Coaching Educators

A Quick Guide



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First Edition • September 2026

Coaching Educators: A Quick Guide

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Published by Dionysus Enterprises, LLC
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First Edition: September 2026

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Introduction: The Conversation That Changed My Mind

Early in my time as a supervisor, I sat across from a veteran teacher — twenty-three years in the classroom, beloved by kids, respected by colleagues — and handed her the annual evaluation I had spent the better part of an evening writing. Four pages. Careful language. Three strengths, two areas for growth, the whole dance.

She smiled, thanked me, and tucked it into her bag.

Two weeks later I asked her about one of the recommendations. She looked at me blankly. The document had changed nothing about how she taught.

I thought then what I still believe now: the annual review is required by contract, but an evaluative document wasn't built to develop educators.

I don't mean we should stop holding people accountable. The annual review has its place — it is required by contract, and the district needs a formal record. But it is worth being honest about what it is: more of an autopsy than a developmental tool. It examines the year after the year is over, when there is nothing left to adjust. Development happens during the year, in real time, while there is still time to change course. That is what coaching is for.

Here is what I came to believe instead: people grow through coaching, not evaluation. They grow through short, regular, honest conversations about their actual work — not through a four-page letter they receive once a year. Coaching is a process. The annual review is an event. Processes change people; events record what happened.

This publication is about the process.

Think of it the way a good Little League coach thinks about practice. Nobody gives a nine-year-old a forty-minute lecture on hitting mechanics. The coach pitches, the kid swings, the coach says one thing — "keep your eye on the ball," "step into it" — and the kid tries again. Small bit, immediate rep, small bit, immediate rep. By the end of practice the kid has taken fifty swings and heard five small corrections, each one tied to something that just happened. That is how memory gets built: a tiny instruction, an immediate attempt, repeated often.

Educator coaching works exactly the same way. A teacher doesn't need a two-hour workshop on questioning technique. They need one small move — after asking a question, wait five full seconds before calling on anyone, so every student has time to think — tried in tomorrow's lesson, talked through the day after. Small bits, practiced right away, repeated weekly. That is how professional memory gets

built. The annual review is the equivalent of lecturing the kid about hitting once a season and wondering why the swing never changes.

That is also why coaching works where evaluative systems don't. Evaluation makes people defensive, and a defensive adult cannot learn. Coaching builds trust, and trust lets people admit what isn't working — which is the only way anything gets better. A school that coaches its adults, from the struggling teacher to the exceptional one, is a learning environment for everyone in the building, not just the students. That is what schools have always strived to be.

Teachers already know this, because it is exactly what they do with students. Formative vs. summative:

- **Formative:** exit tickets, checks for understanding, quick feedback during the lesson. This is what improves learning.
- **Summative:** the final exam. This records where the student ended up. It measures learning; it doesn't improve it.

School leaders should do the same two things with educators:

- **Formative:** coaching — brief observations, quick feedback, adjustments during the year, while there is still time to change course.
- **Summative:** the annual evaluation — a record of the year after the year is over.

I wrote it for school leaders — superintendents, assistant superintendents, education leaders, instructional coaches, department chairs — anyone whose job includes helping other educators get better. And coaching doesn't only flow downhill. Teachers can coach teachers. Education leaders can coach education leaders. Peers often make the best coaches: they know the work firsthand, and with no evaluation in the room, the conversation stays honest. It is short on purpose. You don't have time for a 300-page treatise, and frankly, most of what you need to know about coaching fits in a publication you can read in one sitting and start using the next morning.

Three things this publication is not. It is not a theory of leadership. It is not a compliance manual. And it is not a warmed-over evaluation form with the word "coaching" pasted on top. There are already plenty of those, and they don't solve the problem.

What it is: a practical guide to coaching as a regular, embedded, human practice — for teachers, for education leaders, and for everyone in between. The coaching sessions I describe take about fifteen minutes of observation and fifteen minutes of conversation. The micro-coaching moments in Chapter 3 take even less. Chapter 6 lays out the 7-step coaching process end to end. And Chapter 3 is about building a coaching culture in your school or district.

The research backs this up, and I'll show you the evidence in Chapter 2. Coaching — real coaching, sustained and built into daily work — moves teacher practice and student learning in ways that workshops and annual reviews simply don't. Matthew Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan's 2018 meta-analysis of 60 causal studies found coaching produced average effect sizes of 0.49 standard deviations on instruction and 0.18 on student achievement. In education research, that is a big deal. Jim Knight spent years documenting how a partnership approach to instructional coaching changes school culture. Elena Aguilar built a whole model around transformational coaching that treats the adult's growth as the engine of student success. Paul Bambrick-Santoyo showed that the highest-leverage thing an education leader can do is observe and give feedback — constantly, not annually.

But I didn't write this publication because of the research. I wrote it because I watched coaching work and watched evaluations fall short, year after year, in real schools with real people. The research just confirmed what the classroom teachers already knew.

Our teachers and education leaders do hard, important work every day, often with too little support. This publication is built on respect for that work — and on the belief that every educator deserves the coaching that helps them get even better.

So here's my thesis, stated plainly: **stop relying on the annual review alone, and start having the conversations that change practice.** Do it regularly. Do it briefly. Do it with evidence, not adjectives. And do it for everyone — teachers and education leaders alike. Get a coach for yourself, too. Everyone grows faster with one.

Chapter 1: Pitfalls of the Annual Review

Let me describe the annual review process in most school districts, because I ran it for years and I know exactly how it goes.

Sometime in the spring, education leaders get the reminder: evaluations are due. They have forty teachers. Each evaluation requires a classroom observation (or two, if the contract is generous), a write-up of two to four pages, a rating on some scale — distinguished, proficient, needs improvement, unsatisfactory, or whatever your state calls them — and a meeting to deliver it. If an education leader spends even two hours per teacher on this process, that's eighty hours. Two full work weeks. In the busiest season of the school year.

And what does the district get for those eighty hours? A stack of documents that say, essentially, "this teacher is proficient," with three compliments and one gentle suggestion. To be fair, most of those teachers are doing genuinely good work — "proficient" is often accurate. The problem isn't the rating; it's that the document does nothing to help a good teacher get better. Teachers who are struggling sometimes get vague language because the education leader wants to avoid a grievance. Teachers who are excellent get vague language because the education leader doesn't have time to say anything specific. Almost everyone gets "proficient." Too often, the whole exercise becomes a compliance ritual.

The teacher reads it once — maybe — signs it, and goes back to teaching much as before. Little changes. I know this because I asked. Over my years as a superintendent, I asked dozens of teachers what their last evaluation changed about their practice. Few pointed to the document and said, "This made me better."

Now compare that to coaching. Coaching is what happens when a leader watches a teacher work, notices one specific thing, and talks about it — that day, that week, while it still matters. It is a fifteen-minute conversation in the hallway after a walkthrough. It is a fifteen-minute debrief after an observation. It is a question — "What did you notice about the last fifteen minutes of that lesson?" — that gets a teacher thinking about their own practice instead of defending it.

The difference is not subtle. The annual review is retrospective, formal, and rare. Coaching is current, conversational, and constant. The annual review evaluates. Coaching develops. The annual review is about the file. Coaching is about the person.

I want to be clear about something: I am not arguing against accountability. Some people should not be teaching, and districts need a fair, documented process for those decisions. But let's be honest about what the annual review was designed to be. It is a personnel tool more than a professional growth tool — and

there is nothing wrong with that, as long as we stop expecting it to do the growing. Growth belongs to coaching, and coaching belongs in the weekly rhythm of the school, not the spring paperwork season.

Here's the other problem with the annual review: frequency. Think about how people actually learn anything. Nobody learns to play an instrument with one lesson a year. Nobody gets in shape with one workout a year. Nobody improves their golf swing with one tip every June. Learning requires repetition, feedback, and adjustment — tight loops, close together. The annual review gives you one loop per year. Coaching gives you one loop per week. Which one do you think changes behavior?

John Hattie and Helen Timperley's landmark 2007 review of feedback research found that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning — but only when it answers three questions: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? An annual review answers those questions once, months after the fact — long after "where to next" could have done any good. Weekly coaching answers them in real time, while the teacher can still act.

And there's a darker finding worth knowing: Avraham Kluger and Angelo DeNisi's 1996 meta-analysis found that roughly one-third of feedback interventions actually made performance worse — typically when the feedback threatened the person's ego instead of focusing on the task. Sound like any evaluation meeting you've ever attended? "You need to improve your classroom management" lands as an attack. "In the last fifteen minutes, twelve students were off-task during the transition — let's talk about what was happening there" lands as coaching. Same issue. Completely different result.

So here is the deal I want to make with you in this publication: keep whatever evaluation system your contract and state law require. Do the paperwork. But don't confuse it with developing people. Development happens in the fifty weeks between evaluations, in many small conversations. That is what this publication teaches you to do.

And here is the part most leaders miss: the coaching you do all year is the raw material that makes the required review worth writing. When spring comes and the contract says you owe every teacher an annual or biannual review, you don't have to manufacture one from a single observation and a vague memory. Pull the stack of session records — a year of goals, evidence, action steps, and follow-ups. The review practically writes itself, and for once it's honest: a faithful summary of a real year of growth, full of specifics, with nothing in it the teacher hasn't already heard and worked on. The contract requires the document. Coaching supplies the content. Put it all together and the annual review stops being an autopsy and becomes a record of growth.

Chapter 2: What the Research Actually Says About Coaching

I am suspicious of books that throw around research like confetti — a study here, an effect size there, no context. So let me be straight about what the evidence says, what it doesn't say, and why it matters for how you spend your time.

Coaching works better than traditional professional development. This is not even close.

For decades, the default model of teacher improvement was the workshop: hire a speaker, fill the auditorium, hand out binders, done by three o'clock. The research on this model is discouraging. Almost nothing changes on Monday. The problem is structural — a one-time event cannot change embedded habits, and there is no feedback loop to sustain whatever enthusiasm the workshop generated.

Coaching is the opposite design: sustained, built into the teacher's daily work, focused on the teacher's actual classroom, with repeated observation and feedback built in. And the evidence is strong.

The most rigorous summary comes from Matthew Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan, who in 2018 published a meta-analysis of 60 studies using causal research designs — meaning studies that can actually tell us coaching caused the improvement, not just that the two happened together. Their finding: coaching produced an average effect of 0.49 standard deviations on teachers' instructional practice and 0.18 standard deviations on student achievement. In education research, an effect of 0.49 on practice is large. An effect of 0.18 on achievement — across 60 studies, across subjects and grade levels — is meaningful and rare for an adult-focused intervention. As the authors put it, coaching "affirms the potential of coaching as a development tool," though they honestly note that large programs taken to scale show smaller effects than small, well-run pilots. That warning matters, and I'll come back to it in Chapter 3: coaching done badly at scale is just another initiative. Coaching done well, consistently, is transformative.

Jim Knight gave us the partnership model.

Jim Knight, a researcher at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, spent years studying what makes instructional coaching actually work in schools. His 2007 book, *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction* (Corwin Press), laid out the foundation that most serious coaching programs still build on: coaching works when it is a partnership, not a hierarchy. The coach and the teacher are equals working on a shared goal. The teacher chooses the goal. The coach brings data, strategies, and support — not directives.

Knight's model has a few requirements that I have found to be exactly right. First, the teacher must enroll voluntarily in the coaching relationship, or at minimum have real voice in the goal. Coaching imposed

from above becomes compliance with a friendlier name. Second, coaching focuses on one goal at a time — the "Big Four" of behavior, content knowledge, direct instruction, and formative assessment, narrowed to a single target. Third, the coach collects real data in the classroom and shares it plainly. Not opinions. Data. How many students were engaged. How many questions made students think hard. What the exit tickets showed. Data depersonalizes the conversation and keeps it about practice.

Elena Aguilar reminded us that coaching is about the whole person.

Elena Aguilar's *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation* (Jossey-Bass, 2013) added something Knight's model underplayed: you cannot separate the teacher's practice from the teacher's humanity. Aguilar's transformational coaching model insists that coaching must address beliefs, emotions, and identity — not just technique. Her line that stuck with me: to meet the needs of students, we must transform the experience of adults who work in schools.

This matters because the hardest coaching conversations aren't about technique. They're about the teacher who has stopped believing a group of kids can learn, or the education leader who is drowning and won't admit it, or the veteran who has heard every suggestion before. Aguilar gives coaches permission — and tools — to work at that level: to listen, to surface beliefs, to sit with discomfort instead of rushing past it. If Knight gave us the structure of coaching, Aguilar gave us its soul.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo told leaders where to put their time.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo's *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools* (Jossey-Bass, 2012) asked a different question: what should a school leader actually do all day? His answer, built from studying high-performing schools, was seven "levers" — four instructional (data-driven instruction, instructional planning, observation and feedback, professional development) and three cultural (student culture, staff culture, managing school leadership teams). But the lever that matters most for this publication is observation and feedback. Bambrick-Santoyo's argument is blunt: the highest-leverage activity an education leader can engage in is getting into classrooms constantly and giving teachers bite-sized, practical feedback — weekly, not annually. He even prescribed the rhythm: observe for 10–15 minutes, give feedback within 24 hours, focus on one bite-sized action step. That is micro-coaching, and it is the backbone of Chapter 4.

Hattie and Timperley told us what makes feedback work.

John Hattie and Helen Timperley's 2007 review, "The Power of Feedback," published in the *Review of Educational Research*, is one of the most cited papers in education. Their headline finding: feedback has an average effect size of 0.73 — among the largest of any influence on learning they studied. But the average hides enormous variation. Feedback works when it answers three questions — Where am I

going? How am I going? Where to next? — and it works at the level of the task and the process, not the person. "You're so smart" does nothing. "Here's what you did, here's the gap, here's the next step." That's the kind of feedback that moves a teacher forward.

Apply that to coaching educators: your feedback to a teacher should be about the lesson (the task) and the strategy (the process), not about the teacher as a person. And it should always include the "where to next" — the one concrete action step. Feedback without a next step is just commentary.

What the research doesn't say.

Let me be honest about the limits, because overselling research is how initiatives die. Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan found that large-scale coaching programs show much smaller effects than small pilots — coaching is hard to do well at scale. Knight's model requires trained coaches and willing teachers; imposed coaching flops. Aguilar's work is deep but demanding; not every leader is ready for transformational coaching on day one. And none of this research says coaching replaces evaluation — it says coaching does something evaluation was never designed to do.

The bottom line from the evidence: brief, regular, evidence-based coaching conversations change practice. Long, rare, judgment-based evaluations rarely do. The rest of this publication is about how to have those conversations.

Chapter 3: Building a Coaching Culture

Everything in this publication works for one educator and one coach. But the real prize is a coaching culture — a school or district where everyone expects to be coached, everyone expects to coach, and nobody confuses it with evaluation. Cultures aren't built by proclamation. They're built by repeated behavior.

Work with your team on the why before you ask for the what. Don't announce coaching as a new initiative — start a conversation about why coaching matters. Share the formative vs. summative idea from the introduction. Then ask: "When did you last get feedback that actually made you better? What did it look like?" Let them describe it — chances are they'll describe coaching, not an evaluation. That shared recognition is your foundation. Then work with them on buy-in: ask what would make coaching useful for them, what worries them about it, and what they'd need to trust the process. Listen to the answers and adjust. People don't resist coaching; they resist being coached without a say. When the team helps shape the why and the how, buy-in isn't something you have to manufacture later — it's already there. Then explain the system: one goal, brief observation, prompt conversation. Then do something most leaders never do: ask to be coached yourself. Pick one thing in your own leadership practice, name it publicly, and invite feedback on it. Aguilar's research and plain common sense agree: vulnerability at the top gives everyone else permission to grow. If you won't be coached, don't ask anyone else to be.

This week, also pick your first three coaching partners — educators you'll coach personally. Not the three worst. Not the three best. Three representative educators who will talk honestly about the experience afterward, because their word-of-mouth will do more than any memo.

What the coaching session looks like.

A coaching session has three main pieces: a goal conversation where you agree on one thing to work on, a fifteen-minute observation where you collect evidence on that goal (a tally sheet, a seating chart with check marks, a stopwatch — whatever fits), and a prompt debrief where you ask what they noticed before sharing your evidence, and end with one next step.

What to watch out for.

Three traps kill coaching cultures. First, **the compliance trap**: coaching becomes another form to fill out, another binder, another initiative. Fight it by keeping every tool brutally simple — one-sentence goals, three-line logs, three-line feedback notes. The moment coaching generates paperwork, you've lost.

Second, **the only-strugglers trap**: coaching becomes something that happens to teachers who might be struggling. The day coaching is perceived as remedial, your best people will avoid it. Coach everyone —

especially your stars. The best teachers are often the hungriest for real feedback, because nobody ever gives them any.

Third, **the evaluation blur**: leaders slip back into judging instead of coaching, especially under pressure. When you catch yourself writing mental ratings during an observation, stop and return to the evidence sheet. Coaching and evaluation can coexist in one leader, but not in one conversation. Keep them separate on purpose.

The long game.

Thirty days builds a habit. A year builds a culture. Two years builds a reputation — the kind of district where educators want to work because they know they'll get better there. That's the learning environment this publication is about: not a program, not a binder, but a place where every adult is growing, visibly, all the time — and the students can feel the difference.

Which brings us back to where this publication started. Pull coaching out of the evaluative system, and trust replaces defensiveness. When every adult in the building is learning openly — and your exceptional teachers, who are usually the hungriest to improve, lead the way — the school becomes a learning environment for everyone, not just the students. That is what schools have always strived to be.

The annual review will still be there in the spring. Do the paperwork. But by then, it should be the easiest conversation you have all year — a formality summarizing growth that already happened, in many brief moments, one educator at a time.

Brief opportunities that happen regularly.

The annual review falls short for a lot of reasons, but the simplest one is arithmetic: one conversation a year cannot compete with ten. This section is about the ten — the brief, regular coaching moments that take minutes, happen constantly, and together do more than any formal process ever will.

I call them brief opportunities. Bambrick-Santoyo would call them bite-sized action steps. Whatever the name, the principle is the same: small, frequent, specific beats large, rare, general. Every time.

The 15-minute walkthrough.

You don't need a full period to coach. Walk into a classroom for fifteen minutes with one question in mind — tied to the teacher's current coaching goal — collect your evidence, and leave. Later that day: a fifteen-minute conversation. "I watched your transition after the short lesson — 2:30, and every student had materials out. That's the fastest yet. What did you do differently?" That's it. Fifteen minutes of observation, fifteen minutes of talk, and the teacher just got specific, positive, evidence-based feedback

on their goal. Do that weekly and watch what happens.

The key discipline: the walkthrough must connect to the goal. Random walkthroughs with random comments ("Great energy today!") are pleasant but not very useful. Goal-connected walkthroughs are coaching.

The PLC (professional learning community) check-in.

If your schools run professional learning communities, you have a built-in coaching venue. Drop into a PLC meeting for fifteen minutes — not to run it, to observe it. Are teachers looking at student work or just talking about it? Does everyone leave with a specific plan or just good intentions? Afterward, coach the PLC leader: "I noticed the team spent twenty minutes on the data but never named what they would re-teach. What's one change to how the meeting runs that would fix that?" You're coaching the coach, and the effect multiplies across every teacher in the room.

Why this beats the annual review — the arithmetic of growth.

Add it up. One annual review: maybe two hours of observation and one meeting, once a year. Versus: one 30-minute coaching session a month — fifteen minutes of observation, fifteen minutes of conversation. That’s about five hours across a school year, more than double the review. The coaching model invests more than twice the hours — but spread across the year, in sessions short enough to fit a prep period, and every single minute is tied to a live goal with fresh evidence.

More importantly, the timing is different. Feedback given in June about a lesson taught in March is archaeology. Feedback given on Tuesday about a lesson taught on Tuesday is coaching. Hattie and Timperley's "where to next" only works when "next" is tomorrow, not next semester.

I'll say it plainly: weekly fifteen-minute coaching sessions will do more for student learning and teacher morale than the annual review alone ever could. The research supports it. Common sense supports it. The only thing standing in the way is habit — and the mistaken belief that seriousness requires length. It doesn't. Seriousness requires frequency.

Chapter 4: Coaching Teachers

Everything in this publication comes down to a simple system: regular short observations paired with coaching sessions. For teachers, that means brief classroom observations — some pre-announced, some unannounced drop-ins — followed by short coaching conversations about what you saw. For educational leaders, it means regular coaching sessions about their leadership practice. The pattern is always the same: set a goal, observe the work, talk about it. That's it. A coaching opportunity, including the observation, takes about 30 minutes in total — fifteen minutes in the classroom, fifteen minutes in conversation. Do it regularly, and you will accomplish more professional growth in a month than the annual review usually accomplishes in a year.

Let me walk through each step the way I taught it to my education leaders.

Step 1: Set a goal. Together. In plain language.

The process starts with a conversation, not an observation. Sit down with the teacher — fifteen minutes is plenty — and agree on one specific thing to work on. Not three things. One.

The goal has to meet three tests. First, the teacher has to own it. This is Knight's partnership principle, and it is non-negotiable. A goal you impose is a directive wearing a coaching costume. Ask: "What's one thing in your classroom you'd like to be better at?" If the teacher can't name one, offer two or three candidates from what you've seen and let them choose. Choice creates ownership. Ownership creates effort.

Second, the goal has to be specific enough to observe. "Improve classroom management" is not a coaching goal — you can't see it in fifteen minutes. "Reduce transition time between activities to under two minutes" is a coaching goal. "Get every student answering questions" is not. "Call on students by name so that every student answers at least once per lesson" is. If you can't picture what success looks like in a classroom, the goal isn't ready.

Third, the goal has to matter for kids. This is Aguilar's student-centered lens. We are not coaching teachers to make adults feel good about their craft. We are coaching them because better teaching means better learning. Every goal should connect, in one sentence, to what students will be able to do differently.

Write the goal down in one sentence. Both of you keep a copy. That moves the goal from vague intention to real commitment.

Step 2: Observe for evidence, not impressions.

Go watch the teacher teach — fifteen minutes is enough. And here is the discipline that separates coaching from casual walkthroughs: you are collecting evidence related to the goal, not forming general impressions.

If the goal is transition time, you time the transitions. If the goal is calling on every student, you tally who gets called on. If the goal is asking deeper questions, you write down every question asked. Bring a simple data sheet — a tally chart, a seating chart with check marks, a stopwatch. The tool doesn't matter. The specificity does.

Some observations should be pre-announced: the teacher knows you're coming and what you're looking for. Others should be unannounced drop-ins — fifteen minutes, no warning, because everyday teaching is what you're coaching. Both feed the same coaching conversation.

This is the hardest habit for leaders to build, because we are trained to walk into a classroom and form a judgment: good lesson, weak lesson, strong teacher, struggling teacher. Judgments are fast and mostly useless. Evidence is slow and transformative. When you sit down with a teacher and say, "I timed three transitions — 4:20, 3:45, and 5:10," you have given them something they can work with. When you say, "Your transitions need work," you have given them something to feel bad about.

Knight's research found that teachers are far more willing to engage with data than with opinions. Data doesn't have an attitude. It doesn't play favorites. It just sits there on the page, inviting the teacher to interpret it. That's the moment coaching starts.

Step 3: Talk about it. Ask first, tell second.

The feedback conversation should happen soon, while the observation is still fresh. Feedback decays fast — by Friday, Tuesday's lesson is ancient history.

Start with a question, not a verdict. "What did you notice about the transitions today?" Let the teacher think first. Most of the time, teachers know. They felt the 5:10 transition dragging. They saw the kids drifting. Your job is to help them articulate what they already sensed, then add your evidence to sharpen the picture.

Then share your data plainly. No sugarcoating, no sandwich method (praise-criticism-praise — teachers see through it by year two). Just: "Here's what I saw." Then the most important sentence in coaching: "What's one thing you could try next time?"

That question does three things. It keeps ownership with the teacher. It forces specificity — "one thing," not "do better." And it ends every conversation with a forward step, which is Hattie and Timperley's "where to next" in action.

If the teacher is stuck, offer one suggestion — one. "One thing I've seen work is giving the transition directions before the activity ends, not after. Want to try that Thursday?" Then schedule the next observation. The pattern repeats: goal, observe, talk. Same goal until it's solid, then a new one.

What about the struggling teacher?

The system doesn't change, but the goal-setting does. With a teacher in real difficulty, you may need to name the goal more directly — "We need to get transitions under control, because right now students are losing fifteen minutes a lesson" — while still leaving room for the teacher to shape the how. Honesty is a form of respect. Vague kindness helps no one. And remember: most struggling teachers are working hard in difficult circumstances — big classes, tough assignments, little support. Coaching honors that effort by giving them something concrete to work on instead of just a verdict.

And document the work. Not a four-page evaluation — a running log. Date, goal, what you observed, what was agreed. Three lines per cycle. If a personnel decision ever becomes necessary, this log is far more useful than an annual review, because it shows sustained support, clear expectations, and the teacher's actual response over time. Coaching documentation protects everyone.

What about your best teachers?

I focused on the strugglers. My best teachers got a glowing evaluation and were left alone. I thought I was respecting them. What I was actually doing was starving them.

Your strongest teachers are often the hungriest for real feedback, because nobody ever gives them any. Everyone assumes they've got it figured out. But the difference between a good teacher and a great one is usually two or three refinements nobody ever named. Run the same cycle — goal, observe, talk — with your stars, and let them pick ambitious goals. "I want every student writing every day." "I want my Socratic seminars to run themselves." Coaching your best people sends the most important cultural message in this publication: coaching isn't remediation. It's what professionals do.

Chapter 5: Coaching Educational Leaders

Here's an uncomfortable truth from my years as a superintendent: we coach teachers (sometimes), but we almost never coach education leaders. We evaluate them annually, we meet with them about budgets and buses and board politics, and we assume that because they made it to the education leader's office, they've got the instructional part figured out. Most of them don't — not because they're weak, but because nobody ever coached them on it.

Bambrick-Santoyo's *Leverage Leadership* was written largely for this gap. His core argument: the job of the superintendent — or the education leader manager, or the assistant superintendent — is to develop education leaders as instructional leaders, not to manage them as building operators. If your education leaders spend their days on discipline referrals, bus duty schedules, and email, that is a sign coaching is needed at your level. They learned to do what you reward. If you only ever talk to them about operations, operations is what they'll prioritize.

Coaching an education leader follows the same pattern — goal, observe, talk — but everything scales up.

For educational leaders, the system is regular coaching sessions: brief, scheduled conversations about their leadership practice, grounded in the evidence you collect by shadowing their work — their feedback meetings, their walkthroughs, their data meetings. No drop-ins needed here; a standing appointment works better with an education leader's calendar.

The goal isn't a single classroom strategy; it's a leadership practice. "Increase the number of weekly classroom observations with same-day feedback from two to ten." "Run data meetings where every teacher leaves with one plan for re-teaching what students missed." "Cut the average discipline referral processing time so you're in classrooms by 9 a.m." These are observable, measurable, and they matter for kids — because an education leader who is in classrooms coaching teachers multiplies your impact across every room in the building.

The observation isn't fifteen minutes in one classroom; it's shadowing the education leader's leadership work. Sit in on their feedback conversation with a teacher — is it specific? Evidence-based? Does it end with a next step? Watch them run a PLC meeting. Walk the building with them and notice what they notice. You are collecting evidence about their leadership practice the same way they collect evidence about teaching.

Make observing how they coach their teachers a standing part of the system. The single most revealing thing you can watch is an education leader in a coaching conversation: sit in on the feedback meeting,

listen for evidence versus adjectives, watch the teacher's face, and notice whether the teacher leaves with one clear next step or a fog of suggestions. Then coach the coaching — debrief the education leader on their coaching the same way they debrief teachers on teaching. That is how a coaching culture reproduces itself: every level coaching the level below it, and every level being coached on how well they do it.

The conversation follows the same discipline: ask first, share data second, end with one next step. "You gave that teacher three action steps in the feedback meeting. What do you think happens to three action steps?" Let them arrive at "nothing" themselves. Then: "What's one thing you'll change in your next feedback conversation?"

Here's what that conversation sounds like in practice:

> **Superintendent:** "You gave that teacher three action steps in your feedback meeting yesterday. What do you think happens when a teacher walks away with three?"
>
> **Education leader:** "Honestly? They probably do none of them well."
>
> **Superintendent:** "That's been my experience too. If you had to pick the one that matters most for her kids right now, which is it?"
>
> **Education leader:** "The calling on every student, by name. The other two can wait."
>
> **Superintendent:** "So next time — one step, not three. Want to try that in your Thursday feedback meeting? I'll sit in if you want a second set of eyes."

Fifteen minutes. No rating, no file. The education leader just got coached on the highest-leverage part of her job, and she named the solution herself. Multiply that by every education leader, every week, and you start to see what a coaching culture looks like from the top down.

The biggest shift: coach the system, not just the person.

When you coach teachers, you work on individual practice. When you coach education leaders, you work on the systems that shape everyone's practice. An education leader's observation schedule, their

data meeting protocol, their approach to struggling teachers — these are systems. Your coaching should target them.

Ask your education leaders: "Walk me through your weekly schedule. Where is the coaching time?" If the answer is "there isn't any," you have found your first coaching goal — for them and for you. Bambrick-Santoyo is blunt about this: leaders who don't schedule instructional leadership don't do instructional leadership. Help each education leader build a weekly calendar with protected time for observations and feedback. Then hold them to it — not with a gotcha, but with a coaching check-in: "You planned ten observations this week. How many happened? What got in the way?"

Chapter 6: The 7-Step Coaching Process

Coaching fails when it's vague. It works when it's a repeatable process — the same seven steps every time, whether you're coaching a first-year teacher or a veteran education leader. Memorize them. Run them in order. Don't skip one because you're busy; the skipped step is always the one that mattered.

Step 1: Set a goal.

The process starts with a conversation, not an observation. Sit with the educator and agree on exactly one goal — specific, observable, and tied to student learning. "Improve questioning" is not a goal. "Ask at least three follow-up questions that press students to explain their thinking, in every lesson this week" is a goal. The educator should have real say in choosing it; people work harder on goals they helped pick. Write it in one sentence. If you can't say it in one sentence, it's not clear enough yet.

Step 2: Observe briefly — with evidence.

Ten to fifteen minutes in the room. You're not there to judge the whole lesson; you're there to gather evidence about the one goal. Tally the follow-up questions. Time how long the education leader spends in classrooms. Write down exact quotes. Evidence is what separates coaching from opinion — "I noticed" beats "I felt" every time. Tell the educator in advance what evidence you'll collect. No surprises.

Step 3: Talk it through.

Don't let feedback go stale — meet soon, while the observation is fresh. Start by asking, not telling: "How do you think it went against our goal?" Listen to the answer before you open your notes. Then share your evidence, plainly and without editorializing: here's what I saw, here's what it means for the goal. Keep it to fifteen minutes. If the conversation needs an hour, the goal was too big — go back to Step 1.

Step 4: Practice it.

This is the step everyone skips, and it's the one that changes behavior. Don't just talk about the next move — rehearse it. Model the follow-up question and have the teacher try it on you. Role-play the difficult conversation the education leader needs to have with a staff member. Co-plan the first five minutes of tomorrow's lesson together. Practice feels awkward the first time. Do it anyway. Nobody gets better at anything by only discussing it. Athletes drill. Musicians rehearse. Educators should practice too.

Step 5: Commit to at least one action step.

End every coaching conversation with at least one action step — one thing the educator will do before the next session, a few at most. Specific enough that you'd both know whether it happened: "Open

tomorrow's lesson by calling, by name, on two students who rarely volunteer" — not "call on more kids." Say them out loud together. This is the handshake the whole cycle runs on.

Step 6: Follow up on the action step.

The next session — observation, walkthrough, or check-in — starts in the same place every time: "How did the action step go?" Look at it together before anything new. If it worked, name what worked and build on it. If it didn't, get curious, not critical: what got in the way, and what do we adjust? This is where coaching compounds. A dozen small kept commitments will transform a practice faster than one grand plan nobody follows through on.

Step 7: Leave it in writing — brief.

After the conversation, the coach writes it down — and I mean brief. Three lines, tops: what you observed against the goal, the action step (or very few), and the date you'll look at it together next time. Give it to the educator soon — the same day if you can. This is not an evaluation memo and it never goes in a personnel file. It's a short note you can both point back to, so the next session starts with the action step instead of starting from scratch. When the written feedback is this short and this consistent, people stop fearing it and start relying on it.

Run these seven steps on a loop — goal, observe, talk, practice, commit, follow up, write it down — and you have a coaching process that actually changes practice. Skip the loop, and the growth doesn't happen.

Coaching Session Notes

Coach: _____ **Date:** _____

Person coached: _____

Goal (one sentence): _____

_____

Evidence observed: _____

_____

What we practiced: _____

_____

Agreed action step(s): (one specific thing, due before the next session)

_____

_____

_____

We will review these action step(s) on: _____

Steps completed:

- ☐ Set one goal
- ☐ Observed with evidence
- ☐ Talked it through
- ☐ Practiced the next move
- ☐ Committed to action step(s)
- ☐ Followed up on the last action step(s)
- ☐ Left brief written feedback

Conclusion

This publication makes one argument: the way adults improve is coaching — brief, frequent, grounded in evidence — not the annual review. The review has its place; it is a formal record. But records don't change practice. Conversations do.

The system is simple: watch for fifteen minutes and write down what you actually see, ask what they noticed before you share what you saw, and end with one next step left in writing — three lines. Do it regularly. And get someone to coach you, too, because leaders who won't be coached can't build a coaching culture.

People don't resist coaching; they resist being coached without a say. Bring them into the why, keep every tool brutally simple, and let the evidence do the talking. Do it regularly. Do it briefly. The growth will follow.

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