

“Accountability breeds response-ability” so says Stephen Covey.

Accountability, responsibility, and response-ability are three factors that impact instructional coaching and influence organizational effectiveness. While it's difficult to “assign” accountability to instructional coaches, they view their relationships with colleagues very personally and take ownership of their work with their teaching colleagues. Coaches are completely immersed in working with their colleagues and engaging them regularly in accountable talk, much like we ask teachers to ensure that their students are engaged in accountable talk. So, what does that mean?

Accountable talk is talk that is evocative, thoughtful, and constructive to both speaker and listener. It is meaningful conversation that results in some action. It means being responsive and responsible in ways that help teachers and students grow. And, it also means being answerable at some level for the work that was accomplished after a reasonable amount of time and support have been given. Although the goal is that all practice moves forward as a result of the coaching interactions, it also means coaches are responsible and accountable for working with teachers, not necessarily for the outcomes. For instance, a coach may work with a teacher on a teacher-identified need. They work together and over time, the teaching practice changes. Since learning is ongoing, change is ongoing which means there isn't one distinct event that resulted from the conversation but a series of events that result from ongoing conversations. The coach is responsible for creating opportunities to meet regularly with the teacher and engage in meaningful conversations but is the coach accountable for the changes that took place as a result of those conversations? Remember, the coach is not interacting with the students to implement a change; the coach is working from a distance with the teacher to create change.

What does accountability and responsibility mean for coaches? Is there blame placed somewhere if the intended outcomes are different from the actual outcomes?

Peer interactions help extend understanding but who is held responsible and accountable for those interactions and the envisioned outcomes from them? Coaches are responsible for bringing peers together to talk about practice. Are they really accountable when “it” doesn't get done the way it was planned?

Vygotsky claims that peers learning from each other is one of the most effective ways to gain knowledge. He posits that social learning precedes development and that's why it is essential for coaches to provide multiple opportunities for colleagues to collaborate and learn from and with each other (<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/lsn/educator/edtech/learningtheorieswebsite/vygotsky.htm>).

In fact, when the quality of a teacher's colleagues improve, the students of that teacher benefit (Jackson, C.K. & Bruegmann, E., 2009). It's almost like a theory of momentum... the more colleagues work together, the more teaching changes. Students move from teacher to teacher and benefit from those teachers working and learning from each other.

It sounds like learning from each other and redefining responsibilities may be what is needed to determine what is within a coach's sphere of influence and what is beyond his/her control. It seems like responsibility and accountability are almost meaningless if a person's thinking and performance are not changed. Isn't every individual responsible for his/her own actions?

Coaches do not blame others, nor can they be "blamed" for something happening that is less than ideal. As a coach, view things through a variety of perspectives; communicate openly and frankly; provide timely, specific, descriptive and non-judgmental feedback; offer multiple opportunities for collaboration and help your teaching colleagues try new things without fear of negative evaluations; think "outside the box" and encourage others to do the same; consistently and persistently ask, "What am I doing as a coach to help teachers change, improve practice, and increase student engagement"; be courageous in establishing relationships and creative in working through obstacles that impede growth. And, above all, share a vision where all students and their teachers are learners.