Coach Cycle: Establish Relationships

Establishing productive and mutually respectful relationships is critical to the work of coaching for equity. People who are effective relationship builders:

1. Demonstrate Cultural “Responsiveness”

Relationships are not built in a vacuum. Each person brings a unique set of life experiences to the task of building relationships. These experiences are necessarily mediated by one’s cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Coaches must be able to read the linguistic and behavioral meanings and contexts of one’s own and others’ cultures, to understand cultural differences so that they do not become barriers to communication, and to help to recognize and reverse oppressive patterns of behavior. Coaches must be knowledgeable about the social and historical context of schools, and the ways that systemic oppression operates and impacts people’s experience. Effective coaches for equity must seek out, listen to and value multiple perspectives, skills, and experiences.

2. Exercise Emotional Intelligence (self-awareness, mood management, self-motivation, impulse control, and people skills)

Being self-aware and self-reflective; being able to manage one’s own reactions to people and situations is critical to the work of building effective coaching relationships. Coaches must be able to manage their own emotional responses to coaching interactions and make strategic choices about when and how to share their own feelings and thoughts according to the goals they are trying to accomplish. This can be particularly challenging—and important, when confronting inequities in schools. In addition, coaches must be able to accurately assess the impact of their coaching choices on others and must be willing to seek and make productive use of feedback from clients and colleagues.

3. Express Genuine Interest, Ask Questions

Taking the time to learn about people (clients), who they are, what they value, how they see themselves and their work, helps lay the foundation for effective coaching relationships. Asking questions is a key skill required to effectively assess people and situations. Finding out what people know, what their skills are, what experience they have had, allows the coach to build on strengths. Learning about people’s prior experience with schooling, with change, and with leadership allows a coach to anticipate possible pitfalls and take action in ways that are most likely to be effective with particular clients in particular contexts.

“How has it felt for you to be working here this year?”
“How is it that you see the most urgent issues from your perspective?”
“What kind of support would help you to be more effective?”
“What is your assessment of the professional development program here?”
“What is your take on the quality of relationships here?”
4. Listen and Respond with Empathy

Listening increases a coach's understanding of how people think, feel, and experience events. Listening is a powerful way to build trust and improve communication. Often times, people who may otherwise appear resistant to change, respond favorably once they have been listened to. When you respond with empathy, people know you understand how they are feeling and why they are feeling that way. Expressing empathy is not the same as agreement. Effective coaches are able to communicate their understanding of a client’s experience in ways that open up space for additional probing and reflection.

“I can imagine how (feeling) it can be to experience (fact).”
“I can see why you would react that way. It can be (feeling) when (fact) happens.”
“I would understand if you felt (feeling) by the way he responded.”
“You must be so (feeling).”
“You have a right to feel (feeling) under these circumstances.”

5. Maintain or Enhance Self-Esteem, Locate Challenges on a Developmental Continuum

Acknowledging the strengths and accomplishments of clients is an important feature of building an effective coaching relationship. Confidence and self-esteem promote the kind of innovation and risk-taking that the work of leading high achieving and equitable schools requires. With self-esteem intact, people are better able to learn and to make productive use of corrective feedback. Coaches play an important role in supporting leaders to “stay in” the work—especially when it feels messy or personally challenging. The coach can share information with the client that lets them know that they are not alone—that other leaders and schools have confronted, and overcome, similar obstacles.

“I appreciate that you...because...”
“I noticed that you took a risk when you...”
“I could tell you really prepared for...”
“You bring several strengths to this challenge.”
“This is only your 2nd year of operation, it is expected that you would still have some difficulty with..”
“You have only been working with this staff for two months, it is not surprising that you still need to...”
6. Share Thinking, Rationale, and Experiences—Appropriate Self-Disclosure

An important function of an effective coaching relationship is that of modeling and meta-cognitive sharing. Coaches must make strategic choices about when and how to “make visible” to the client the thinking behind their actions, both for teaching and relationship building purposes. Sharing the way the coach is assessing situations and making decisions about when and how to intervene can provide clients with important learning. Likewise, authentically sharing experiences and feelings communicates to people that you trust them and opens the door for two-way sharing and deeper relationships.

“In my experience as a teacher…”
“The way I experienced you during that meeting was…”
“My own challenge as a leader is…”
“In all of the high schools I have worked with, I have observed…”
“I made a strategic choice not to challenge (person) in that moment. I made that choice because…”
“I decided to organize the groups the way I did in order to accomplish…”
“I revisited the community agreements in that moment so that…”