record a lesson and provide the teacher with some suggestions to better interpret what the video reveals.

Following this, the coach and teacher usually have a coaching conversation to identify a goal that the teacher really cares about and that will have an unmistakably positive impact on student learning or well-being. Once a goal is set, they identify a teaching strategy the teacher will implement in an attempt to hit the goal.

During the learning stage, the coach and teacher collaborate to prepare the teacher to implement the new strategy effectively. This often involves the coach explaining the strategy and the teacher modifying it to better meet her students’ needs. Often the teacher watches the coach, another teacher, or a video to better understand the strategy before implementing it. Finally, during the improving stage, the teacher, in partnership with the coach, makes adaptations until the goal is met.

Let’s look at how this might play out for an individual teacher. Imagine a teacher who views a video recording of her lesson and sees that only 5 of her 31 students responded to the questions she asked. In conversation with her coach, she might decide to set a goal of increasing the number of students responding

to questions during each lesson to 20. Once she has set the goal, she and the coach can discuss various strategies she might use to meet it. For example, she might try thinking prompts, effective questions, or a cooperative-learning approach such as think, pair, share (Knight, 2013). She or the coach could videotape her lessons to monitor her progress. As long as she remains committed to her goal, she can keep partnering with the coach to identify strategies or refine what she is implementing until she hits her goal.

This is professional learning that is undeniably accountable—measurable changes will occur that will mean real improvements for students. However, this type of professional learning also involves a high degree of autonomy: The teacher, with support from the coach, observes her own lesson, sets her own goal, adapts the teaching strategies she implements, monitors progress, and determines when she has hit the goal.

The Complexity of Teaching

School leaders and coaches must also understand that teaching is not something that can be boiled down to a set of prescriptive steps. Its complexity

requires independent decision making and self-directed growth.

In a groundbreaking study published in 2002, researchers Sholom Glouberman and Brenda Zimmerman broke down the complexity levels of different work tasks. They identified three different types of tasks: simple, complicated, and complex. A simple task, like baking a cake, involves a set of steps that will produce the same results each time when the steps are followed. A complicated task, Glouberman and Zimmerman argued, like putting a person on the moon, involves much more intricate work, but it still involves formulas and steps that should produce predictable outcomes. A complex task, like raising a 3-year old, cannot be broken down into a set of steps because every day and every child is different.

Leadership experts Alexander Grashow, Ronald Heifetz, and Marty Linsky (2009) have described the kinds of challenges presented by simple and complicated tasks as technical challenges. Such challenges “have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise” (p.19). By contrast, the kinds of challenges presented by complex tasks are adaptive challenges:

Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating new ideas to thrive anew. (p. 19)

If raising one child is complex, then educating and inspiring a room full of children must be considered



dauntingly complex, and certainly anyone who has taught recognizes how many variables are at play in the classroom. Much of teaching, in other words, requires adaptability, meaning that discretion and personal discovery are essential to success, and that one-size-fits-all solutions or external dictates will only hamstring progress.

To be sure, technical solutions are appropriate for simple and complicated classroom tasks like organizing a seating chart or teaching some basic procedures. But much of teaching is complex work, and technical solutions will not suffice. Indeed, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky write that “the most common failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems” (p. 19).

Feedback as Dialogue

When people describe what coaches do, one of the chief tasks they

identify is giving feedback. However, as Buckingham and Goodall (2019) recently argued in the *Harvard Business Review*, many people’s understanding of feedback is completely backwards. For many of us, feedback “is about telling people what we think of their performance and how they should do it better.” But, as Buckingham and Goodall explain, “The research is clear: Telling people what we think of their performance doesn’t help them thrive and excel, and telling people how we think they should improve actually *hinders learning*.”

Buckingham and Goodall identify three fundamental flaws in the prevailing understanding of how to provide feedback. First, we are not very good at rating others’ performance. Our evaluations of other people, they maintain, have more to do with ourselves than with those we are observing. Second, simply telling others how they fall short actually inhibits, rather than encourages, learning. Buckingham and Goodall present compelling research showing that hearing criticism shifts people into survival mode, thereby “impairing” learning. “Learning,” the authors write, “rests on our grasp of what we’re doing well, not on what we’re doing poorly, and certainly not on someone else’s sense of what we’re doing poorly.” And third, excellence isn’t reducible to universal and simple explanations. As Buckingham and Goodall explain:

Since excellence is idiosyncratic and cannot be learned by studying failure, we can never help another person succeed by holding her performance up against a prefabricated model of excellence, giving her feedback on where she misses the model, and telling her to plug the gaps.

What does this mean in connection with instructional coaching? First, the lesson (again) is that honoring the autonomy of teachers in coaching is essential if feedback is to lead to improved practice. Rather than telling teachers what they like and dislike about a lesson, coaches should structure conversations with teachers as dialogues between two equal partners, where both members of the conversation are heard and where both parties' opinions count.

Second, as education authors like William Sommers, Parker Palmer, and Robert Garmston have pointed out, effective dialogue is often enabled through a third point for conversation that takes the focus off the coach and teacher and directs it toward whatever the two are exploring together. This increases the teacher's role in the feedback process. Two powerful "third points" are student work and video recordings of teachers' lessons.

Third, coaching conversations are more effective when they are non-judgmental. This doesn't mean that coaches shouldn't share what they think; instead, they should share their thoughts provisionally and with the humility appropriate for any conversation about what happens in a classroom.

Questions of Fidelity

A final argument often given for top-down professional learning is that effective teaching practices must be implemented with fidelity, so coaches need to ensure that teachers are proceeding as prescribed. This point of view is easy to justify in theory. If teachers don't teach evidence-based practices with fidelity, the thinking is, they won't get results. Therefore,

coaches need to make sure teachers implement teaching practices the way research says they were meant to be implemented.

Unfortunately, too narrow a focus on fidelity can actually stand in the way of quality instruction. Without question, instructional coaches need to partner with teachers to provide the supports that empower teachers to implement new practices in ways that get results. But it's the results that matter, not the fidelity to process. By results I mean positive changes in student learning and well-being. Fidelity of implementation doesn't mean much if there aren't positive changes for students.

One of the problems with fidelity

is that asking teachers to implement exactly what a script says, exactly as the script says, treats teachers like workers on an assembly line rather than professionals. An overemphasis on fidelity could lead to teachers doing every move on a checklist but teaching without passion or engagement, or even teaching in ways that fail to promote student learning.

A second, more important issue is that teaching is too complex to conform to a one-size-fits-all model. A fidelity approach embodies the idea that solutions to instructional challenges are technical—when, in reality, they must be adaptive.

To be sure, instructional coaches need to be deeply versed in the prac-

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tices they share, and they should be highly skilled at finding precise, easy-to-understand explanations for those practices. However, they need to present information in a way that allows the teacher to do the thinking. When explaining a teaching practice, an effective instructional coach might say, “Here’s what the research says. However, do we need to adapt this at all so it will work for you and your students? What do you think about this approach?” When, for the sake of fidelity, coaches tell teachers what to do without honoring their thoughts and opinions, they are crushing motivation and inviting resistance.

Finally, coaching should be a goal-directed process, as opposed to an exercise in micromanagement. Only an effectively executed practice will lead to positive results for students. So rather than telling teachers exactly what to do, instructional coaches should engage teachers in reflective conversations about what they think might work in their classrooms. By treating teachers like professionals, instructional coaches have a much better chance of enabling high-quality teaching and better student learning—and isn’t that the whole point?

Real Choices

When school leaders and coaches dismiss the importance of teacher autonomy, they usually do so because they are so concerned about students’ needs that they just can’t feel at ease giving up control. But as we’ve seen, a rigid emphasis on accountability and control ultimately hampers teacher development. External mandates and top-down coaching typically fail—because ultimately they are disempowering and dehumanizing and fail to address the complexity of

the classroom. A better option is to infuse coaching with autonomy. When teachers have real choices, when they are engaged in coaching that is responsibly accountable, then real student growth is possible. ■

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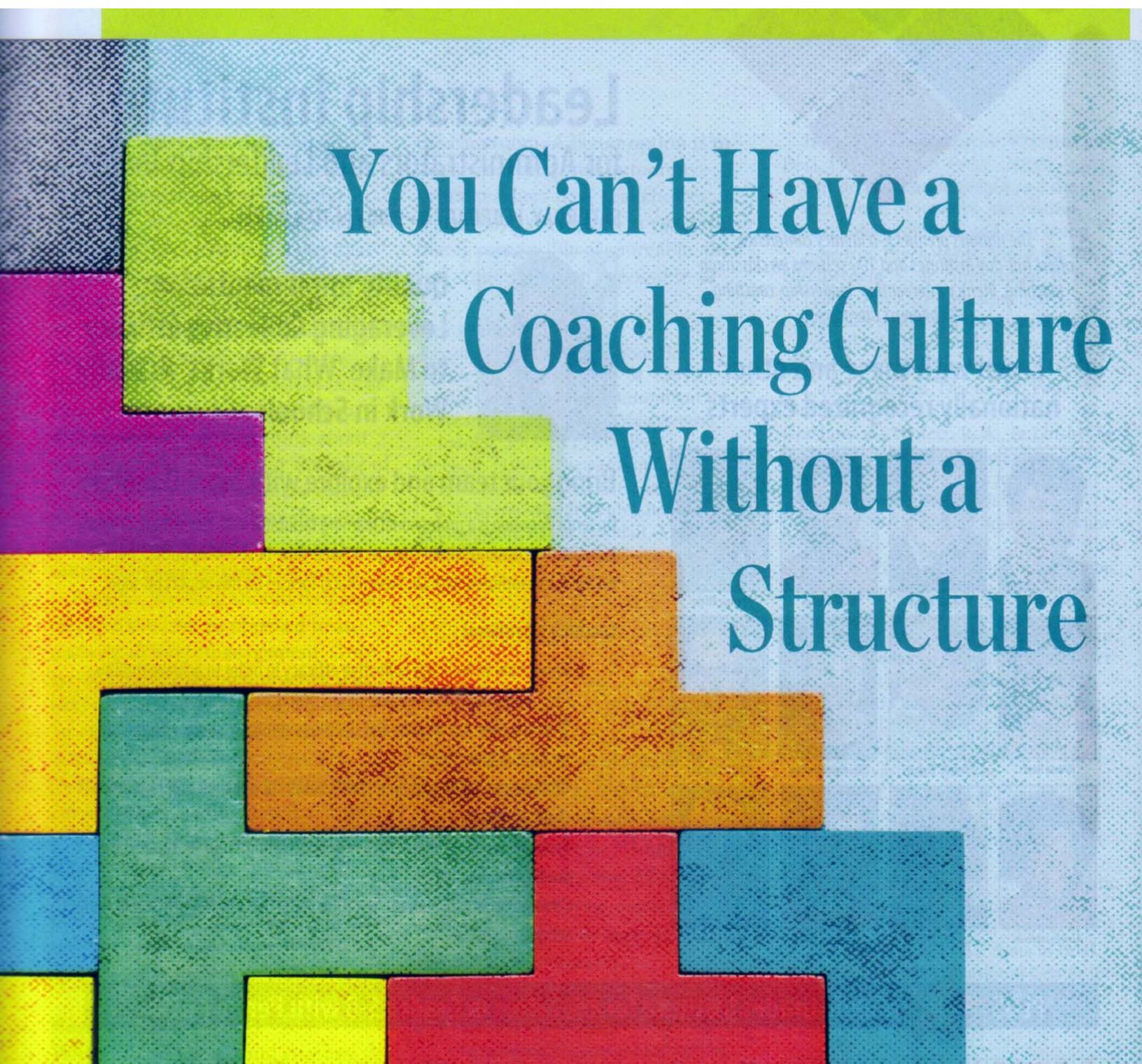
REFLECT & DISCUSS

Can you think of a time in your school or district when a “directive approach” to coaching or PD had a counterproductive effect on teachers? How could the training have been done differently?

Can you describe examples of “responsible accountability” in your school? What conditions helped create them?

What could you change in your coaching or supervision to better honor teachers’ autonomy? How comfortable are you about making that change?

Jim Knight (jknight@ku.edu) is a senior partner at the Instructional Coaching Group and a senior research associate at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. His recent books are *Better Conversations: Coaching Ourselves to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected* (Corwin, 2015) and *The Impact Cycle: What Instructional Coaches Should Do to Foster Powerful Improvements in Teaching* (Corwin, 2017). Follow him on Twitter at @jimknight99.



You Can't Have a Coaching Culture Without a Structure

Attending to 10 key elements lets school leaders design stronger coaching programs.

Elena Aguilar

Management guru Peter Drucker is credited with saying that culture eats strategy for breakfast. But there's an additional truth: Strategy can create culture. An organizational culture must be envisioned, intentionally designed, and nourished. Without strategy, culture may never be born. Without structure, culture will be flimsy.