

Ep #241: Setting Up Your Instructional Coach for Success



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 241.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal™ Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday, and happy new school year. So I'm recording this at the beginning of July right before I'm leaving for Idaho. My in-laws just recently moved from the Bay Area to Idaho.

We are going there for the 4th of July to enjoy their brand new home, their brand new swimming pool. They have a billiards room. I mean, it's really crazy. I'm just so excited to see them and spend time with them. It's supposed to be beautiful. My son Alex is flying up from Los Angeles. That's where he lives. He is in the film industry. He is joining us for a few days. I am so excited.

But I had to jump on and record this podcast right this minute. Because I woke up very early this morning and coached one of my clients. We wanted to get one more session in before she's on break and I'm on break. We talked about her instructional coach and the relationship with the instructional coach and setting this instructional coach up for success.

It made me so excited to coach her on this topic because I have been through this with my own instructional coaches at my school. We developed a very successful process for the coaches. I want to share that with you.

So I want to paint a little bit of a picture around what typically happens with instructional coaches. If you are a principal who has an instructional coach

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at your site, whether they are full time or part time. I know for a while I was sharing an instructional coach. It just depends on how your district sets up instructional coaching. But we're going to talk about what instructional coaching is, why it works, and how you can set up your instructional coach for success.

So my client was talking to me about her concerns and her worries about how to make the instructional coach as successful as possible. The district had said we want instructional coaches in the classrooms coaching teachers. We want them to spend their time coaching teachers and spending more time in classrooms than perhaps, let's say, supporting the school at large. You know what I'm talking about.

Like when we have a teacher on assignment, when we have an instructional coach who's not assigned to a classroom, that person has more flexibility in their schedule because they're not having to be in a classroom with students.

It's very easy for that position to slip into the role of can you go help this teacher with this child? This child is having a meltdown. Can you go out and cover recess duty because so and so has a sub? Can you run and pick up this? We need it for the event. Can you monitor the office because the secretary or somebody is out? Right? It's very easy when you have somebody with flexibility to think of them as a person who can help you manage the school at large, the school wide systems and things that need to be in place for the school.

Now, there's nothing wrong with your desire to have them help you in these ways. However, we want to be mindful as school leaders about the role of the instructional coach, the intention and the purpose of the instructional coach, and the teachers and other staff members perception of that role. Okay.

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So as I'm talking with my client, she was explaining to me this is what the district wants. Then we shifted gears into a survey that went out, and some teachers on the teacher survey commented that instead optional coaches are not supposed to be assistant principals. They're not supposed to act as administrators. They're supposed to be confidential, and they're supposed to be supporting teachers.

There was some concern on the anonymous teacher survey that the role of instructional coach might be used as kind of a dual purpose where yes, they're in classrooms, but they're also concerned about the instructional coach coming into classrooms perhaps with a more administrative lens. What I mean by that is that teachers are fearing that the instructional coach might be assessing them, evaluating them in her or his work with those teachers.

If you have ever been an instructional coach or have an instructional coach, you know that this is a concern amongst teachers. It's evident that teachers feel nervous when somebody comes into their classroom. Now, let's talk about why that happened.

So I worked through this process with my client today. I said let's break down the actual words that were in the teacher comments because those words on that document, on the teacher survey, that is a situation. That is a neutral circumstance.

So the words were the PLC position, that's the title for the instructional coach at the school, is not an AP position. These are the words written on the survey. The coach must be willing to listen to staff members, even when opinions differ. If a teacher doesn't feel heard, that person will feel less willing to share or voice an opinion. The coach should not see themselves or act as an assistant principal. The coach should not share

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scores outside of classroom teachers and admin. The coach should not be an administrative position. Okay.

So you can see, there are words on a page, and the principal took those words and formed them into a meaning. Her brain had thoughts about those words. The thoughts were things like this feels personal. I've tried to treat everyone the same. The coach maybe is walking around acting like an AP. Maybe people are jealous. Maybe the coach is privy to additional school wide information and sharing that with staff.

Perhaps what they're saying is true. Is what the principal is thinking. Maybe this is happening, and I need to fix it. Right? I don't want this to be something that festers. People are stressed when the coach is in their classrooms. They were stressed when they wrote the survey because it was at the end of the year.

So her summary was even though these are opinions of teachers, there could be a grain of truth in it. Her urge, her feelings that were coming up based on the thoughts she was having about these comments was a little bit of stress, some worry, concern about it bubbling into something bigger that could fester into a failure, right. That the coach wouldn't be received well, or the coaching wouldn't be effective. She also felt awkward because she saw the truth in it. She could see where the coach might be perceived in this way. She was wondering what to do about it.

So when you feel this urgency to fix it, right, you want to meet with that coach and tell her do this, don't do that. Do this, don't do that. You want to try and get in there and manipulate and fix so that you can believe that people are trusting her or him. In this case, it's a her, and that people are going to receive the coach and receive coaching from her well.

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Now, this is the beauty of coaching. This is where coaching invites our brain—Before we take that action right, in the STEAR cycle. The situation is the teacher's comments, the thoughts, the brain drain of all the thoughts that the principal had regarding those comments, her thoughts and opinions about those comments and what she made them mean then that triggered this fear and concern and worry. She had this urge in response to that emotion to try and solve the problem, to try and fix it right. This is what our brains want to do. It wants to fix the problem.

Coaching invites you to pause. When you're having those emotions before you react to them, you pause and you invite yourself to slow down and plan out your approach, the set of actions you're going to take with intention. Okay?

So we slowed her down. I said let's reverse engineer this STEAR cycle. We start with the result, or the outcomes we want to create. What is it we want to create with instructional coaching? She said, "I want teachers to trust the coach. I want her to remain true to the purpose of her role and to be confidential and to be supporting teachers." So the outcome we're trying to create in instructional coaching is for teachers to believe we're on the same team. That we have trust, that we can work together to solve problems, and to improve the teaching experience for the teacher.

Instructional coaching, of course, it's about students. We know that when we help teachers teach better, students will receive better instruction, and they'll have a better learning experience. They will enjoy school more. They will participate more. We understand the value of instructional coaching. But unfortunately, lots of teachers feel fear and kind of a resistance to coaching because there is this very gray area between the role of the coach, the purpose of the coach, and communicating that very clearly, and then acting that through. I'll talk more about this in a second.

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But the outcome we're trying to create, through instructional coaching benefits the teachers. I think we need to make this clear with ourselves as school leaders. The purpose of instructional coaching is to support teachers. It's for a coach to come in and say hey, what problems are you having? What are you struggling with? What would make life easier for you? I'm here to help you solve problems and struggles and issues that you're facing to make your job easier.

The reason we want to approach our teachers this way as instructional coaches is because when teachers feel supported, they'll be more open and more trusting and more willing to be vulnerable and tell the coach the truth of what they're struggling with and why and what would make life easier for them. When life is easier for your teachers, it becomes easier for students. So the outcome of instructional coaching is to support teachers in what they are struggling with, what they perceive themselves as having problems.

What happens in instructional coaching, unfortunately, is it starts with good intention. Our coaches have great hearts. They're teachers at heart. They want to help teachers, but they're told by administration often times, whether it's district or site administration, to go in and fix them.

Now, when you use your instructional coach and you implement your instructional coach in this way, teachers, of course, are going to feel defensive, and they're going to feel scared. They're going to feel like you think they are broken or something's wrong with them or they're not doing it right. Then you're going to point out the teachers who aren't doing it right and go in and fix them. That's not going to be well received as you can imagine.

Imagine if you were that teacher, and they sic the instructional coach on you and tell you like here, this is what you need to do differently. Versus

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what are you struggling with? How can I help you? I'm going to talk a little bit more about this. I'm so excited about this you guys.

Now, what is the outcome that you as the principal wants to create? You want to create a trusting bond, a collaborative relationship. That's the outcome you want. The reason you want that is because the outcome you want beyond that is teachers who are highly effective. Teachers who are highly effective, we believe that creates more success for students, okay? So we're trying to build a professional and trusting and safe space for teachers to expose what they're struggling with and ask for help and receive it openly.

Now, if we go in the opposite route, and we tell teachers this is what you need to fix. This is what you need to do. This is where it's working. This is where it's not. If we come in with our own set of thoughts and opinions and assumptions and we tell them, what result does that create? Teachers don't feel safe. They don't feel comfortable. They are skeptical. They feel like that coach is playing an administrative role. They won't trust her. They'll resist having this person in the classroom. That's not the result you want to create.

You have to understand the outcome that you're trying to create. We're trying to impact student learning. Absolutely. But really, the reason we're trying to impact student learning and the way, the approach we're using, is through the instructional coach to help the teacher. Okay.

So if you have an instructional coach or if you want an instructional coach, and you want to sell your district on the value of instructional coaching, you have to understand what are the benefits? What are the results, the outcomes? What's the value of instructional coaching? Not for kids, but for the teacher. Why does a teacher benefit? What's in it for the teachers when they have an instructional coach? How does teaching get better for them?

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How does it make life easier for them? What challenges does it help them overcome or solve? Right?

So to your role, as the principal, if you have this instructional coach, you want to go through the process I'm going to share with you to set this person up for success. Okay. Step one, set your intentions for the role. Yes, your district is giving you an instructional coach, and they're probably telling you this is what we want. Okay, fine.

Within those confines, what do you want? What outcomes and intentions do you want to create from this instructional coaching position, and why? Why do you want to create these outcomes? I mean what is the benefit for the teachers? Why do you want to create these benefits for these teachers? What's in it for them?

What's in it for them is what's in it for you. This is a win-win situation. The teachers win, the coach gets to be successful, and you win. What's in it for all of you. Really thinking about the benefits of having that instructional coach supporting teachers on the issues that they perceive they need help with. Okay.

Then you want to consider the expectations and the boundaries that you as the principal will adhere to regarding the instructional coaching position. Things like this. You have to hold yourself accountable and not invite that instructional coach to overstep his or her boundaries. I know this is hard.

I did this myself accidentally my first year. I would want to talk to my instructional coach about things outside of the role. I would subconsciously pull her in and want to talk about things that were really an admin situation or an admin conversation. Do not do this to your coach. Don't put them in the position of having to switch back and forth because it doesn't serve them, and then they can't serve your teachers.

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So you have to decide what am I going to hold myself accountable? What are the boundaries, the expectations I have for myself? Of course you want to also clarify what are the boundaries and expectations I have for the instructional coach, the position that they are holding, right? So you want to set boundaries for yourself so you don't slip into that, and you want your teachers to know you've set those boundaries for yourself.

Also consider how you're going to handle those problems. When you feel that urge to pull the coach in and go and solve all the external problems, the kind of bigger school wide problems. Before you use them as that resource ask yourself, how might I handle that in another way? If I didn't have a coach, how would I solve this problem? Brainstorm solutions that don't include the instructional coach so that you have a backup.

The more you plan ahead for those obstacles, if you didn't have a coach, how would you handle it? Plan those out ahead of time so you don't have to rely or expect your coach to step out of her coaching role and into the role of covering administrative duties or even teacher duties that you don't have somebody else to do. Do you see what I'm saying?

You might have to use your coach on occasion. We're not saying you never use the coach, but as a general rule, as an expectation, as a guidance, you want to solve those problems ahead of time without that instructional coach being the solution. Okay.

Then you want to list out what teachers need to be thinking and feeling in order to accept the instructional coach and for that instructional coach to be a success. What do teachers need to think and feel that will result in them accepting the coach, trusting the coach, working with the coach, and getting the results that you want them to receive, that they want to receive, and the coach wants. You all want the same thing. You all want your coach

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to be successful, your teachers to be successful because that means you are successful.

So what do teachers need to think and feel in order to take the action of accepting that coach into their classroom, working with them, problem solving with them, and coming up with strategies that work? You want them to be thinking they're on the same team, and that they can trust. That it's safe, and that it's comfortable, and that this coach is on their side. All right.

Not that there's sides, on the same team. You're all on the same team. That's what I want to reiterate is that the coach is not against teachers. They're not tattling on teachers to you. They're not tattling to the district office. They're there to support the teacher. Okay.

Step two, you want to map out the job description. You want to be very clear and very specific about the role of the instructional coach based on your own expectations. So the district will have a set of expectations, and within those expectations, what are your very specific outcomes that you're desiring to create? What is the role and purpose of that instructional coach? Be as specific as possible.

You want to make sure you include what the role does not include, such as evaluating teachers, sharing information with other people, talking to administration about teachers, specifically in an evaluative role. That's not the purpose of the coaching, and we want to make sure we're honoring that because trust will be broken if we don't do that, okay? What are the boundaries and the expectations of the role, and why that's a benefit for the coach?

So when you say to the coach, like with the boundary or the expectation, the standard we're creating for this role is that you're not going to share information from one teacher to another. The reason that helps you as a

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coach is that builds trust. If you don't talk about their colleagues, then they can trust that you're not talking about them to their colleagues. Okay. When you set up boundaries and expectations for the role, you're doing it to benefit and help the coach. You want the coach to see that benefit for themselves. Okay?

What outcomes do you want the instructional coaching position to create for teachers? Share that with the coach. We are here to serve the teachers. We're here to help them. Then how do you see this person spending their time on a regular basis. What does a week look like for an instructional coach in your eyes? You want to be as clear as possible about your expectations so that the coach can be successful. You want to talk with the coach about the purpose and the intention behind whatever meetings you have.

This was something else that came up in my coaching session today. My client was concerned that teachers were feeling maybe jealous or maybe worried about the instructional coach meeting with the principal more often, having these secret meetings, and what were they talking about? Are they talking about us? This lack of trust that's building up because of those meetings that the principal and the coach are having together.

You want to be as transparent about those meetings as possible. So what is the purpose and the intention of those meetings? The intention of those meetings should be to problem solve for teachers. When you're sitting down with your coach, you want to identify what problems are coming up? What are the solutions? What is the process the coach is going to use to help that teacher solve this problem? What are the results we're trying to create?

You want to be transparent with your entire staff about these agendas. What you're talking about what your problem solving, what solutions you're

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coming up with, and what's not going to be included on that agenda. You want to be clear. We're not going to talk about specific teachers. We're not going to talk about them in an evaluative type of way. We're not maybe even going to say names.

I know my coach and I, we didn't have to say names. That didn't mean we didn't understand who the person was talking about, but we made a decision not to bring up names. Because the goal isn't to call someone out and to make them look bad or for the coach to be spying and tattling and bringing it back to you.

The purpose is for the coach to help that teacher understand what's going on for them. What they think is a struggle, what they think the solution might be, and then how can we bridge that gap from where they're at to where they want to be as a teacher. To help them feel better about themselves as a teacher, to help them solve problems, and to be more effective as a teacher from their perspective, okay?

Also consider how the coach is going to be evaluated. How are you going to progress monitor the coaches progress? How will that coach know that he or she is on track? How are they achieving goals? How are they tracking the progress they're making with teachers in supporting them? You want to think about that as well. Okay.

Then step three, with your coach once you have cleared out in your mind and you're very clear about the expectations for yourself, the expectations for the coach, the expectations for the teachers and the meetings, and how that's all going to play out, then you want to sit down with your coach and talk with them about what are the problems. You want to anticipate obstacles ahead of time and solve for them.

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So I call this pitfall planning. You know the coach's job is to go in and help solve problems for teachers. Why not preemptively make a list of all the things that your coach might come up against or across in the coaching session? So what are the top 10 things teachers struggle with? What do new teachers struggle with? What do veteran teachers want assistance with? What do they think is the problem, right? They have different thoughts. Brand new teachers may have different thoughts and veteran teachers. You want to think about that.

What are the problems they're going to present to the coach? What might be a solution? You want to preemptively decide? What are the top 10 problems? What are the top 10 solutions? What's the process the coach is going to use to teach that teacher or to mentor and guide them how to get themselves from where they're at to where they want to be? Map this stuff out. That's what your meetings should be about. Here are the problems being presented. Here's what I'm seeing. Here's what teachers want. These are the solutions they're looking for.

Now, the work for the coach comes in with how do I bridge the gap? What process do I model or mentor this teacher to help them figure out a strategy that works for them, whether it's classroom management, or teaching a particular lesson, or maybe some kids aren't getting a concept. Whatever the coach is working on, deciding ahead of time and having kind of an action plan.

Because here's why you do this. Number one, it sets the coach up for success. But number two, you can say to teachers hey, these are some of the problems that the coach can help you with. The coach has pre-thought of solutions and a process to help you tackle these things. So you can kind of give your teachers some ideas about here's some ways to use an instructional coach to help you feel better about the work you're doing. Okay.

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So with your coach, you want to identify the problems, potential solutions. You want to streamline and simplify a process that's going to help the coach mentor the teachers, and then to identify what specific outcomes and results you're trying to create and how that benefits the teacher. Okay.

Basically, it's going to look like identify the problem, get very specific about it. What is the theory? What is the solution you think will work? Then you test that theory out. Let's put it into play. Let's model it, let's mentor, let's try it out. Then we just evaluate. What worked? What didn't? What do we need to adjust? We keep honing that process until the teacher gets it, until everything's flowing, until you've kind of figured out how to get that system or that routine or that concept covered in a way that successful for students. Okay.

Number four, you want to be transparent with your communication. You want to be very clear and concise and transparent with your teachers. They need to know what you think the role is, what the coach thinks the role is, what the coach isn't doing. You want to be transparent about your agendas with the meetings and the outcomes of those agendas. You want to invite teachers openly to share their thoughts and opinions.

Really the reason you're doing that is the transparency helps build trust and comfort. You want teachers feeling comfortable with your coach so that the coach can successfully coach. If the coach is met with resistance, the coach cannot be effective. You want to set yourself and your coach and your teachers all up for success.

The way you do that is by being transparent which builds trust and comfort and safety. Letting those teachers know the coach is not in here to fix you. You're not broken. You're not doing it wrong. The coach is here for you to come and say hey, can you help me problem solve this? Can you help me see something I'm not able to see here?

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Because the truth is teachers are doing the best job they can. When you come across resistance from a teacher, most of the time the teacher just has a problem that they don't know how to solve. They're a little embarrassed or they're a little ashamed, and they don't want people to see them failing because that's uncomfortable. It's awkward. It feels hard. It's embarrassing. We have to be mindful of that. We have to give teachers some grace and understanding that it is hard. It is embarrassing. It does bring up shame for some people.

Because look if the teacher that your thinking needs to be fixed, if that teacher is struggling, they know they're struggling. If they knew the solution, they'd implement it. They know that they don't know. So that just feels embarrassing right there. You want to understand this and approach them with love and kindness and understanding and compassion. We want our coaches out there to be successful.

In order to be successful, they have to be very compassionate. They have to be understanding of the viewpoint of the teachers. So the teachers are scared. The teachers think that the coach is coming in to fix them because they're broken. If they don't fix it, they're going to lose their job. That's not what we're trying to create here. Right.

The goal is to make your instructional coach a beloved member of the community. My coaches were so loved by my teachers, more than me. Like they loved the coaches. That's because we established trust, safety, comfort, and that opened up the portal to vulnerability, to tell the coach the truth. Here's what I'm really struggling with. This parent is coming down my throat. I don't know how to handle them. I've tried these things. What do I do? Then the coach gets in there and empathizes and agrees and comforts them and just acknowledges that pain, that fear of that parent, and then they can sit down and problem solve, right? That's what you want.

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Here's why. When the coaching is all about helping the teacher feel better and to problem solve, kids definitely benefit. Teachers definitely benefit. Your coach is successful. Guess what? That makes you successful. This is a win, win, win, win, win situation. The kids win, teachers win, the coach wins, you win, your district wins. That is what we're trying to set up with your instructional coaches.

If you want support on how to create a successful coaching situation in your school, or if you feel like you have a toxic or negative culture around instructional coaching, reach out for a consult. Let's sign up for coaching. Let's get your coach and your school back on the coaching track. Okay. Have an amazing week. I'll talk to you guys next week. Take care. Bye.

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