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Make a Good First Impression

Whether it's a movie, a book, a first date, or a dinner out at a nice restaurant, having a positive beginning is the key to a memorable experience. Memory research confirms that we naturally remember things that occur first in a series. It's the same with a coaching session. It is important to get off to a good start in the introduction phase, setting the stage for optimal learning. The introduction phase is shared by all three of the coaching models. So, practicing your technique here pays off in three ways.

The introduction phase of a coaching session is intended to set the stage for optimal engagement and learning. In the introduction the coach seeks to set a positive and energetic tone for the session, to create a sense of safety for the teacher, and to preview what's to come. This is accomplished in the three segments of the introduction phase: greeting, set the tone, outline the session. Or... as a mnemonic rhyme: hi line, feel fine, outline.

Introduction- Greeting: "Good morning Joyce, thanks for being a part of this coaching session." "Hello Vic. It's good to see you! I've been looking forward to working with you this morning." "Good afternoon Mrs. Felder. I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me today." The elements of an effective greeting are: call the teacher by name, make eye contact, smile, shake hands, exude warmth, express appreciation, and communicate that you are anticipating a positive experience. It is amazing how much important information (verbal and non-verbal) is exchanged between two people in the first five seconds of an encounter.

Introduction- Set the Tone: "Joyce, I know you've had a busy fall coaching the cross-county team. Were there some runners you were particularly pleased with?" "Tell me Vic- how are things coming along with your construction project? Aren't you and your wife remodeling your kitchen?" "The faculty is still talking about the homemade shrimp quesadillas you brought to the holiday luncheon, Mrs. Felder. I'm envious. Where did you learn to make those?" Setting the tone provides time for the natural anxiety of the coaching session to dissipate a bit. A little chit-chat allows the teacher's (and coach's) brain and voice a chance to get started on something safe and easy. Here is a classic recipe for a set the tone conversation:

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Ask the teacher a question about something outside of school that they know more about than you do. The response should come easily since the teacher is talking about something familiar. Also, the fact that the topic is not a classroom issue should lower anxiety even further. During this brief conversation (30 – 90 seconds, perhaps) the coach should notice any non-verbal cues from the teacher indicating that anxiety is at a manageable level... smiling, laughter, head nodding, gestures, vocal variety, uncrossing of arms, and leaning forward are a few examples of these cues.

Introduction- Outline the Session: The purpose of the outline is to reduce the anxiety of the unknown, clarify the purpose and process of the coaching session, and invite mutual effort toward a positive outcome for the session. In the outline, the coach should identify the type of coaching session that is being used, explain the purpose of the coaching session, provide a brief overview of the steps in the process, estimate the amount of time needed for the session, and ask for an acknowledgment that the teacher is ready to engage in the coaching session.

Sample outline scripts for three coaching models:

For a Reflective Planning Session: "Joyce, this is called a reflective planning session. The purpose of reflective planning is to provide you with an opportunity to think through a future lesson with a partner- in a way that is deeper, more complete, or different than if you were just working on your own. To accomplish this, I'll be asking you some questions about your goals for the lesson, about what types of activities or experiences you're thinking of using, and about how you'll know whether or not your students are learning as expected. I'll likely follow up the questions with various probes and prompts aimed at sparking your creative thinking. If I'm a good enough questioner, you'll leave the session with a few more ideas of how you might go about teaching the lesson. At the end, I'll ask you for a bit of feedback on the coaching session so I can continue to develop my skills as a coach. The whole process will probably take 10 or 15 minutes. How does that sound to you?"

For a Positive Reinforcement Coaching Session: "Vic, this is a positive reinforcement coaching session. There are two purposes of positive reinforcement coaching. The first is to highlight a particularly successful episode from your classroom and affirm your teaching... to say 'way to go,' 'this really worked.' The second

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purpose is to talk through why it worked, so you’ll be even more confident in using that particular approach to teaching in the future. In one way of thinking, I’ll be spotting some of your natural teaching talents and encouraging you to use and develop these talents more and more. To accomplish this, I’ll show you the notes I took while observing your class. I’ll point out a particularly effective part of the lesson and we’ll talk about how and why it worked so well and how you might apply it to future lessons. At the end, I’ll ask you for a bit of feedback on the coaching session so I can continue to develop my skills as a coach. The whole process will probably take 10 or 15 minutes. Are you ready to get started?”

For an Instructional Coaching Session: “Mrs. Felder, this is an instructional coaching session. The idea of instructional coaching is that I take a look at your teaching, in an overall way, and add (other verbs... sharpen, adjust, fine tune) a tool to (in) your toolbox (other metaphors... arrow in your quiver, strategy in your repertoire, play in your playbook). I’ll seek to add something that is complementary to what you’re already doing so that you can be ever more successful in your teaching. Here’s how it works. First, we’ll discuss the idea in general terms. Then, I’ll take the role of teacher and provide a short lesson to show what it is and how it works. Then, we’ll brainstorm ways you might incorporate it into your teaching. A few days down the road, we’ll set up a time for me to come to your classroom and provide some feedback on how it’s going. Today’s part of the process will probably take 10 or 15 minutes. Are you ready to get started?”

It is also worth noting that the introduction phase of these three coaching models can also be put to good use in many other applications at school or home. Whether it’s a sticky parent conference, a heated discipline hearing, or a difficult conversation with a teenager, it’s important to start off on the right foot by remembering the rhyme... hi line, feel fine, outline.

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