

During the Improve phase, the coach and teacher move through the following four steps: (a) Confirm Direction, (b) Review Progress, (c) Invent Improvements, and (d) Plan Next Actions.

The question addressed in the Improve phase is ...

Did we hit the goal?

If the answer is yes, ask the collaborating teacher ...

- » Do you want to continue to refine your use of the practice?
- » Do you want to choose a new goal to work on?
- » Do you want to take a break?

If the answer is no, ask the collaborating teacher ...

- » Do you want to change the goal?
- » Do you want to change the way you measure progress toward the goal?
- » Do you want to stick with the strategy as is?
- » Do you want to revisit how you teach the strategy?
- » Do you want to choose a new strategy?

Step 1

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Confirm Direction

When a coach and teacher meet to discuss progress toward the goal, the first thing to do is to unpack the collaborating teacher's most pressing concerns by asking questions.

Two questions are especially helpful for confirming the direction for the coaching conversation:

1. Given the time we have today, what's the most important thing for us to talk about? (Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations*, 2004)
 - » This question positions the teacher as the one setting the agenda.
 - » It ensures issues that are important to the teacher are addressed.
2. What's on your mind? (The Kickstarter Question, Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit*, 2016)
 - » The Kickstarter Question helps confirm direction quickly by getting to the heart of the matter.
 - » It helps move the session naturally to step two: Review Progress.

Step 2

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Review Progress

During instructional coaching, there are primarily two reasons why data are gathered: (a) to assess how close students are to the goal to identify what adjustments need to be made in order to ensure the goal is hit; and (b) to help gauge how the teacher is implementing the new strategy.

If goals have been met, the coach and teacher plan their next actions. If the goal has not been met, they can move through the following series of questions (as appropriate to the coaching situation) to take a deeper look at what the data reveal.

- A. What has gone well?
 - » This question begins on a positive note!
 - » Ask: Can this success be amplified or applied to other aspects of the lesson in some way?
 - » Other ways to ask this question are: “What are you seeing that shows this strategy is successful?” and “What progress has been made toward the goal?”

- B. What did you learn?
 - » This is an open-ended question, but it still provides some focus for the conversation.
 - » It highlights the iterative, experimental, and creative nature of the work teacher and coach are doing together.
 - » Another way of asking this question is: “What surprised you?”

- C. What roadblocks are you running into?
 - » This question helps balance the highs and lows of the coaching cycle.
 - » It is open-ended, which encourages dialogue.
 - » The question helps focus the teacher’s commitment to the goal by asking, “What would it look like if your students cared deeply and were highly engaged in their learning?”
 - » After discussing what that would look like, ask: “What could we do that might move the students in that direction?”

Step 3

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Invent Improvements

During instructional coaching, most changes are made to address challenges that surface in the improvement stage, and the kind of challenges faced are usually technical or adaptive. This is important because different kinds of challenge requires a different response. In fact, As Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky explain in *Leadership On The Line: Staying Alive Through The Dangers of Leading* (2002) when you fail to respond to a certain type of task or challenge in the correct manner, you set yourself up for failure.

KINDS OF TASKS

(Glouberman and Zimmerman, 2002)

- » Simple: Task involves simple steps; same results each time (e.g., baking a cake).
- » Complicated: Task involves more complicated formulas and recipes but still offers a predictable outcome (e.g., putting someone on the moon).
- » Complex: Task cannot be broken down into steps with predictable outcomes; every day is different (e.g., raising a 3-year-old).

Different types of challenges require different and appropriate responses.

Simple and complicated tasks produce what Heifetz and Linsky call technical challenges. A technical challenge has known solutions. Usually, people successfully address technical challenges by following a certain set of steps or a recipe.

Complex tasks produce what Heifetz and Linsky call adaptive challenges. These require adaptive responses. There is no how-to manual for responding to these tasks. You have to be creative, imaginative, and be adaptive enough to make it up as you go. As Ron Heifetz states, “Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating new ideas to thrive anew (2002).”

Teaching is a complex task that requires endless adaptability!

“The most common failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.”

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HEIFETZ AND LINSKY

Leadership on The Line, 2002

THE FIVE QUESTIONS FOR ADAPTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Instructional coaches need to be adaptive problem solvers. Asking the following five questions can help:

1. Do you want to stick with the strategy as it is?
 - » Change doesn't happen immediately, and sometimes things stay the same—or get worse—before they get better. Have you given the strategy enough time?
 - » Sometimes it takes a while for students to become more engaged and responsive to the new way of doing things. Are the students used to operating this way yet?
 - » In short, does the strategy need more time to have an impact, or is it clearly not facilitating progress toward the goal?

2. Do you want to revisit the way you use the strategy?
 - » Further adaptation may be needed to refine the strategy for maximum impact. Consider the following three ideas:
 - The teacher may need to change her practice;
 - The teacher may determine that the modifications she made to the strategy decreased the strategy's effectiveness; or
 - The teacher may decide that more changes need to be made in order to increase the strategy's impact.

3. Do you want to choose a new strategy?
 - » Remember: Everything is an experiment! Relatively speaking, some strategies may work better than others.
 - » If the teacher decides to change the strategy, the coach should repeat most parts of the Learn phase of the Impact Cycle (checklists, adaptations, and modeling).

4. Do you want to change the way you measure progress toward the goal?
 - » An effective measure is valid and reliable, and yields the same score when used by different people.

5. Do you want to change the goal?
 - » A general goal provides a rough target and gets the coaching cycle moving, but once changes and strategies are implemented, it may become clear that the goal needs to be refined or changed altogether.
 - » Consider: The goal may be too challenging or not challenging enough; also, it may not take the standards into account.

“Coaching is informed, adaptive response.”

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The Impact Cycle, 2017

- » Caution: Resist the temptation to choose less challenging goals before you are absolutely certain the goal needs to be modified.

Step 4

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Plan Next Actions

As teachers move through the Impact Cycle, there will be highs, and there will be lows. Collaborating teachers may find themselves frustrated and discouraged. This is a normal part of change. It is this feeling that Michael Fullan (*Leading In A Culture of Change*, 2001) and Seth Godin (*The Dip*, 2007) refer to as The Implementation Dip, or more simply, The Dip.

THE DIP

Moran and Lenington have identified five phases people typically go through when they are making changes: (a) uninformed optimism, (b) informed pessimism, (c) the valley of despair, (d) informed optimism, and (e) success and fulfillment.

Instructional coaches guide teachers through the valley of despair. The Dip may involve dips in confidence or performance, as well as anxiety, fear, confusion, and feelings of being overwhelmed or incompetent.

Coaches help guide teachers through these rough patches by ...

- » confidently and calmly helping them stay focused on the goal
- » pointing out gains already made
- » reminding them that change is messy. A coach is a living, breathing assurance: “It’s OK. We can do this!”
- » helping identify ways to get over roadblocks

PLANNING IN COACHING

A rule of thumb: Too much planning is better than too little!

Making a plan for next actions with your collaborating teacher involves four steps:

- » Establish the date and time for the next meeting.
- » Identify which tasks need to happen before the meeting.
- » Identify who will do which tasks.
- » Estimate when the tasks will be completed.

The Coaching Planner included below can be especially helpful at this stage.

Here are some hints for how to use the form.

- » Use the form when you are meeting the teacher to plan next actions.
- » Complete the form from left to right.
- » Use it while moving through the four steps of the Improve Questioning phase or with teachers after they have worked through those questions.