



# Coaching for School Improvement

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## Doing 'with' versus doing 'for'

When coaching school improvement teams there's a fine line between doing *with* the team and doing *for* the team. Because the coach brings a special set of skills and expertise to the change effort, it's easy to slip into the role of writer of the plan, documenter of discussions, and planner of work sessions. How much quicker it would be if the coach functioned as the project manager, laying out the workplan for the year and setting benchmarks to monitor progress!

But look what happens -- in the eyes of the team members, a plan written by the coach is the coach's plan. A productive work session planned by the coach is credited to the coach's efforts, not to the team leaders. Yes, a skilled coach is likely very efficient at selecting appropriate change strategies and facilitating data collection activities to measure the impact of reform on student learning, but who 'owns' the products of these efforts and how sustainable are they after the coach's contract ends?

In North Dakota, the coaches assigned to work with school improvement teams are called "capacity builders." Consider the implications of using that term. A coach who considers herself a 'capacity builder' is challenged to reflect on her actions in specific ways: by taking on this task/ conducting this meeting/ arranging this event, am I building capacity (doing "with") or am I enabling the team to avoid tough choices and hard work (doing "for")?

Now, there are certainly times when it is advisable for a coach to use her expertise, skill, and (often) time to pitch in on a team management chore in order to bypass potential delays or meet strict timelines. But if building local capacity is an intended outcome of the coaching relationship, clear, frequent communication on the topic of who does what is smart.

Imagine the coach of a sports team in a similar situation. Tony Dungee isn't on the field tossing touchdown passes, nor is Phil Jackson making three pointers on the court. They are on the sidelines guiding their players to use *their* skills as quarterbacks and point guards to lead the team to success. Can it be frustrating to be a guide on the side versus the star on the field? Of course it can -- just ask Erik Spoelstra, head coach of the much-favored Miami Heat who lost in the NBA finals to the Dallas Mavericks!

By continually checking with school leaders and team members about the tasks to come, gauging their aptitude and interest in developing new skills, a coach can add value to the school improvement process by *not* doing the work 'for' the team, but 'with' them. A coach can structure learning opportunities for team members so that they become skilled facilitators and project managers of their own change process.

A school improvement coach encounters numerous balancing situations like this between doing 'with' and doing 'for'. Regular conversations with team members and their leader about roles and responsibilities throughout the coaching commitment engage both parties in making the decision that's best for each situation.