Chapter 11

Catalyst for change

Perturbs the current state to examine effects and alternatives to expand and refine practice.

An important role for coaches to assume is as a catalyst for change. In this demanding role, the coach seeks to influence improvement not only by disturbing the status quo and introducing new ideas, but also by shifting interpretations and assumptions. For most professionals, the notion of disturbing the status quo has a negative connotation. Yet, for coaches this role is not about finding fault or blame or naming problems, but rather about seeking opportunity to leverage talents, resources, and tasks to reach new levels. In his book, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges, 2nd edition,* C. Otto Scharmer (2016) suggests that leaders seek their authentic selves by discovering the blind spots that bind them to their current practices. Recognizing those blind spots opens up possibilities that were previously hidden to them. To identify blind spots leaders examine their assumptions, relationships, and behaviors and let go of three things that get in the way of seeing opportunity:

1. Let go of the voice of judgment because it blinds you as a person;
2. Let go of the voice of cynicism because it destroys trust and hope;
3. Let go of the voice of fear because it paralyzes collective action (Scharmer, 2016).

The coach's primary means for catalyzing change is gaining a strong sense of self and identity. Then, by observing current practices and inquiring about what led to those practices, coaches help others reach the same sense of self (see Tool 11.1). Catalysts for change facilitate educators' examination of deeply-held motivations and unspoken assumptions. In that role coaches often raise possibilities about how leaders and other educators could be more effective, move beyond the current state, and challenge mental models (Schön, 1987; Senge, 2006) that limit new possibilities, including coaches' own and those held by others. As they support deeper examination of the status

quo, coaches promote learning and continuous improvement throughout their schools.

The culture within a school influences how people behave. When schools function as learning organizations (OECD, 2016; Senge, 2006), the openness and practice of continuous improvement is routine as all members continuously and critically examine how people think, act, and interact. Yet, too often in schools there is a norm to maintain the status quo of the system. This is often a result of fear of the unknown or complacency with current practice.

Being a catalyst for change requires a coach to hold a mental model suggesting that educators find opportunities for innovation whenever they become satisfied or complacent. Made famous by multiple business leaders, this approach encourages one to celebrate success, yet never allow it to lead to complacency. In the technology field the term *disruptive innovation* frequently describes practices that result in new opportunities (Christensen, Raynor, & McDonald, 2015; Tencer & Cardoso, 2014). Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2001) state, "To bring about real change, … we must disturb the balance, not merely look at our status quo." They continue, "To increase our chances of disturbing the balance, … [we must] disturb the very foundation of the status quo: preserving equilibrium" (p. 66).

Catalysts for change support teachers in several ways

Acting as a catalyst for change, the coach leads from behind, often speaking the unspoken, or as Maxine Greene (1978) called it, the undiscussable, as a way of initiating conversation about alternative ways of thinking and acting. They ask questions that are designed to shift thinking such as, "What if it were true — that ALL students can meet high standards?" or "What if students from ALL backgrounds have the same capacity to succeed?"

As catalysts for change, coaches have two major responsibilities. One is engaging teachers in *evaluation think* (Killion, 2002). Evaluation think is "individuals and teams looking critically and analytically to discover what is working and what is not in order to redefine their work and improve results" (Killion, 2002, p. 1) (see Tool 11.2). A second responsibility is introducing possible new ways of thinking about current practices as a means to refine or extend them to achieve greater results. This latter responsibility suggests that a coach stay familiar with current research- and evidence-based practices in curriculum, instruction, leadership, and professional learning so that she is always on the leading edge.

Catalysts for change need certain knowledge, skills, and practices

Coaches use a wide range of knowledge and skills in the role as catalyst for change. They know about and understand change, leadership, reform, and resistance to change. They use scanning and forecasting skills to remain aware of international, national, state, and local trends that may affect education. They understand the impact of environment and culture on their colleagues' willingness to consider change. Drawing on that knowledge, they apply strategies to engage colleagues, parents, and other community members in appreciating and developing multiple perspectives. They also have a strong moral purpose and sense of identity. They know how their own beliefs and actions affect the culture within

> "A coach is in a role within a staff. Going into it, he or she must know that trust is earned by the administration and separately by the staff. To be a change agent for a building, a coach has to maintain trust with the administration. For those changes to become reality, trust has to be maintained with the staff. None of this happens by accident; it is a conscious effort that requires constant attention."
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> *Adam Schmitt*
> *Coach*
> *Madison Junior High School*
> *Naperville 203*
> *Naperville, Illinois*

which they work and the beliefs and actions of others with whom they work.

They use creative and critical problem-solving skills to meet new challenges with adaptive, not technical, responses by encouraging other educators to think out of the box. They engage others in dialogue, surfacing both their own and others' assumptions and identifying mental models that influence behaviors. They help others recognize the contradictions between their espoused theories and their mental models. They make observations and state them factually without blame or judgment. They hold an inquiry-oriented rather than an advocacy-oriented perspective (Garmston & Wellman, 2016). They gather evidence, examine it critically, and make recommendations or requests without expectation.

Catalysts for change engage educators in assessing the current state and examining the gap that exists between where they are and where they want to be, the desired result (see Tool 11.3). They change their own practice first and lead by example. They see opportunities rather than problems or barriers. Catalysts for change know how to let experience and opportunity guide change. They offer information from a new perspective and invite others to study alternatives. They use trust and honesty as their main tools rather than demands or ultimatums. They help others see through a new lens. Coaches who act as catalysts for change need strong communication and relationship-building skills so that their challenges to the status quo are seen as positive and constructive; nevertheless, some educators or school leaders who want to maintain the status quo may come to disregard coaches who serve in this role.

They examine their identities as a coach and their beliefs about coaching and its role in transforming schools into learning organizations in which everyone learns and grows within a collaborative community. They set personal and professional growth goals. They make their practice public and seek feedback from critical friends within the school and beyond to examine and refine their own practice and the assumptions they hold. They think aloud (i.e. meta-cognition) about their work and remain open to alternative interpretations of current reality by networking with other coaches, reading, and participating in dialogue. They engage in dialogue about people's beliefs and goals so that they might examine their own and others' assumptions that drive how people think, speak, and act. By examining and challenging their own assumptions in public settings, they model the value of this salient learning practice. Questioning the status quo is a strategy that coaches often use as catalysts for change by asking the following:

- How did this become our practice?
- Whose needs does it serve?
- What message does this action send to our community about our values as a school? (Killion & Harrison, 1997; Oakley & Krug, 1991).

Another set of questions coaches use are the "evaluation think" questions:

- What is working?
- How do we know? What's the evidence?
- What isn't working?
- How do we know? What's the evidence?
- What are we going to do to change it? (Oakley & Krug, 1991).

These questions emphasize that a catalyst opts to use a positive or assets approach to change rather than a *deficit* approach. The deficit-based approach often results in defensiveness and increased resistance and helplessness, while the asset-based approach fosters capability, responsibility, and motivation (Dweck, 2006; Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Pink, 2009). Catalyzing change is both easier and more enjoyable when people feel capable, motivated, and open to addressing the challenge rather than accepting blame for the past (see Tool 11.4).

In the role of catalyst for change, coaches cultivate continuous examination of current practice within their schools by inviting others to consider how their actions affect their results. Catalysts for change regularly test basic assumptions and experiment with new ways of thinking that, in turn, lead to new ways of doing things. They view problems not as failures, but rather as opportunities for learning and growing. They are committed to "learning from their successes and failures so they can do better the next time" (Petrides & Nodine, 2005, p. v). The coach explores "truths" and

SNAPSHOT

A coach as a catalyst for change

Mildred Taylor, instructional facilitator at Marlin Middle School,* and the administrative team know that the number of 7th-grade failures is creeping upward. When comparing results year-to-year, the trend is less obvious, yet when looking across three years, the evidence is more visible. Taylor noted that there might be a connection with her experience last week with the 8th-grade team when they complained that students are not ready for the 8th-grade curriculum.

Taylor has a scheduled meeting with the 7th-grade team later in the week. She thinks about how she could plant a seed to let team members know about the increasing failure rates. She also wants teachers to initiate action before the principal requires action, because she wants them to own the problem and address it in adaptive rather than technical ways. Adaptive approaches cause thinking outside the box about innovative, even untested, ways to address the problem rather than treating them with known strategies with a weak track record of success (Heifetz, 2009). She decides to bring data to the meeting to facilitate teachers in examining the challenge through different lenses.

At the meeting, Taylor reviews the meeting purpose and non-purpose and reminds them about their team agreements. The teachers immediately begin to launch into what's not working, with an emphasis on student-focused issues such as lack of motivation, low parental value of education, high student absenteeism, and poor middle school preparation. Taylor musters her courage and brings out the grade distribution results for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders.

"These data prove our point," teachers respond. "Students seem to slack off when they get to 7th grade."

"I wonder why they don't seem to have difficulty in 6th grade? They perform well on the state tests with nearly 70% scoring proficient. Then in 7th grade, their scores drop. Only 40% are proficient," Taylor ponders aloud.

"It's because the 6th-grade teachers baby them," one teacher suggests.

"Yet they seem to bounce back in 8th grade," Taylor responds.

"I wonder why that is?" another teacher asks.

"Are you interested in finding out why that is?" inquires Taylor.

"Sure," say most of the teachers, "but it is because of adolescence."

That might be," responds Taylor. "Would you be interested in examining data from other schools like ours to see if the same patterns exist? It might help us understand this situation." She promises to bring data from schools with similar characteristics to the next meeting.

Next, Taylor brings out another Marlin data chart showing how the numbers of failures in 7th grade compare to those of 6th and 8th grades over the last few years. Teachers study the charts in amazement.

"These students are less prepared than students we've had in previous years," interjects one teacher.

"Maybe, in addition to their lack of preparation, there are other ways to think about this. Let's explore other interpretations. One example is that our current students may require different instructional techniques to help them learn," counters Taylor. "What are other ways to think about this situation?" she presses. "Let's think about several potential areas to examine. Then let's see if we can determine which we have the most opportunity to influence ourselves, so that we can become proactive rather than reactive."

Taylor suggests that they have a good list of student factors already and encourages them to consider other areas that influence student learning such as those that teachers make decisions about every day — instruction, assessment, curriculum, lesson and unit planning, learning resources, their own comfort with the content and pedagogy, and others. She offers to lead them through the fishbone process next week when they meet again. They agree and each takes one area to think about more closely before the meeting starts.

One of the 7th-grade teachers catches up with Taylor as she walks down the hall. "What you did was gutsy. This problem has been going on for a few years, and we all know about it," he says. "We just haven't had the courage as a group to name it out loud. I am relieved that it is finally out in the public, and that we now have permission to talk about it. It will help us stop talking about students and begin talking about teaching and learning. Thanks, Mildred."

**Fictitious name and school*

assumptions upon which actions are based. The catalyst-for-change coach "reveals truths and identifies what is often unspoken as a way of initiating dialogue about alternative ways of behaving and thinking" (Killion & Harrison, 1997, p. 43).

When the culture is strong, change occurs more easily. As catalysts for change, coaches contribute to building and nurturing a positive school, productive disagreements, and healthy conflict as means of promoting continuous improvement. "When schools become learning schools," note Joellen Killion and Patricia Roy (2009), "every student benefits from every educator's expertise, and every educator grows professionally with the support of his or her colleagues" (p. 17).

Coaches as catalysts for change face challenges

As catalysts for change, coaches face the difficulty of maintaining a delicate balance between disturbing the status quo and ensuring that people are confident and competent in their work. When the imbalance occurs, teachers may be less open or resistant to continuous improvement. If the coach enables teachers to become too comfortable, they may lose the desire for improvement and develop habits that restrict or limit learning. Change of any magnitude takes some internal dissonance. Without conflict there is no change.

Another challenge is being ready to act whenever an opportunity arises. Keeping a laser-like focus on the school's vision and his or her own moral purpose, the coach seeks every opportunity to enact the vision in large and small ways. Such a constant focus on the vision and possibilities may irritate those who are more comfortable with constancy and certainty.

When in this role, the coach walks another delicate line between initiating a necessary change and planting a seed that allows others to perceive the need to change and, thus, initiate the change on their own. The coach strives to foster ownership in others so that the aspiration to initiate, implement, and sustain the change exists within them. Coaches also seek to maintain a certain level of dissatisfaction, discomfort, or disequilibrium within the school as a way of inducing continuous improvement. It is dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction that opens others to explore new ways of thinking and acting. An example of provoking dissatisfaction is the coach identifying an achievement gap among students of different ethnicities and asking a team to examine why the gap exists and identify ways to address the gap (see Tool 11.5).

Another challenge that catalysts for change experience is being patient while they generate energy in others to lead the change. When coaches plant seeds, not every seed will grow to fruition. Some wither immediately; some never had potential and others flourish. Coaches acting as catalysts for change must be satisfied with planting seeds rather than being the director of every change effort. They must also remember that some seeds require hibernation before they flower. By being willing to plant and nurture, catalysts for change cultivate potential in others to lead the change they want to achieve.

A final challenge coaches have in this role is acting alone. When the coach is the lone person who questions the status quo, invites dialogue about assumptions, or asks sets of questions that force others to examine reality, he may be perceived as disagreeing with others, never satisfied with successes, or unable to go along with the majority. Rather than seeing the coach as supportive, school staff members may perceive the coach's actions as working

against the school plan for improvement or in opposition to other school leaders' efforts. Coaches must take care that they are not perceived as the devil's advocate just for the sake of disagreement.

Conclusion

A coach chooses to be a catalyst for change. The choice is between accepting what is or imagining new possibilities. By acting as an advocate for learning for students and educators, coaches have leverage to open doors previously not even visible. Coaches as catalysts for change hold student success as their main priority. This work takes courage and commitment, absence from judgment and fear, and strength of moral purpose.

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