

20 Tips for New Instructional Coaches

Let the teachers do most of the talking, learn to listen, and stay curious. These are just a few of the tips offered to instructional coaches new to the field.

By [Elena Aguilar](#)

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Welcome to the wonderful world of coaching. Ten years ago I took a full-time job as an instructional coach after having dabbled part time in coaching for several years. Here's what I wish I'd known then, and what I offer you as you enter this field.

1. Your job isn't to fix anyone. The job of a coach is to support by listening and shining a light on their best thinking. (It's not possible to fix anyone but ourselves anyway.)

2. Clarify your definition of coaching. What's your definition of it? How do teachers and administrators define coaching? Get on the same page with others on a definition of coaching.

3. Understand what others expect of you. What does your principal (or supervisor) expect you to do and accomplish? What do teachers expect of

you? What are your goals as a coach? Who sets those? How do your goals support your school's goals?

4. Your job isn't to know everything. You don't have to know everything about teaching or a specific content or curriculum. You don't have to be an expert.

5. Your job is to *facilitate* an adult's learning process. Our job is not to drive their thinking or direct it, or *to make them* do something.

6. You need to know about adult learning. You will also need to know how to put that knowledge into practice. You need to know what it looks like in a coaching conversation to work from a place of knowledge of adult learning.

7. In order to facilitate someone else's learning, they need to trust you. In the first months, build relationships and cultivate trust. You can't coach without trust.

8. Create a safe space for risk taking and learning. Strive to be an expert in this area. How do you do this? Start by reflecting on your own experience and needs. What makes you feel safe to take risks?

9. Listening is the foundational skill set of a coach. Learn different ways to listen, practice listening, and when in doubt, just listen.

10. Make sure the teacher you are supporting is doing the talking. Talk for less than a third of the time in a coaching session. Trust that by giving her time to talk and be heard -- and perhaps a thought-provoking question -- she will get what she needs from the conversation.

11. Listen for what matters. What do they care about deeply? What are their core values? What are their dreams, hopes, and aspirations?

12. Find the joy in coaching. When you wonder if you should return to the classroom -- when you miss the joy in teaching kids, when you stumble as a new coach -- set your sights on spotting the joy in coaching. It's there.

13. Let those who you support do the work. After you master the vast and complex skill set of coaching, coaching can feel easy; let the person you support do the work.

14. Mastery takes a lot of practice. Remember that mastery may take 10,000 hours of practice, and practice with feedback. Find colleagues with whom you can practice coaching skills and practice and practice.

15. Have coaching conversations that matter. Ensure that the conversation means something. People show up for conversations that matter. Teachers are not resistant in conversations that matter.

16. Have conversations about students. These are conversations that matter. Use student work, anecdotes, observations, and videos of students to ground the conversation in the needs of our young people.

17. Don't get too busy. Don't take on too many projects, responsibilities, or tasks. You need time to think, plan, reflect, and learn about coaching. Resist the temptation to do more as a way of compensating for not knowing what you're doing as a coach. If you're a coach, learn about coaching, and do it.

18. Be patient. There's a lot of change that needs to happen in our schools, and it's going to take time. You can make every conversation count. Imagine each coaching conversation as a baby tree you plant. You may not be around to sit in the tree's shade, but you can get it started. The poet Rumi wrote,

“Patience does not mean to passively endure. It means to be farsighted enough to trust the end result of a process.” Trust the process.

19. Be curious. Be insatiably, humbly curious. Learn to ask nonjudgmental questions that create expansion in someone else’s thinking and imagination. Learn to ask nonjudgmental questions about assumptions, biases, interpretation, and opinion. Know that you will learn a tremendous amount as an instructional coach about things you don’t yet know that you don’t know. Be curious.

20. Be compassionate. Have compassion for those you are supporting. Have compassion for students. Have compassion with yourself. From compassion comes the conversations we need to transform our schools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- [Elena Aguilar](#) Transformational Leadership Coach from Oakland, California [@artofcoaching1](#)