



---

# 3 STEPS *to* GREAT COACHING

A SIMPLE BUT POWERFUL INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING CYCLE NETS RESULTS

By Jim Knight, Marti Elford, Michael Hock, Devona Dunekack, Barbara Bradley,  
Donald D. Deshler, and David Knight

*“Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance.”*

— Atul Gawande (2011)

**A**tul Gawande’s comment is often used to justify coaching. What people overlook in his comment, however, are the words “done well.” Coaching “done well” can and should dramatically improve human performance. However, coaching done poorly can be, and often is, ineffective, wasteful, and sometimes even destructive.

What, then, is coaching done well? For the past five years, researchers at the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning and at the Instructional Coaching Group in Lawrence, Kansas, have been trying to answer that question by studying what coaches do. The result of that research is an instructional coaching cycle that fosters the kind of improvement Gawande describes.

One coach who uses the instructional coaching cycle is Jackie Jewell from Othello School District in Washington. A participant in one of our research projects, Jewell used the coaching cycle when collaborating with Melanie

Foster, a new elementary teacher in her district. Foster had sought out Jewell for coaching because she felt she needed to improve the way she gave positive attention to students. While Jewell would happily have focused on increasing Foster’s positivity ratio, instead she suggested that it might be worth confirming that encouragement was the right goal.

To start, Jewell recorded one of Foster’s lessons using her iPad and shared the video with her.

After watching the video separately, both agreed that Foster was effective at encouraging students. But Foster saw something else she wanted to work on: student engagement. Her students were not staying focused during small-group activities. Armed with this new insight, she set a goal that students would be on task at least 90% of the time during small-group activities.

Jewell recorded another lesson, which revealed that students were on task about 65% of the time. It also showed that students didn’t fully understand the expectations for their activities. In other words, students were off task because they didn’t know what to do.

Agreeing that Foster needed to set more explicit expectations for small groups, Jewell and Foster created a checklist describing the expectations, and Jewell modeled how to teach them. Foster also decided that she and her learning

assistant would talk to each small group at the start of activities to make sure groups were clear about what they were to do.

Once students understood their tasks, they hit the goal quickly after only a few modifications. Eventually, students were consistently on task 90% or higher, and this showed up in their test scores as well. Before coaching, students received scores on quizzes that were on average about 20%. After coaching, their scores averaged above 70%. Coaching helped Foster teach more effectively, and her improved instruction led to better student learning.

### HOW WE STUDY WHAT COACHES DO

Kansas Coaching Project and Instructional Coaching Group researchers have studied instructional coaching since 1996, focusing in the past five years on the steps coaches move through to help teachers set and hit goals.

In the process, we experimented with a research methodology that we used to identify a process to be studied, assess what works and doesn't work when the practice is implemented, and refine the process based on what is learned during implementation.

To study instructional coaching, Kansas Coaching Project researchers worked with coaches from Beaverton, Oregon, and Othello, Washington. In addition, Instructional Coaching Group researchers conducted more than 50 interviews with coaches around the country. In large part, the instructional coaching cycle is the result of what was learned from these studies and interviews.

Researchers followed these steps:

1. Instructional coaches implement the coaching process.
2. They video record their coaching interactions and their teachers' implementation of the teaching practices.
3. They monitor progress toward their goals.
4. Researchers interview coaches and teachers to monitor progress as they move through the coaching cycle.
5. Researchers meet with coaches two or three times a year (at the end of each coaching cycle) to discuss how the coaching process can be refined or improved.
6. Refinements are made, and the revised coaching model and research process is repeated.

Researchers have moved through this cycle eight times in Beaverton and Othello. Over time, moving through increasingly effective coaching cycles, we have come up with a simple but powerful way to conduct instructional coaching.

### THE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING CYCLE

The coaching cycle that Jewell used involved many steps embedded in three components.

**1. Identify:** Jewell and Foster got a clear picture of reality (by video recording the class), identified a goal (90% time on task), and identified a teaching strategy that would help them hit the goal (teaching expectations).

**2. Learn:** Jewell used a checklist and modeling to make sure

Foster understood how to use the identified strategy.

**3. Improve:** Jewell and Foster monitored progress toward the goal and made modifications to the way the strategy was used until the goal was hit. Here is how the cycle works. (See diagram on p. 10.)



### The coach and teacher collaborate to set a goal and select a teaching strategy to try to meet the goal.

This involves several steps.

First, the coach helps the teacher get a clear picture of reality, often by video recording the teacher's class. Then the coach and teacher identify a change the teacher would like to see in student behavior, achievement, or attitude.

Next, they identify a measurable student goal that will show that the hoped-for change has occurred. For example, a coach and teacher in Othello set the goal of reducing transition time from a four-minute average to a 20-second average. Since there were four transitions per period, hitting the goal added 15 minutes of instructional time to each 50-minute period — giving students 40 more hours of learning over the course of the year.

Other data besides video that might be gathered include student work, observation, and formal and informal evaluation results. Video, however, is quick, cheap, and powerful, and, if teachers only look at student work, they may miss some important aspect of their teaching.

Teachers frequently have an imprecise understanding of what their teaching looks like until they see a video recording of their class. When video is used within coaching, it is best if teacher and coach watch the video separately (Knight, 2014).

After data have been gathered, the coach and teacher meet to identify next steps. Coaches can use these questions to guide teachers to set powerful goals:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how close was the lesson to your ideal?
2. What would have to change to make the class closer to a 10?
3. What would your students be doing?
4. What would that look like?
5. How would we measure that?
6. Do you want that to be your goal?
7. Would it really matter to you if you hit that goal?
8. What teaching strategy will you try to hit that goal?

Once a measurable goal has been established, the instructional coach and teacher choose a teaching strategy that the teacher would like to implement in an attempt to hit the goal. To support teachers during this step, coaches need to have a deep knowledge of a small number of high-yield teaching strategies that address many of the concerns teachers identify. Coaches in Beaverton and Othello learned the teaching strate-

gies in *High-Impact Instruction: A Framework for Great Teaching* (Knight, 2013).

Goals that make the biggest difference for students are powerful, easy, emotionally compelling, reachable, and student-focused.

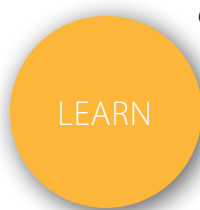
**Powerful.** The most effective goals address important aspects of student learning. Also, powerful goals address ongoing issues in the classroom rather than single events.

**Easy.** Not every goal is easy to reach, and goals are not improved if they are watered down or made less than powerful. However, given the choice between two equally powerful goals, take the one that is easier to reach. An easy-to-achieve goal leads more quickly to meaningful change for students, reinforces teachers' and students' efforts sooner, and frees up time for other tasks, such as setting other improvement goals.

**Emotionally compelling.** If teachers are going to invest a lot of time in changing their teaching to reach important goals, they have to choose goals that matter to them.

**Reachable.** Reachable goals have two characteristics: They are measurable, and they are ones teachers can reach because they have strategies to do so.

**Student-focused.** Usually these are goals that address student achievement, behavior, or attitude. The power of a student-focused goal is that it is objective and, therefore, holds coach and teacher accountable until meaningful improvements are made in students' lives.



**Once teacher and coach set a goal and choose a teaching strategy, the teacher must learn how to implement the strategy. For the coach, this means explaining and modeling teaching strategies.**

When instructional coaches explain teaching strategies, they need to give precise and clear explanations. Coaches are clearer when they use checklists. This doesn't mean coaches prompt teachers to

mindlessly implement every step on a checklist. However, before teachers make adaptations, coaches need to be certain teachers know what they are modifying.

Coaches need to be precise and provisional when they explain teaching practices. They should clearly explain the items on a checklist while also asking teachers how they might want to modify the checklist to best meet students' needs or take advantage of their own strengths as teachers.

One benefit of establishing objective goals as a part of instructional coaching is that goals provide a way to assess whether teachers' modifications improve or damage the teaching strategies they use. If teachers modify strategies and hit their goals, their modifications didn't decrease effectiveness and may have helped students hit their goal. However, if the goal is not met, the coach and teacher can revisit the checklist to see if the strategy needs to be taught differently.

Coaches who explain strategies in precise and provisional ways foster high-quality implementation yet give teachers the freedom to use their professional discretion to modify teaching strategies to better meet students' needs.

The next step is modeling. To understand how to implement teaching strategies, teachers need to see them being implemented by someone else. The coaches from Beaverton, Oregon, found that modeling can occur in at least five ways.

**In the classroom.** Teachers report that they prefer that coaches only model the targeted practice, rather than the whole lesson. While coaches model, collaborating teachers complete checklists as they watch the demonstration. Coaches may ask someone to video record the model so that coach and teacher can review it later.

**In the classroom with no students.** Some teachers prefer that coaches model teaching strategies without students present.

**Co-teaching.** In some cases, such as when a lesson involves content unfamiliar to the coach, coach and teacher co-teach.

**Visiting other teachers' classrooms.** When teachers are learning new procedures or management techniques, they may

### IMPROVEMENT QUESTIONS

DID YOU HIT THE GOAL	
↓	↓
YES	NO
<b>Do you want to:</b>	<b>Do you want to:</b>
A. Continue to refine your use of the practice?	A. Revisit how you teach the new practice?
B. Choose a new goal?	B. Choose a new practice?
C. Take a break?	C. Stick with the practice as it is?

**INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING CHECKLIST**

COACHING BEHAVIOR	OBSERVATION
<b>IDENTIFY</b>	
Teacher gets a clear picture of current reality by watching a video of their lesson or by reviewing observation data. (Video is best.)	
Coach asks the identify questions with the teacher to identify a goal.	
Teacher identifies a student-focused goal.	
Teacher identifies a teaching strategy to use to hit the goal.	
<b>LEARN</b>	
Coach shares a checklist for the chosen teaching strategy.	
Coach prompts the teacher to modify the practice if he or she wishes.	
Teacher chooses an approach to modeling that he or she would like to observe and identifies a time to watch modeling.	
Coach provides modeling in one or more formats.	
Teacher sets a time to implement the practice.	
<b>IMPROVE</b>	
Teacher implements the practice.	
Data is gathered (by teacher or coach, in class or while viewing video) on student progress toward to the goal.	
Data is gathered (by teacher or coach, in class or while viewing video) on teacher's implementation of the practice (usually on the previously viewed checklist).	
Coach and teacher meet to discuss implementation and progress toward the goal.	
Teacher makes modifications until the goal is met.	

choose to visit other teachers' classrooms to see how they implement them.

**Watching video.** Teachers can also see a model of a teaching strategy by watching a video, either from a video sharing website or provided by the coach.



**Instructional coaches monitor how teachers implement the chosen teaching strategy and whether students meet the goal.**

Coaches can accomplish this by video recording classes and sharing the video with collaborating teachers so they can assess for themselves how they implemented the new teaching strategies and whether students have hit the identified goals.

Many goals cannot be seen by looking at video, so coaches may have to gather observation data, or teachers and coaches may have to review assessment data or student work.

Next, coach and teacher get together to talk about how the strategy was implemented, and especially whether students hit the goal. This conversation usually involves these questions:

1. What are you pleased about?
  2. Did you hit the goal?
  3. If you hit the goal, do you want to identify another goal, take a break, or keep refining the current new practice?
  4. If you did not hit the goal, do you want to stick with the chosen practice or try a new one?
  5. If you stick with the chosen practice, how will you modify it to increase its impact? (Revisit the checklist.)
  6. If you choose another practice, what will it be?
  7. What are your next actions?
- (See table on p. 14.)

When teacher and coach meet, they should use these questions to focus their conversation. Many coaches begin by asking teachers what they think went well. Following that, they discuss whether they met the goal.

When teachers reach their goals, coaches ask whether they want to set and pursue other goals or take a break from coaching. When teachers don't reach their goals, they identify changes that need to be made.

Teachers and coaches keep moving forward by modifying the way they use the identified teaching strategies, trying another strategy, or sticking with an identified teaching strategy until they reach the goal. (See table on p. 16.)

**MEASURE OF EFFECTIVENESS**

The instructional coaching cycle is only one element of effective coaching programs. Effective coaches also need professional learning that ensures they understand how to navigate the complexities of helping adults, have a deep understanding

of a comprehensive, focused set of teaching practices, communicate effectively, lead effectively, and work in systems that foster meaningful professional learning (Knight, 2007, 2011, 2013).

However, as important as those factors are, it may be most important that coaches understand how to move through the components of an effective coaching cycle that leads to improvements in student learning.

Instructional coaches who use a proven coaching cycle can partner with teachers to set and reach improvement goals that have an unmistakable, positive impact on students' lives. And that should be the measure of the effectiveness of any coaching program.

**Instructional coaches who use a proven coaching cycle can partner with teachers to set and reach improvement goals that have an unmistakable, positive impact on students' lives.**

**REFERENCES**

**Gawande, A. (2011, October 3).** Personal best. *The New Yorker*. Available at [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/03/personal-best](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/03/personal-best).

**Knight, J. (2007).** *Instructional coaching: A partnership approach to improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Knight, J. (2011).** *Unmistakable impact: A partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Knight, J. (2013).** *High-impact instruction: A framework for great teaching*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Knight, J. (2014).** *Focus on teaching: Using video for high-impact instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

•

**Jim Knight ([jim@instructionalcoaching.com](mailto:jim@instructionalcoaching.com)) is director of the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning and president of the Instructional Coaching Group. Marti Elford ([mdeok@ku.edu](mailto:mdeok@ku.edu)) is a special education lecturer in the University of Kansas Department of Special Education. Michael Hock ([mhock@ku.edu](mailto:mhock@ku.edu)) is director and Devona Dunekack ([ddunekac@ku.edu](mailto:ddunekac@ku.edu)) is project coordinator at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. Barbara Bradley ([barbarab@ku.edu](mailto:barbarab@ku.edu)) is associate professor of reading education at the University of Kansas. Donald D. Deshler ([ddeshler@ku.edu](mailto:ddeshler@ku.edu)) is former director of the Center for Research on Learning. David Knight ([davidkni@usc.edu](mailto:davidkni@usc.edu)) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education. ■**