Coaching with Indicators

Center on Innovation & Improvement

How school leadership teams guide their schools' continuous improvement
and how Coaches and Capacity Builders support their work

School improvement is typically driven by a school-based leadership team. Scrutiny of student learning data informs their decisions and plans. An annual school improvement plan is their primary roadmap. The plan is created and followed for a year, then the cycle starts again. These plans begin by addressing specific subgroups of students and subject areas where the annual assessment shows weakness. The goal is to improve the scores that are low.

Continuous improvement with indicators of effective practice follows a different path. In addition to scrutiny of student learning data, the team analyzes the school staff's professional practices that contribute to the student outcomes. Rather than focusing only on improvement where the last annual test showed weakness, continuous improvement examines professional practices school-wide and seeks to elevate performance across the board, including the most recent areas of deficiency. Instead of creating a plan once a year and then following it, the team engages in a continuous improvement process that is always assessing current practice relative to indicators of effectiveness, planning immediate steps to full implementation, and monitoring progress. Periodically, a snapshot of the work creates a report that marks progress at that point in time, but the improvement cycle continues at pace and without interruption.

The Coach's role in an indicator-based, continuous improvement process is always to build the capacity of the school team to function within a culture of candor, accurately determining the level of implementation of effective practices, striving toward universal and consistent practice. Where does student learning data come into play? Specific indicators address how individual teachers, teacher instructional teams, and the leadership team use real-time data in making decisions, designing instruction, re-teaching, and both elevating expectations for students showing early mastery and providing support for students lagging behind. Truly, each student's progress is closely assessed at many points in time, and instruction is targeted to that student's needs and degree of mastery.

The Coach serves the school best when helping the leadership team understand the meaning of each indicator, gather information necessary for an accurate assessment of current practice relative to the indicator, plan improvement, and monitor results until the team is assured that the practice is fully implemented across the school. The Coach interacts with the team in a way that might be called "metacognitive guidance." That means "thinking out loud" to model for the team how to analyze current performance relative to an indicator and how to plan concrete steps leading to its full implementation. By thinking out loud, asking critical questions, and holding the team to a high level of candor, the Coach embeds in the team the abilities and procedures for continuous improvement.

Examination of current practice provides the opportunity to show where practice is already strong as well as where improvement is needed. Thus, recognizing excellence and deficiencies, the school team builds from strength while honing professional practice in leadership, teaming processes, instructional planning, classroom management, instructional delivery, and school community and family engagement. The emphasis is on what the adults do that makes high student achievement possible.

What is an indicator of effective practice?

An indicator of effective practice is a concrete, behavioral expression of a professional practice that research demonstrates contributes to student learning. An indicator is expressed in plain language so that a school team can answer with certainty whether or not it is standard practice in the school.

What constitutes evidence of full implementation of an indicator of effective practice?

The school team must candidly prove to itself that all the personnel for whom an indicator applies routinely demonstrate effective application of the indicator. The evidence must satisfy the meaning

of the indicator and the high standard set by the team. Each indicator must be deconstructed in literal terms, so that the evidence shows clearly that the indicator is met. This does not require reams of documentation, but access to specific data relative to the indicator and a succinct statement that the data are conclusive in showing that the indicator is met.

How does the team prioritize the indicators to gain "quick wins" while also working over a longer time horizon to ultimately implement all indicators?

As each indicator is assessed to determine the current level of implementation, it is also prioritized in terms of its importance and rated according to the difficulty of its achievement. This combination of priority and opportunity produces an index score that the team can take into account in planning improvement. Thus, indicators of relatively high priority that are also relatively easily achieved are tackled first, gaining quick wins that motivate the team to dig in and work toward the more difficult indicators.

What does a plan look like?

A plan is constructed by setting forth a series of tasks that would logically lead to full implementation of the indicator. For each task, someone is assigned chief responsibility for seeing that it is carried out, and a target date is established for its completion.

What should be considered in creating a plan to fully implement an indicator?

The first question to ask is whether the people to whom the indicator applies are aware that this practice is expected of them. If not, then communicating the expectation might be a first task. A second set of tasks might deal with how the indicator is discussed with the people responsible for it so that they have a good understanding of the expectation. Some professional development may be needed. Check out Indicators in Action™ on the Indistar® website. Then tasks would include methods for gathering the data necessary to know the status of implementation and to determine if additional coaching or training is necessary.

What happens when all the tasks are completed?

When all the tasks leading to full implementation of an indicator are completed, the team re-assesses the indicator. If the team now has data that show the indicator has been achieved, the team provides its succinct evidence. If the data show that the tasks have been completed but the indicator not achieved, the team adds tasks and continues its work toward full implementation.

Can an indicator be "re-assessed"?

Of course. This is a continuous improvement process. If an indicator has been initially assessed as "fully implemented," the team may return to it at any time and change the assessment so that it can plan its implementation. Once an indicator has been assessed as Not Implemented, or Limited Implementation, the team can only change the assessment by completing the tasks (or deleting unnecessary tasks) and then providing evidence of full implementation.

What are coaching comments?

The Coach interfaces with a leadership team in many ways—meeting onsite for consultation, meeting via conference call or webinar, talking individually with the principal and other staff, and sending emails. But coaching comments embedded in the Indistar® system provide a means for documenting key points of advice and congratulation—always with specific reference to the indicator and the team's work. The coaching comments allow the team to respond with its own questions and clarifications, and the dialogue between Coach and team is maintained. This provides a rich tracking of the thinking of the coach and the team, and is useful in future work and in cases where a new Coach or new team members may come on the scene. Also, the Coach periodically conducts a more thorough review, using the Coach's Review feature and examining a variety of reports conveniently provided for the Coach.

What basic expectations guide a Coach's work?

The primary responsibility of the Coach is to see that the Leadership Team meets regularly, with full participation by all members, and candidly addresses the indicators of effective practice. Secondly, the Coach coaches the team to understand the indicators, develop tasks leading to full implementation, and adequately describe their evidence of full implementation. Finally, the Coach reminds the team to submit (electronically through the system) the periodic reports required by the State.

Basic guidelines for the Coach include:

1. **Ensure Effective Teaming**. Know when the Leadership Team is meeting and remind the Principal and Process Manager to prepare and distribute the agenda, worksheets, Wise Ways®, and rubrics (if the State provides rubrics). This may require phone calls and emails as well as coaching comments. Help the Team function as a "professional learning community."

2. **Reinforce the Indistar® Work**. When visiting the school, review the Leadership Team's work by entering the system with the Team and discussing what has been done and what lies ahead. Note upcoming reporting dates. Review Summary Reports and Task Reports.

3. **Leadership**. When visiting the school, meet with the Principal and Process Manager to review Indistar® procedures and the Leadership Team's functioning. Leadership and participation by the principal is essential.

4. **Entry of Work**. Remind the Principal and Process Manager to enter the Leadership Team's work during the Leadership Team meeting or immediately after.

5. **Routine Entry of Coaching Comments.** Enter coaching comments after each Leadership Team meeting and at least twice a month.

6. **Integration of Programs**. Help the Leadership Team integrate other programs and responsibilities within the Indistar® process. Because Indistar® focuses on professional practice rather than programs, it supports implementation of all good programs.

7. **Inclusion and Transparency**. Encourage the school to distribute the Guest Login to all faculty and staff, parents, and school board members and help these groups to understand the meaning of the reports they view. Prepare the Principal and Leadership Team members to explain Indistar® to all stakeholders. Videos, Power Points, and other documents are available in the Resource section of Indistar®.

Indistar® Coaches and Capacity Builders

Lessons from The Talent Code

Center on Innovation & Improvement

We will use the term "coach" to apply to the people external to the district who provide ongoing support for a District Leadership Team and the people external to the school who provide ongoing support for a School Leadership Team. In some cases, the person is called a "coach," and in other cases the term may be "capacity builder" or "specialist." In coaching with Indistar®, your learners are primarily the principal and School Leadership Team. Or, if you are coaching a district team, then your learners are the superintendent and District Leadership Team. Of course, the work of the Leadership Team fans out to engage everyone in the district or school community, so the coach is always mindful of the ways the Leadership Team's lessons learned are internalized by others, how the Leadership Team's objectives are explained to everyone, and how the Leadership Team supports each person's mastery and application of effective practice.

Working with the Indistar® system, the coach supports the Leadership Team in its focused and candid engagement with:

1. The process of assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and celebrating the accomplishment of indicators of effective professional practice.

2. The indicators themselves, and the objectives that are derived from them: Explaining the objectives to everyone in the school community, determining the current level of implementation, providing the training and support for everyone to reach a high level of implementation throughout the school.

We thank the Illinois Rising Star coaches for putting us on to *The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle (2009). The book offers great ideas for coaches of any kind, which are summarized here.

What is Coaching?

"Coaching is a long, intimate conversation, a series of signals and responses that move toward a shared goal. A coach's true skill consists not in some universally applicable wisdom that he can communicate to all, but rather in the supple ability to locate the sweet spot on the edge of each individual [learner's] ability ,and to send the right signals to help the [learner] reach toward the right goal, over and over" (p. 178).

What is the Sweet Spot? What is Deep Practice?

For educators, the "sweet spot" is a readily understandable concept. Think of scaffolding. Think of knowing the learner's current level of understanding and mastery and then stretching the learner just enough to keep the task both challenging and attainable, and then upping the ante. We learn best when engaged in the learning; engagement requires an appropriate level of challenge to sustain interest.

Coyle calls this "deep practice." Deep practice is not based on an assumption that innate talent is the driver of success, but that success comes from the accumulation of small efforts, with scaffolding that moves the sweet spot as the learner gains mastery. "Small efforts produce big, lasting results" (p. 19). The sweet spot is that space between what the learner knows and what the learner is trying to do. In the sweet spot, we make mistakes, then self-correct, then move forward.

Coyle's Three Rules of Deep Practice

1. **Chunk It Up:** First, the learner must see the big picture—like exploring a room in the dark. You grope around and get the dimensions of the room, bump into furniture and find the parts within the whole, see the patterns. Once you absorb the whole thing, you break it into manageable chunks, slow down, master the details.

2. **Repeat It:** "Practice is the best teacher" (p. 87). Each detail, each task, is repeated in practice to reach mastery. The work is daily, constantly perfecting the details. Little things matter—lots of little things done well.

3. **Learn to Feel It:** The learner, with deep practice, comes to "feel" when he or she has it right, to know when the note is off pitch, to self-correct. The learner picks a target, reaches, falls short, evaluates the gap, and reaches again.

Coyle's Concept of Ignition

Motivation. What propels the learner forward? While "deep practice is a cool, conscious act, ignition is a hot, mysterious burst, an awakening. Where deep practice is an incremental wrapping, ignition works through lightening flashes of image and emotion. . . Where deep practice is all about staggering-baby steps, ignition is about the set of signals and subconscious forces that create our identity; the moments that lead us to say that is who I want to be" (p. 101). Coyle says that ignition does not come from within but from outside. In finding the sweet spot, applying appropriate challenge, the coach triggers the ignition. The coach shows what "could be," sometimes by describing what other similar learners have done, always emphasizing the efficacy of practice.

Coyle's Four Virtues of Coaching

1. **The Matrix:** "The vast grid of task-specific knowledge that distinguishes the best [coaches] and allows them to creatively and effectively respond to a [learner's] efforts" (p. 178; taken from Gallimore). This knowledge is acquired through the coach's experience and practice, enabling the coach to find the sweet spot for each learner, to "see the learning the [learner] is capable of and to go there" (p. 178). The matrix is the coach's "technical knowledge, strategy, experience, and practiced instinct ready to be put to instant use to locate and understand where the [learners] are and where they need to go" (p. 179).

2. **Perceptiveness:** "The eyes are the giveaway. They are usually sharp and warm and are deployed in long, unblinking gazes. . . . Though the gaze can be friendly, it's not about friendship. It's about information. It's about figuring you out" (p. 184). Coyle explains that perceptiveness requires attention to the uniqueness of each learner, to understand the learner in detail, to constantly "check" to see how the learner is responding to coaching. Good coaches are good listeners.

3. **The GPS Reflex:** The coach gives directions, like a GPS, not in a dictatorial tone, but with clarity, with specifics, with sufficient urgency: "Turn left, turn right, go straight ahead." These are "just-in-time directives" that guide the learner in the right direction. The coach probes, nudges, questions, applies "strategic impatience" to guide the learner in a productive direction toward the goal.

4. **Theatrical Honesty:** The coach uses "drama and character" to reach the learners with truth about their performance--candor, expressed with sincerity. Moral honesty. Connecting the learner with the learner's own high standards and expectations. This often means pointing out errors, challenging in a supportive way, helping each learner bring out his or her best. Making the work seem as important as it truly is.

Gradual Release: Learner Independence Achieved Over Time

"A [coach] is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary" (Thomas Carruthers, in Coyle, p. 196).

The coach builds the learner's ability to find the sweet spot, to engage in deep practice, to self-correct, to apply the same criteria for analyzing his or her own performance that the coach has applied. The coach ingrains in the learner this mantra of "criteria and process" through repetition and reinforcement. The learner internalizes the coach's lessons, assumes responsibility for engaging in the process with integrity and high expectation.

Reflections and Application

After reading the summary of *The Talent Code* above, discuss the following questions. Jot down your group's conclusions to briefly and succinctly report out.

1. Based on your experience coaching a Leadership Team, what are two essential lessons that the team must learn to effectively engage in the process of assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and celebrating the accomplishment of indicators of effective professional practice?

   A.

   B.

2. Based on your experience coaching a Leadership Team, what are two essential lessons that the team must learn to effectively communicate expectations to everyone in the district or school community, determine the current level of implementation, and train and support everyone to reach a high level of implementation throughout the district or school?

   A.

   B.

3. What tools does Indistar® provide to facilitate your coaching?

4. How is a continuous improvement process different from annual planning?

5. How does Indistar® facilitate "deep practice"?

6. What three points from Coyle's *The Talent Code*, as summarized above, do you find most useful to you in coaching Leadership Teams?

    A.

    B.

    C.

7. How will you apply each of these three points in your coaching this year?

    A.

    B.

    C.