Supportive Coaching Conversations

Activity 1 – Introducing the Coaching Cue Card

Introduction

A skilful coach uses communication skills to encourage a collaborating teacher to think more deeply about a topic or to help the teacher reflect during a planning conference. The goal of this exercise is to help the group gain expertise in using these important coaching skills.

Protocols are guidelines for conversations and we use them in the coaching program to keep discussions focused. We also use protocols because they provide a structure for collaborative work and help build trust. As coaches become knowledgeable about the use of protocols they may use them with groups of collaborating teachers.

The first of these protocols we will use is the ‘Coaching Communication Cue Card’. This protocol becomes the scaffold for coaching conversations. It is your quintessential tool for coaching work.

This cue card protocol is based on the following scaffold:

1. Actively **Listen**
2. **Paraphrase** the problem or issue
3. **Clarify** with factual questions
4. **Probe** with questions that help the coachee create a solution themselves

We use the ‘Communication Cue Card’ best when our coachee comes to a conversation with a concern or problem they need to work through. A problem they are not sure how to solve. This type of scaffolded collaborative conversation helps them to understand and take responsibility for their problem, solving it with their own initiatives, rather than just accepting a solution from a colleague.

Preparing to hold a coaching conversation

When holding a coaching conversation with a partner or coachee, it is best to remove yourself from a noisy or busy place. Find somewhere that you can give your coachee full attention. They have a problem to solve, and it is our role as coaches to help them to do this.

Take notepad and pen with you, switch off or leave behind distractions and devices. This time is for your coachee, you can catch up with other communications after the session. Write notes as you listen. Make them the record and prompt for reflection. Once your conversation is complete, hand these notes to the coachee. This helps to develop a trusting relationship and solid base for reflection by the coachee at a later date. Coachees feel confident that you are not going to share their private discussion with others.

Set aside a substantive amount of time. A good guide is 30 minutes. These conversations take time to get to the real problem and solution, and rushing them will not help the coachee to come to a realisation of the actions needed to solve their dilemma.
Begin the session by focussing on the problem at hand. A coaching conversation is not to discuss daily matters, but to focus on an issue or problem that the coachee is finding a struggle to solve, or move forward and solve.

Some ideas for starting the conversation might be:

1. What would you like us to talk about? What would you like us to achieve? What would you like this to look like? What have you brought to work on today? What if we started here?

The ‘main rule’ of a coaching conversation is to not tell the coachee how to solve their problem. You must ask them questions in a manner that helps them to come to this realisation themselves. You might know exactly what they need to do, or where they need to go with a problem, but you have to ask them questions that make them realise this themselves. Ownership of the problem and solution are very empowering. Some master coaches say that “Helping people to see the solution is 85% of the way to solving it”. Coaching conversations about softly massaging and supporting them to open their eyes to their own problems.

Sometimes coaching conversations make people feel uncomfortable. This is ok as long as it is not traumatic. Coaching conversations push people out of their daily comfort zone. They make them search for solutions that have not come to them easily. In order to do this, they have to think differently and solve their problems in a different way than they do by default. Coaching conversations are not a comforting chat. They are a scaffolded discussion to solve a complex issue or problem. If the conversation gets too emotional, suggest time out. Support them to feel good about the direction they are taking to solve their problem and revisit it as soon as they feel comfortable. This time away may help them to digest and come to a solution on their own.

Once you have set your problem and focus for the conversation, move onto using the coaching cue card.

**What are Probing Questions?**

After listening and paraphrasing back the problem or issue to the coachee, it’s time to ask clarifying and probing questions to help the coachee solve their dilemma. The distinction between clarifying questions and probing questions is very difficult for most people working with protocols. So is the distinction between probing questions and recommendations for action.

**The basic distinctions between clarifying and probing questions are:**

**Clarifying Questions** are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts so that the participants can ask good probing questions and provide useful feedback later in the protocol. Clarifying questions are for the participants, and should not go beyond the boundaries of the presenter’s dilemma. They have brief, factual answers, and don’t provide any new “food for thought” for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Does the presenter have to think before s/he answers? If so, it’s almost certainly a probing question.

Some examples of clarifying questions:

2. How much time does the project take?
3. How were the students grouped?
4. What resources did the students have available for this project?
Probing Questions are intended to help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand. If a probing question doesn’t have that effect, it is either a clarifying question or a recommendation with an upward inflection at the end. If you find yourself saying “Don’t you think you should ...?” you’ve gone beyond probing questions. The presenter often doesn’t have a ready answer to a genuine probing question. Since probing questions are the hardest to create productively, we offer the following suggestions:

- Check to see if you have a “right” answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don’t ask it.
- Refer to the presenter’s original question/focus point. What did s/he ask for your help with? Check your probing questions for relevance.
- Check to see if you are asserting your own agenda. If so, return to the presenter’s agenda.
- Sometimes a simple “why...?” asked as an advocate for the presenter’s success can be very effective, as can several why questions asked in a row.
- Think about the concentric circles of comfort, risk and danger. Use these as a barometer. Don’t avoid risk, but don’t push the presenter into the “danger zone."
- Think of probing questions as being on a continuum, from recommendation to most effective probing question. For example [on next page— from an actual Consultancy session in which a teacher was trying to figure out why the strongest math students in the class weren’t buying in and doing their best work on what seemed to be interesting math “problems of the week”.

In summary, good probing questions:

- are general and widely useful
- don’t place blame on anyone
- allow for multiple responses
- help create a paradigm shift
- empower the person with the dilemma to solve his or her own problem (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- avoid yes/no responses
- are usually brief
- elicit a slow response
- move thinking from reaction to reflection
- encourage taking another party’s perspective

Some final hints for crafting probing questions. Try the following questions and/or question stems. Some of them come from Charlotte Danielson’s Pathwise work, in which she refers to them as “mediational questions.”

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What do you feel is right in your heart?
- What do you wish...?
- What’s another way you might...?
- What would it look like if...?
- What do you think would happen if...?
• How was...different from...?
• What sort of an impact do you think...?
• What criteria did you use to...?
• When have you done/experienced something like this before?
• What might you see happening in your classroom if...?
• How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
• What is your hunch about ....?
• What was your intention when ....?
• What do you assume to be true about ....?
• What is the connection between...and...?
• What if the opposite were true? Then what?
• How might your assumptions about...have influenced how you are thinking about...?
• Why is this such a dilemma for you?

Some Examples of Probing Questions:
• Why is a “stand-and-deliver” format the best way to introduce this concept?
• How do you think your own comfort with the material has influenced your choice of instructional strategies?
• What do the students think is quality work?
• You have observed that this student’s work lacks focus – what makes you say that?
• What would the students involved say about this issue?
• How have your perspectives on current events influenced how you have structured this activity?
• Why aren’t the science teachers involved in planning this unit?
• Why do you think the team hasn’t moved to interdisciplinary curriculum planning?
• What would understanding of this mathematical concept look like? How would you know students have “gotten it”?
• Why did allowing students to create their own study questions cause a problem for you?
• What was your intention when you assigned students to oversee the group activity in this assignment?
• What evidence do you have from this student’s work that her ability to reach substantiated conclusions has improved?
• How might your assumptions about the reasons why parents aren’t involved have influenced what you have tried so far?
• How do you think your expectations for students might have influenced their work on this project?
• What do you think would happen if you restated your professional goals as questions?
### Activity 2 - The Coaching Cue Card Protocol

**Problem or Topic for conversation:**

### Step 1 - Active Listening
- Focus on the speaker and supporting their learning
- Block out all competing thoughts
- Lean forward and nodding
- Take notes
- Use body language that shows empathy.

| 1. | Ask the coachee to describe their problem in detail. |
| 2. | Follow the tips as directed. |
| 3. | Take lots of notes. |
| 4. | It’s all about giving your full attention and letting them explain their problem in depth. |

### Step 2 - Paraphrasing
- Is restating what was stated
- Is used to check for understanding
- Clarifies what was heard by summarizing
- Indicates acceptance and encouragement
- Establishes a relationship between the speakers

**So what I hear you saying is … So what you are wondering is…Let me see if I have understood you… So what you are thinking…**

| 1. | Repeat back what they have told you, in your own words. |
| 2. | Ask the coachee to wait until the end to add anything they have missed. |
| 3. | This step is crucial, as many people realise just how their problem sounds to others and they often solve it. |
| 4. | Be sympathetic in your language |
| 5. | Keep to facts – this gives an objective lens to the problem and the coachee moves out of being too subjective. |
| 6. | Give the coachee time to add to their problem, or change once you have completed paraphrasing. |

### Step 3 - Clarifying Questions
- Lead to a clear picture or understanding of a topic or idea
- Are factual
- Are answered quickly
- Are used to gather information

**How did you… What…?**

| 1. | Use this time to ask factual questions that you need to further help you develop probing questions. |
| 2. | Sometimes you won’t need these if you feel the coachee has explained their issue or problem in depth. |
| 3. | Keep these questions short |
| 4. | Yes / No questions work well in this area. |

### Step 4 - Probing Questions
- Are thought provoking
- Encourage deeper thinking
- Are often open-ended, not yes/no questions
- Are solution focused

**Where is your student/class now? Where do you want them to be as a result of this? What will they know and be able to do? What could you do? What else is possible? Could I make some suggestions? What do you need to know and be able to do to achieve that? Are there other strategies that you could use to . . .? What might the next step be? What did you learn from that?**

| 1. | These questions should not be simple yes/no questions |
| 2. | Probing questions should gently guide a coachee to their solution |
| 3. | May help them to think outside their regular patterns and activities |
| 4. | May be difficult to answer, rephrase them into a few different questions if needed |
| 5. | See the next page for more information and examples |

See the previous page for more examples of probing questions.
Task 1 - Practicing using ‘The Coaching Cue Card’

The best way to learn how to lead a coaching conversation using the Coaching Cue Card is to practice. You will now split into pairs and begin coaching each other.

Sample topics
Below are some topics to help you begin your coaching conversation. Choose one and when asked by your ‘coach’ lead off with this problem.

• How are you preparing your students for their future study and work?
• What would you see and hear if you visited a 21st century classroom?
• What are your favourite web 2 tools? How do you use them to create engaging lessons for your students?

You will need to do this twice in your pair. Once turn each as coach and coachee completing the Coaching Cue Card.

Use the Coaching Cue Card Scaffold from the previous page for your first couple of practice sessions. After that, use the version at the end of your handouts.

Task 2 - Debrief the Coaching Cue Card

Debrief the Coaching Cue Card Protocol in pairs or in your group using the following questions:

• What was helpful about the protocol process?
• What was difficult?
• How could you use the protocol in other settings?
• How do you think communication skills build trust?

Activity 3 – Course Reflection Activity

Task 1 - Continue Start Stop!

Focus Question: Something I will do when helping a colleague tomorrow

• What is something that affirms what you already do, that you will continue to do?
• What is something of importance you have learned that you will start doing?
• What is something you will stop doing?
Coaching Cue Card

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1. Could you have students use the rubric to assess their own papers? (recommendation re-stated as a question)
2) What would happen if students used the rubric to assess their own work? (recommendation re-stated as a probing question)
3) What do the students think is an interesting math problem? (good probing question)
4) What would have to change for students to work more for themselves? (better probing question)

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• Why do you think the team hasn’t moved to interdisciplinary curriculum planning?
• What would understanding of this mathematical concept look like? How would you know students have “gotten it”?
• Why did allowing students to create their own study questions cause a problem for you?
• Why do you think the expected outcomes of this unit weren’t communicated to parents?
• What was your intention when you assigned students to oversee the group activity in this assignment?
• What evidence do you have from this student’s work that her ability to reach substantiated conclusions has improved?
• How might your assumptions about the reasons why parents aren’t involved have influenced what you have tried so far?
• How do you think your expectations for students might have influenced their work on this project?
• What do you think would happen if you restated your professional goals as questions?
• What other approaches have you considered for communicating with parents about their children’s progress?