

Defining Effective Coaching Practices to Support Teachers and Improve Student Outcomes

Research on professional development shows that teachers need long-term support to improve their teaching.^{1,2} One method for providing that support can be instructional coaching.^{3,4,5,6} The National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) defines instructional coaching as a coach working collaboratively with a teacher through a recursive and job-embedded feedback cycle focused on strengthening implementation of effective instructional strategies. However, not every form of coaching is effective.^{7,8} In fact, research links four specific coaching practices to improvements in teaching and learner outcomes.^{9,10}

These practices, described in more depth in this tip sheet, include:

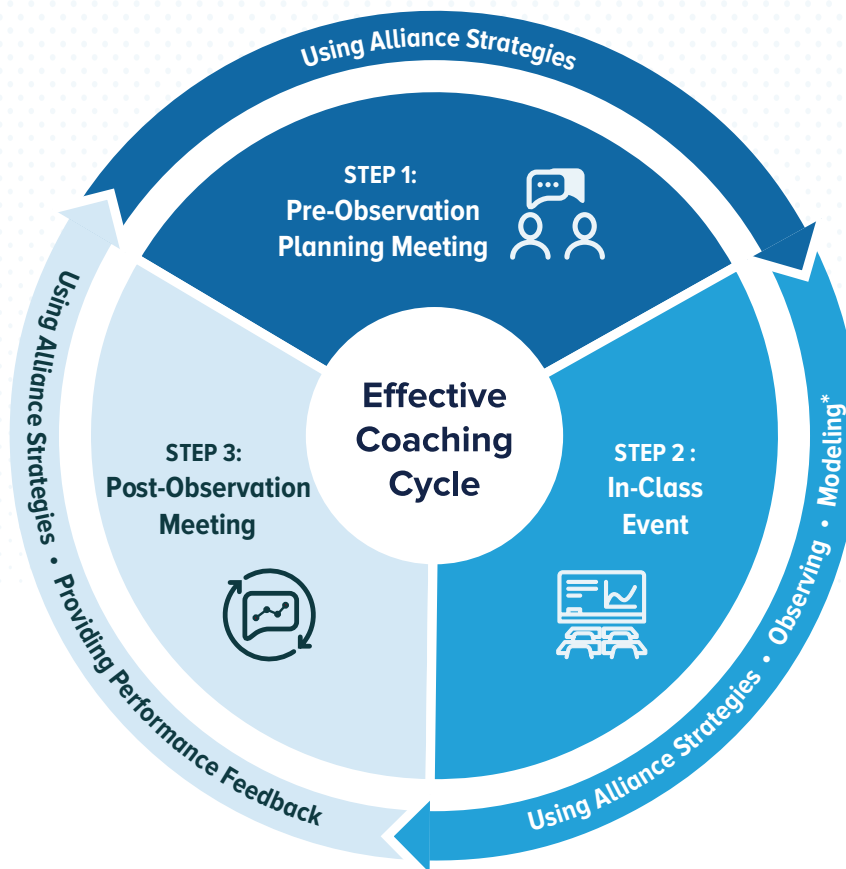
- using alliance strategies (also known as relationship-building strategies),
- observing,
- modeling, and
- providing performance feedback.

As shown in Figure 1, the practices are used across the steps of the coaching cycle—pre-observation meeting, in-class event, and post-observation meeting—to support stronger teaching with a goal of improved student outcomes. Coaches can use this tip sheet to learn more about the effective coaching practices. Understanding these practices can help coaches, as well as those training or supporting instructional coaches, to best meet the needs of teachers and students.

To learn more about how the effective coaching practices fit within the coaching cycle, view [The Coaching Cycle: How Coaches Can Support Teachers and Improve Student Outcomes](#).



FIGURE 1. THE EFFECTIVE COACHING CYCLE



* Modeling happens at coach's and teacher's discretion. It may not be necessary during each in-class event.

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1. Alliance Strategies

"Alliance" refers to the relationship between teachers and coaches. Coaches leverage alliance strategies to establish a positive and trusting relationship with the teachers they support. These strategies can be grouped into three areas: interpersonal skills, collaboration skills, and expertise in the content area.¹¹ Coaches should use these strategies during every coaching cycle and across all steps of the coaching cycle.¹² Strategies and examples for each of these areas are described below. Coaches should carefully map out the strategies they will use to support their work in each step of the coaching cycle.

ALLIANCE

Alliance is the relationship between teachers and coaches.



INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Strategies	Examples
Empathetic listening	Coach actively paying full attention to the teacher by using nonverbal cues like nodding.
Restating or summarizing	Coach saying, "What I hear from your comments is ..."
Using open-ended questions	Coach asking, "Can you tell me more about that?"
Affirming difficulty of change	Coach affirming, "This is really hard!"
Using nonevaluative language	Coach stating, "Coaching is about supporting your teaching practice, not about evaluating how you teach."

COLLABORATION SKILLS

Strategies	Examples
Developing a sense of teamwork	Coach saying, "Together, we will work toward addressing your goals."
Referring to past accomplishments	Coach restating, "Last week you accomplished your goal ..."
Referring to current goal	Coach affirming, "Your goal for this week is ..."
Helping the teacher progress toward goal	Coach saying, "Let's talk about what we'll do to meet that goal. I will ... What do you think you will try to do?"

EXPERTISE IN THE CONTENT AREA

Strategies	Examples
Referring to effective teaching practices	Coach saying, "Learners who struggle benefit from explicit and systematic instruction. Explicit means ..."
Conveying deep content-area knowledge	Coach saying, "Effective reading instruction focuses on the five pillars of reading. These include ..."
Explaining complex concepts succinctly	Coach saying, "Students requiring Tier 3 supports may show challenging behavior because ..."

2. Observing

OBSERVING

Coach views the teacher's instruction in the learning environment.



When observing, the coach views the teacher's instruction in the learning environment. This allows the coach to collect data on what the teacher is doing and how the students are responding. Coaches rely on this information to provide performance feedback and identify times when it would be beneficial to model for the teacher. Observation typically happens in person, but the coach can use technology to conduct a virtual observation.¹³ Within the coaching cycle, observation typically happens during the in-class event.

3. Modeling

MODELING

Coach demonstrates how to implement a teaching strategy.



Modeling occurs when a coach demonstrates how to implement a teaching and/or an instructional strategy. The primary purpose of modeling is to help the teacher better understand how the accurate implementation of a strategy “looks” and how it impacts the performance of the learners.^{14,15,16} Coaches most often model when a teacher either does not know how to use a given strategy or is using it incorrectly. Therefore, modeling may not occur in every coaching cycle. If modeling is used, it typically occurs during the in-class event. However, modeling may also occur when learners are not present (i.e., during a post-observation meeting with the teacher).

4. Performance Feedback

PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Coach provides feedback based on data from the in-class event observation.



When providing performance feedback, the coach presents formal or informal data to the teacher on the implementation of a particular instructional strategy. Research suggests that feedback is most effective when it is specific, positive, corrective (if warranted), and timely.^{17,18}

SPECIFIC

Feedback should be specific to clarify how the teacher's practice directly impacts learning. An example of specific feedback is “During small-group instruction, four-out-of-five learners were actively engaged in the task you assigned.” Feedback is specific when it provides precise information about teaching that benefits learners. In addition, specific feedback includes a research-based rationale for why the strategy is important for student learning.

MORE POSITIVE THAN CORRECTIVE

Coaches should provide feedback that is more positive than corrective to reinforce effective teaching and sustain alliance. To create a balance of positive-to-corrective feedback, coaches provide a ratio of about four positive- or reinforcing-feedback statements for each corrective-feedback statement. Positive feedback includes an overt statement of praise for the teacher's use of specific strategies. Corrective feedback involves statements and questions that suggest a change to the teaching practice is needed. For example, a coach may say, “Learners were redirected seven times during the 20-minute lesson. How can we increase praise for learners while reducing redirections?” Coaches should avoid overfocusing on corrective feedback, which can overwhelm the teacher.

TIMELY

It is important to ensure that performance feedback is delivered in a timely manner or shortly after the observation occurs to ensure both the coach and teacher remember the observation.

Performance feedback usually occurs during the post-observation conversation. While not typical, bug-in ear technology¹⁹ is an option that can allow a coach to provide real-time performance feedback during the in-class event.

Using Coaching Practices to Improve Teaching and Learning

Coaches use the four coaching practices across the steps of the coaching cycle to build a positive relationship with the teachers that they are working with; to gather data to inform feedback that will help the teachers improve their implementation of selected instructional strategies; and to demonstrate what instructional strategies look like when implemented as intended. While research suggests that these four practices are critical, it is important to remember that each coach-teacher relationship is different. How coaches implement the coaching practices will vary based on the teacher and their needs. In some instances, the coach may spend more time focused on alliance building to develop a positive relationship with the teacher. If working on a new instructional strategy, the coach and teacher may determine that it is important

that the coach models the strategy, so the teacher can see what it looks like before implementing the new strategy. In other situations, the teacher may not need to see the coach modeling the strategy but would benefit from watching a video example and reflecting with the coach about what they saw prior to trying it out. Coaches should be prepared to adapt and adjust based on their relationship with and the goals of the teacher they are working with. Learn more about the effective coaching practices by viewing NCSI's self-paced learning module, [Effective Practices for Coaches](#).

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WestEd is the lead organization for NCSI. For more information about the work of WestEd, NCSI, and their partners, please visit www.ncsi.wested.org and www.wested.org.

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Endnotes

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