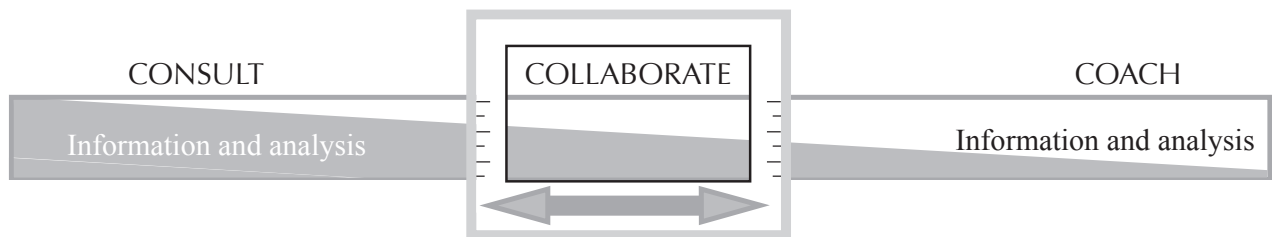




Learning-Focused Consultation

*Promoting Growth
for Beginning and Experienced Teachers*

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A Continuum of Learning-Focused Interaction

Skilled growth agents operate across a continuum of interaction to support learning for their colleagues. Within learning-focused conversations, they flex between consulting, collaborating and coaching stances to develop their colleagues' capacities to reflect upon practice, generate ideas and increase professional self-awareness. The ultimate aims of these interactions are to support self-directed learning by colleagues and enhance their capacities for engaging in productive collegial relationships.

Versatility across this continuum supports response patterns that are developmentally and contextually appropriate for meeting the learning needs of novices. At times it may be most appropriate to consult; that is, to offer counsel and advice about processes, protocols, choices and actions. The growth agent as consultant draws upon her own repertoire, experiences and expertise to advocate and offer perspectives and options. Alternatively, it may be most productive to collaborate; that is, to participate as equals in planning, reflecting and problem-solving. In this stance, the growth agent and colleague share the work of idea generation and analysis. At other times, coaching, or the nonjudgmental mediation of thinking and decision-making, is the most productive option for supporting learning and growth.

In each stance, trust and rapport, as well as commonly defined goals and clarity of outcomes, are critical to success. Skillful application of communication patterns across the continuum of learning-focused interaction encourages the colleague to learn from and with a growth agent, and to generate his or her own learning.

One way to think about these outcomes is to imagine the colleague you would like to have teaching next door to you. With this in mind, create a list of the knowledge, skills and dispositions of this ideal neighbor. Then, note the various approaches you might take to help your neighbor develop these resources. You will most likely find yourself crafting lists of ways to physically and emotionally support your colleague, ways to intellectually challenge your colleague, and ways to model and support a growing vision as a professional teacher.

Three Stances: Consulting, Collaborating, Coaching

Two major attributes define the stance a growth agent is taking in any learning-focused conversation. One factor is the way in which information emerges during the exchange. The other factor is the source of any gap analysis regarding such elements as planned goals and actual outcomes or teacher actions and student behaviors. Within a consulting stance, the growth agent produces or supplies the information and identifies and offers expert analysis of any gaps. Within a collaborative stance, the growth agent and colleague share idea development and gap analysis. Finally, within a coaching stance, the colleague produces the information and analyzes the gaps as the growth agent paraphrases and inquires to enlarge perspectives and clarify details.

To Consult

The intention of the consulting stance is to share vital information about policies and procedures, learning and learners, curriculum and content and standards and effective practices. The consulting growth agent provides information in two important categories; information about how the district and school operates, and information about professional practice.

The first category includes the procedural expectations of the district and school, including legal and policy guidelines for matters like discipline and special education. In the consulting stance, the growth agent might share information about policies for getting approval for and conducting fieldtrips, and how to manage bureaucratic tasks such as completing personnel forms, ordering materials and entering data into the student information system.

The second category includes information about the craft of teaching including such things as; establishing classroom routines, developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and implementing curriculum guidelines. This information offers colleagues opportunities for making informed choices and decisions as they implement these ideas and suggestions in their classrooms.

In addition to sharing technical information, the skilled growth-agent-as-consultant also shares principles of practice in the 'Why' of the actions and options. This intentional display of habits-of-mind models professional practice at its highest level and offers a vision of growth for the protégé. As protégés internalize principles of learning and teaching, these resources help them to develop approaches and solutions on their own.



To Collaborate

In a collaborating stance, the growth agent and colleague co-develop the information pool. This is often the case once a problem has been framed or clarified and solution approaches appear. A collaborative interaction involves shared analysis, problem-solving, decision-making and reflection. The reciprocal nature of collaboration supports mutual learning, mutual growth and mutual respect. Each party participates, alternately listening, paraphrasing and inquiring towards shared understandings and productive outcomes. Ideas develop through brainstorming, elaboration, and exploration of external resources. Prioritization, evaluation and, ultimately, implementation might be the function of each colleague, or the one most involved with or responsible for the event or plan.

This stance usually arises spontaneously as an outgrowth of the growth agent taking either a consulting or coaching stance to help frame a problem or planning task; or once a central issue emerges, during a reflecting conversation. Careful pausing and paraphrasing by the growth agent opens up the emotional and thinking space in which this stance flourishes. The use of inclusive pronouns, such as 'us', 'our' and 'we' or 'we're' also sends a subtle invitation to the colleague to join this stance. After paraphrasing, "so we have a list of seven items to think about . . .," the growth agent can then shift to coaching or consulting based on her sense of which stance might be most appropriate.

Adopting a collaborative stance signals respect and the expectation of a collegial relationship. It is important to resist our own impulsivity to jump in and do the bulk of the analysis and thinking. Pausing to allow colleagues time to think and prompting and encouraging idea production communicates our belief in their personal and professional capacities.

To Coach

A coach supports a colleague's thinking, problem-solving and goal clarification. The outcomes of the coaching stance are to increase the colleague's expertise in planning, reflecting on practice, and instructional decision-making. We draw from the work of Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston (2002) whose model, Cognitive Coaching, defines this stance. Cognitive Coaching addresses the underlying thinking that drives the observable behaviors of teaching. With a focus on cognitive and related emotional operations, skillful coaches guide colleagues in accessing internal resources and developing capacities for self-directed learning.

In a coaching stance, the growth agent supports the colleague's idea production by inquiring, paraphrasing, pausing and probing for details. These inquiries are not focused solely on the 'What's and How's' of planned actions or past events. They also focus on the 'Whys' of choices, possibilities and connections. The intention is to continually enlarge the frame to take in a bigger and bigger picture as the colleague's professional confidence increases. The ultimate aim of this stance is to develop the internal resources of self-coaching for the colleague. Over time, the patterns of a growth agent's inquiry within templates for planning, problem-solving and reflecting transfer to the colleague's inner voice so he or she can be guided by this professional self-talk.

Flexibility in Stance

Expert growth agents listen for and note the ways in which colleagues are framing problems and concerns. In general, they enter the conversation in a soft coaching stance, somewhere between collaborating and coaching. Until you know the other person's perception of the problem, you usually do not know which approach to take or what problem-solving resources the colleague is bringing to the table. Often, clarifying the question, in and of itself, is a major breakthrough and leads to insights for the colleague.

In a problem-solving situation, problem framing is as important as solution generation. If you continually jump to advice giving, it can build dependency and can, over time, establish a one-up, one-down relationship. Problem finding and problem clarification are hallmarks of expert thinking. Growth agents must remember to keep an eye on the bigger picture while responding to the issues and emotions of the present moment.



Eight Strategies for Learning-Focused Consulting

Offer a Menu

If one idea is useful, several are even more effective. Suggesting multiple options when planning or problem-solving (we suggest at least three) provides information and support while leaving the choice making, and the responsibility for making that choice, with your colleague. *“Given your concerns about developing meaningful homework assignments, here are three options to consider...”*

Think Aloud

Just as in instructional problem solving or modeling strategic reading strategies for students, sharing the thought process along with a solution or idea enhances the learning and maximizes the likelihood of transfer to future applications. *“When I encounter student confusions like this I first search for the underlying knowledge gaps and thinking patterns that might be contributing to those confusions. Then I try to figure out the instructional building blocks that will help develop essential understandings. So, in this case, you might look at ways to scaffold your students’ understandings of these objectives.”*

Share What, Why and How

When sharing expertise, an effective verbal pattern is describing the ‘what, why and how of an idea or suggestion. This might sound like: *“Here is a strategy for addressing that issue (what); which is likely to be effective because (why); and this is how you might apply it (how).”*

State A Principle of Practice

Connecting a specific strategy or solution to the broader principles of effective practice provides an opportunity to learn and apply the principle, as well as the individual idea, in other situations. This might sound like: *“An important principle of practice related to (topic) is _____; so a strategy like (suggestion) should be effective in this situation.”*

Generate Categories

Ideas or solutions as categories provide a wider range of choice and a richer opportunity for learning than discrete strategies or applications. For example, a category such as ‘grouping students’ is broader than ‘putting students in pairs’ or suggesting a specific partnering strategy. This approach is especially effective when categories are offered as a menu. This might sound like: *“Several broad categories of successful classroom management include attention moves, establishing routines, maintaining momentum and developing effective transitions between activities.”*

Name Causal Factors

Rather than suggesting potential solutions, it can be very productive to offer several factors that might be producing the problem. This option is particularly effective when working with experienced teachers. This might sound like: *“There are several things that typically would produce that behavior (or result); for example _____, _____ or _____.”* Followed by a shift to a coaching stance to add: *“Given what you know about your situation, what’s your hunch about which of these, if any, might be an influence?”*

Consider an Alternative Point of View

Effective problem solving can be stimulated by an exploration of multiple perspectives. When idea generation bogs down, surfacing additional points of view can re-energize the conversation. For example offering thoughts on how parents might consider the issue, or administrators, or the students, and so on. *“It is possible that your students are not perceiving the purposes of the new reward system in the ways that you had intended. It might be effective to consider their beliefs about motivational rewards.”*

Reframe the Problem or Issue

Expert problem solvers spend a greater amount of time defining a problem than they do strategizing solutions. Novel approaches to the problem definition not only release new energy and ideas, but often lead to a more effective solution. Related to considering alternative perspectives, reframing is changing the context or representation of a problem; including positive or useful aspects of the issue and alternative descriptions of the goal or approach to the problem. *“There are several ways to think about classroom climate and culture. Typically teachers search for simple rules and fair consequences to apply equally. Another approach might be to work from the inside out and support students in developing the self-management skills to be productive classroom citizens and contributing group members.”*