

From: *Evocative Coaching*, 2nd edition

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11/5 2020

Creative Energy Check-In

Nowhere is coaching presence more important than at the outset of a coaching conversation. To get teachers to open up, coaches have to come alongside them in terms of energy, emotion, pacing, and understanding. We have to connect as human beings. If we get out in front or behind them, teachers will feel pulled or pushed to do what we want. When that happens, we fail to establish rapport and lose effectiveness. When coaching conversations begin, we do not initiate them by focusing attention on reviewing homework from the last session; there will be time enough for that later. First, we seek to read, understand, and connect with the presenting energy of the person we are coaching.

To avoid coming across as being in a hurry to get down to business, we begin every encounter with a brief check-in as to how teachers are feeling in that moment. With the use of one or more opening questions, we communicate authentic compassion for and engagement with the teacher as a person. In so doing, we elevate positivity and readiness to engage. Asking “How are you?” or “How’s it going?” are common ways of doing that, but they typically yield a perfunctory answer: “Fine” or “OK.” There are far more evocative and creative ways to communicate a genuine interest in and respect for whatever may be stirring inside a teacher as the conversation commences. After setting things up by saying something like, “Before we get started, I’d like to ask . . .” coaches might ask, for example:

- If your energy right now was a weather condition, how would you describe it?
- What song could be the theme song for your day today?
- What color might capture how you feel right now?
- What object in your classroom or desk reflects how you are right now?
- What three adjectives might describe how you’re feeling right now?
- How would you describe your energy right now on a scale of 0 to 10?
- What’s especially present for you in this moment?

The reason for setting up the initial check-in by saying, “Before we get started,” is to give teachers permission to talk about whatever

is showing up for them in the moment, both personally and professionally. It expresses caring for the personhood of the teacher even as it recognizes the work of coaching that is yet to come in the conversation. By asking first about how teachers are feeling in the moment, rather than by immediately asking about or commenting on how things are going in their work or with their homework from the last coaching session, coaches gain insight into the teachers' presenting emotional energy. If we don't ask, they may not share how they are showing up for coaching. By doing a brief, initial check-in, through empathy and inquiry, coaches can match whatever energy teachers bring to the conversation.

Sample Coaching Conversation

As we travel together through the next few chapters, we will provide some sample coaching conversations with Janelle. Janelle is a fifth-grade teacher with fifteen years of teaching experience across the K-12 continuum.

COACH: Before we begin, I wonder if you'd share with me how you are showing up for today's conversation. If you were going to describe your energy as a color, what color would you be?

JANELLE: Um, I guess, purple?

COACH: OK. Tell me about purple. What made your mind go to purple?

JANELLE: Well, I was feeling a little stressed and frustrated as I arrived. But I'm starting to calm down now that I'm sitting here. So I'm no longer in the red zone but not quite to blue. I guess purple would be between red and blue.

COACH: Thank you for sharing that. Would you like to take just another minute to catch your breath and get a little closer to blue before we get started?

The First Coaching Session

Although what we have just written applies to initiating every evocative coaching session, the first session with any teacher deserves special comment because it represents the first, fateful impression of our presence and energy, of who we are and how we work, and of what our agenda is with that teacher. It is important to start off the coaching relationship on the right foot. Through the way we initiate the first coaching session, teachers will decide whether or not we can become

trustworthy partners in their professional development. The conversation will most likely include an open yet brief disclosure of our background, our intentions, how we work with people, as well as our passion for coaching, learning, and supporting the work of educators. "What more do you want to know about me?" is a great way to end this brief introduction and to invite questions that build rapport.

It is important to clarify expectations around the understanding that evocative coaches do not come in as experts to tell teachers how to do things; we come in as partners to ask questions and co-create designs. Although we have expertise to share, we are not primarily "answer people"; we are "question people." We are not showing up to observe and evaluate them, to identify and fix their problems, or to tell them what to do. We are facilitating discovery that will enable them to reach their goals and develop themselves professionally. If teachers think that we have the answers and are there to solve their problems, then they can sit back and relax. They do not have to work hard or take full responsibility for their circumstances. In setting up the relationship, then, evocative coaches communicate our desire to avoid such counterproductive dynamics. We express our intention to engage with them as professionals who are already doing many things well and who have the ability to learn how to do even more things well. Most teachers welcome this frame and quickly warm up to such a coaching relationship, to the many questions we ask, and to the creative approaches we take over time. We may make suggestions or share advice, particularly during brainstorming, but that is not our primary role. Our primary role is to help them find their own answers and achieve exceptional results even in the face of challenges. If the teacher still seems especially wary or troubled, we reflect those feelings and needs with a stated desire to understand them fully, to accept them right where they are, and to work with them only in ways that they will enjoy and appreciate.

Once we have a beginning sense of trust and rapport, it is time to introduce the teacher to how evocative coaching works. This is best done by getting as quickly as possible to extending a story invitation that will get them talking about their experiences as a teacher in positive ways. That sets the tone for all that follows, including the discovery of strengths, the framing of aspirations, the assessment of opportunities and resources, and engagement in design-thinking. In other words, the best way to explain coaching is to coach. Once we have teachers talking in this way, we have successfully initiated an evocative coaching relationship.

The initial conversation is key in establishing the quality of the relationship as nonthreatening and productive.

—Matt, High School Department Chair

Sample Coaching Conversation

- COACH:** So, I've been assigned as your coach this semester. I'd like to be a resource for you in any way that you would like. How you use our time together, and whether we meet at all, is up to you. You choose the agenda, and what's on that agenda stays between you and me. Our conversations are strictly confidential.
- JANELLE:** So, I could just say "No, thank you," now or in the future, and I wouldn't get in trouble?
- COACH:** That's right. It's your choice. My only agenda is to support you in what you want to learn to be the best teacher you can be.
- JANELLE:** Hmm. OK, I guess I'll give it a try.
- COACH:** I understand that you've taught in a lot of places and at a lot of grade levels. I wonder if you'd tell me the story about how you came to be a teacher and how you came to be teaching fifth grade here?
- JANELLE:** Sure! Well, it's kind of a long story, but I'll keep it brief. . . .

Once the stage has been set through clarifying our intention to support the learning and growth of the teacher we are working with, and paying attention to how we are showing up—our coaching presence—we are ready to LEAD the coaching dance through listening well, extending empathy, appreciating current strengths and successes, and developing a design for new learning. These four skill sets are not implemented in a step-by-step fashion but inform our practice as coaches throughout. The two phases of evocative coaching, however, tend to be more sequential, with the no-fault turn of listening and empathizing coming before the strengths-building turn of appreciating and designing. These two turns are each introduced in what we call an "interlude," a brief pause before we describe the skill sets in detail to consider how the pair of skills works in concert to advance the coaching agenda.

KEY POINTS IN THIS CHAPTER

1. Evocative coaches see teachers as whole human beings who can figure out for themselves how to be more successful once they find supportive environments and encouraging relationships.
2. The most important moment of a coaching session is often the moment just before it begins because it is in that moment that coaches have the opportunity to adopt a mindful stance, to ready ourselves to be fully present with our teachers and what is alive in them in this particular moment.
3. Apart from a solid foundation of trust and rapport, no coaching alliance can generate a productive and fulfilling change process.
4. Our coaching competence rests in asking good questions and listening well.
5. A key element in the coaching space is the flow of energy and emotion between the coach and teacher. When we are connected in life-giving ways, the dynamics become those of calm assurance, playfulness, and openness to new possibilities.
6. Coaching presence is conveyed in many ways, including body language, facial expressions, eye contact, intonation, word choice, phrasing, and pacing.
7. We use creative energy check-ins to communicate a genuine interest in and respect for whatever may be stirring inside a teacher as the conversation commences.
8. Evocative coaches do not come in as experts to tell teachers how to do things right; we come in as partners to ask questions and co-create designs. Although we have expertise to share, we are not primarily “answer people”; we are “question people.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What dimensions of coaching presence resonate with your experience? How do these dimensions promote mutuality and involvement?
2. How do you convey coaching presence in your everyday interactions with others, even when you are not coaching?
3. What helps you to get into a coaching frame of mind before a coaching session? What practices assist you to adopt a calm, open, and playful stance before a coaching session?