

CHAPTER 3

How Do I Begin My Work as a Literacy Coach?

- How can I make a good first impression?
- How do I approach the many kinds of teachers in the school?
- What's the best way to introduce myself to the principal, the staff, and the parents?
- What if my offers of help are met with silence?

“**F**irst impressions count”: We’ve all heard this adage, and many of us believe it to one extent or another. In education, first impressions do seem to matter. Think of the chatter among the teachers after the new principal conducts his or her first staff meeting or the effort you have put into making a good impression with parents at back-to-school nights or open houses. As you might guess, it is equally important for literacy coaches to make good first impressions and to start off right. This chapter offers some tips for doing so.

Laying the Groundwork

It will be helpful for you to think about some things before you meet the people with whom you will be working. Some questions to ponder are as follows:

- Which of my personality strengths do I want the staff to see from the start?
- How do I want my role to be understood? For instance, do I want to be seen as a change agent, support system, or resource? (If your response is “all of the above,” then you might choose to prioritize these roles.)
- What is the likeliest negative response I might initially receive from staff members, and what can I do to prepare for it?
- How can I describe my literacy coaching duties in a few words?
- How do I want to spend my first and second weeks on the job?

Your responses to these questions can help you in thinking about the manner in which you might introduce yourself to staff members individually as well as in a group. In addition, they will help you develop language that you can use in explaining your work to others, and they may indicate some trouble spots for which you can already begin preparing.

Meeting the Principal

Sit down with the principal as early as possible and definitely *before* you meet the staff as a group. Prepare notes on the points you want to be sure to make and the issues you want to explore with him or her. I recommend that the list include the following items:

- The job description—review it or plan for developing one if none exists
- Visions of literacy coaching—yours and the principal’s
- History of coaching, professional development, and literacy instruction at the school (if you or the principal are new to the school)
- Your background and beliefs (be brief—support your comments with your resumé or philosophy statement)
- Communications with the principal—how often and in what format (make sure he or she knows that you want to keep him or her informed and involved)
- First steps for meeting staff, students, and parents
- Priorities for the start of the year
- Your plans for individual and small-group meetings
- Resources available (time, money, staff)
- Next meeting time, location, and topics (At this second meeting, you may want to discuss data on student reading achievement that are available and additional data that might be collected.)

Try to avoid gossiping about the staff or appearing interested in working with the principal to manipulate the staff. Demonstrate that you are professional in all aspects of the work you do.

Meeting the Staff

What does the staff want to learn from you when you first meet them? No doubt, some people are thrilled that you are there and can’t wait to hear when you’ll be available to assist them either inside or outside their classrooms. I’ll call these the Ready-to-Go Group. On the other end of the spectrum,

other people probably dread your presence in the building and are attempting to determine how to avoid you or convince you to go somewhere else. I'll call these the Put-on-the-Brakes Group. And the rest of the staff will be someplace in between, perhaps feeling curiosity, cautious enthusiasm, or restricted skepticism. I'll call these the Wait-and-See Group. The characteristics of these groups are outlined in Table 2.

I'd suggest that many new literacy coaches make the mistake of focusing on one of the groups at either end of the spectrum. Some literacy coaches put their attention on the best-case scenario and speak to the entire staff as if they are ready to jump in and work together to create major changes. These literacy coaches sometimes demonstrate their affiliation with the Ready-to-Go Group by referring to accomplishments already achieved by this group that the coaches hope to build on. This is a mistake, because the Wait-and-See Group will become more cautious and the Put-on-the-Brakes Group will become defensive and perhaps angry. Literacy coaches who focus on the individuals or aims of the Ready-to-Go Group make the rest of the staff wary that the coaches already have decided what the staff needs and who the "good" teachers are. This inhibits the staff members' openness to the literacy coaches.

Another danger of focusing on the Ready-to-Go Group is that literacy coaches probably will convey a level of enthusiasm that others on the staff don't feel. If literacy coaches are thinking about the teachers they think are doing the most exciting things in the school, the coaches will talk to the staff excitedly about the prospects for what can happen. Now, I'm not recommending a *lack* of enthusiasm. However, again, an abundance of enthusiasm may make the cautious or resistant members of the staff feel even more hesitant.

On the other hand, new literacy coaches sometimes focus on the Put-on-the-Brakes Group. When this happens, the literacy coaches make the exact opposite mistake from those who focus on the Ready-to-Go Group. Whereas the content of the discussion when focused on the Ready-to-Go Group may be about the changes taking place and soon to take place, the content of the discussion when focused on the Put-on-the-Brakes Group may be both the need to move slowly and the literacy coaches' interest in making everyone feel at ease. In the latter situation, a well-intentioned literacy coach wants even the most hesitant or resistant staff members to feel comfortable, so he or she conveys that he or she is there to do nothing that will be threatening. In the process, the staff may come to believe that the literacy coach is there to support the status quo, perhaps even to make the status quo easier to live with. This will make the literacy coach seem inconsistent or insincere if he or she proposes changes at a later point. Likewise, while the literacy coaches who focus on the Ready-to-Go Group

Table 2
Staff Groups Encountered by New Literacy Coaches



Group	Characteristics	Challenges to Coaching	Tips for Working With This Group*
Ready-to-Go Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eager to try new things ● Enjoy working with colleagues ● Confident—not afraid to talk and ask about what they want to learn ● 10–20% of staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can easily captivate all of the literacy coach’s time ● May tempt the literacy coach to focus too much on them because they are pleasant to work with ● Might intimidate coaches who lack confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give them the same amount of attention as other groups. ● Leverage this group’s enthusiasm by asking them to help you try out practices new to you. ● Use teachers in this group as examples some of the time but not too often. ● Encourage members of this group to share their knowledge and skill with teachers in other schools.
Wait-and-See Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eager to improve but cautious about changes ● Looking for quick signs of success (e.g., “OK, show me”) ● May seek clarifications about roles and expectations ● 60–80% of staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● May be thinking about past initiatives and wondering how literacy coaching is different ● May feel hesitant to stand out from the group in their teaching practices or environment ● May be overwhelmed by day-to-day concerns that prevent them from volunteering for new initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Lead with the need”: Identify and address immediate needs of these teachers to yield speedy results. ● Listen to and learn about past efforts of these teachers; seek to identify ways that literacy coaching should be different. Ask the teachers for help. ● Encourage teachers to work in pairs so they are not trying new things on their own.

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)
Staff Groups Encountered by New Literacy Coaches



Group	Characteristics	Challenges to Coaching	Tips for Working With This Group*
Put-on-the-Brakes Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Want nothing to do with the literacy coach ● Feel satisfied with their work as it is, or so dissatisfied that they don't want anyone to know ● Usually have a history of resisting initiatives ● 10–20% of staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Often exert influence over colleagues that discourages colleagues from participating in literacy coaching ● May be quite vocal ● May be intimidating to the literacy coach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do not avoid these teachers. ● Do not give these teachers undue time or mental energy. ● Support these teachers in an honest and authentic manner. ● Listen to and learn about past experiences and current beliefs and practices of these teachers. ● Take your time, but don't give up.

*Additional ideas for working with different kinds of teachers are found in this and subsequent chapters.

may convey too much enthusiasm, the coaches who focus on the Put-on-the-Brakes Group may convey negativity. They may unintentionally communicate an awareness that they can't expect too much from the staff. Then again, they also may convey fear and hesitation. These messages can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Moreover, literacy coaches who focus too much on the Put-on-the-Brakes Group may find themselves inadvertently placing their attention on the staff members who least want to work with them. (See chapter 8 for more on dealing with teachers who are resistant.)

So, what tone would I suggest for literacy coaches meeting the staff for the first time? As you may have guessed, I advocate a middle-of-the road approach. I think literacy coaches will make the most productive impressions if they honor the range of perspectives and practices that exist within most staffs. These literacy coaches will wisely avoid acknowledging partic-

ular practices or perspectives as the ones they find most exciting to work with. In addition, they will demonstrate enthusiasm for meeting the staff and interest in getting to know them but avoid overwhelming the hesitant staff members with the strength of their introductory comments.

For example, let's say that a literacy coach is introducing him- or herself to the staff at the first faculty meeting in August. Here's a message that may be productive:

Hi. I'd like to give you a sense of who I am and what I'm doing here. I'll give you all a copy of my job description but, in a nutshell, I'm here to help you help your students achieve in literacy and beyond. I'll soon be meeting with you as individuals and grade-level teams in order to discuss what that might look like in your particular instance. Meanwhile, what I want to say is that, while I'm an expert at some things, I know you are, too. I hope we can work together to share one another's expertise. I believe my first job is to listen and learn—to get to know you, your interests, and your concerns. I believe we're all working for the success of the children at this school, and I look forward to being part of that effort.

An introduction such as this establishes that you want to focus on student success, you are not the only expert in the room, you want to get to know the staff before you draw any conclusions, and that you have a sense of what you're about.

I encourage literacy coaches to think of their first interactions with the school staff as the foundation for future work together. Although poor starts can be repaired, strong starts give literacy coaches the advantage of making the staff excited about working with them. From this strong base, literacy coaches can then begin to work with individuals and small groups on the staff.

Meeting Individuals and Small Groups

I would encourage you to formally meet with individual staff members or in grade-level teams as soon as possible. You may be wondering which is better, individual or small-group meetings, and unfortunately, I can't say for sure. I'd encourage you to think about the dynamics of the staff with which you are working as well as your own skills and time. It probably is ideal to meet both with groups and individuals early in the school year, but if that is not possible, you may want to consider the advantages and disadvantages in Table 3. I provide this table because it will help you decide how to meet teachers at the start of the year. However, the same information is useful as you're doing your work throughout the year. Therefore,

Table 3
Individual or Small-Group Introductions



Individual Introductions

Advantages

- You have more time to listen to each person.
- An individual staff member may tell you something that he or she would not be comfortable sharing in a group.
- You and the staff member have a greater opportunity to get to know each other as individuals.
- The meetings are fairly easy to schedule because you only have to coordinate two schedules, yours and that of the staff member.

Disadvantages

- Some individuals are more comfortable voicing potentially controversial perspectives if they know there are others in the group who share their views.
- You don't have the contributions of additional perspectives, which is especially desirable if the individual with whom you are meeting is very negative or narrowly focused.
- Individual meetings with all staff members take more time on your part.

Small-Group Introductions

Advantages

- If held with grade-level teachers, including specialists and resource teachers, such meetings can build a sense of community.
- You can get a sense for how the teams do or don't work together in instructional planning.
- Members of the team will learn how their colleagues feel about important matters.
- Individuals who prefer not to speak up in a whole-staff meeting may feel comfortable speaking up at a small-group meeting and, therefore, will be heard by some of their colleagues.
- Having a few small-group meetings takes less of your time than having individual meetings with all staff members.

Disadvantages

- One or two vocal participants can dominate the discussion.
- A literacy coach without strong group facilitation skills might feel overwhelmed by a highly vocal small group.
- Small-group meetings often are difficult to schedule because they require a shared planning time or a time outside the regular school day when all group members can meet.

refer back to it as you read chapters 6 and 7 on coaching individuals and groups, respectively.

You might ask your principal for advice, or go to the staff and ask how they prefer to meet you initially. No matter which approach you use at the start of the year, include both individual and small-group meetings in your literacy coaching duties as the year continues.

The First Interaction. The first face-to-face meeting with teachers, either individually or in small groups, often is the point when literacy coaches damage their positive first impressions. Here are some common mistakes to avoid:

- In a grade-level meeting, the literacy coach asks the teachers what they'd like to do differently. The coach is met with silence.
- At the beginning of a conversation with a teacher, the literacy coach outlines possible things he or she can do for the teacher—demonstration lessons, class observations, and instructional coplanning. The teacher says, “Thanks, but I don’t need any help right now.”
- The literacy coach places a sign-up sheet in the office, listing the times when he or she is available to observe in classrooms. The sheet remains blank for several weeks.

These scenarios represent unintended blunders on the part of well-intentioned literacy coaches. What happens in each scenario is that the literacy coach makes an assumption about the teachers with whom he or she is working, and the teachers deliver a clear message that the assumption is wrong: They don’t want to do things differently, they don’t want the literacy coach’s offer of help, and they definitely don’t want to be observed in their classrooms by the literacy coach.

I don’t want to stereotype *all* teachers with these scenarios. In most schools, there will be a couple teachers who find such offers of help appealing, but most teachers won’t. This seems to be just a reflection of human nature. After all, who wants to volunteer when someone shows up to provide unsolicited assistance? This approach to literacy coaching is sort of like selling merchandise door to door: The literacy coach shows up and tries to “get a foot in the door” by “making an offer you can’t refuse.” Most people are pretty wary of such offers.

There are other reasons, too, why teachers may want to avoid the literacy coach’s offer of help. Teaching is a profession about which everyone has an opinion, and teachers are routinely being told what they should do. In addition, teachers often have felt powerless in their schools. Teaching is a gendered profession, meaning that it has been highly influenced by

traditional perceptions of male and female roles. In the case of teaching, perceptions of appropriate female behavior can still be found in assumptions about appropriate teacher behavior, despite the great number of males who are also in the profession (Biklen, 1995). One of the characteristics of such a profession is that its members are vulnerable to being told what to do by others. Moreover, teaching is notorious for being a profession in which individuals do their work in the isolation of their classrooms (despite the fact that there are 25 or 30 students there) and in which they like to be left alone.

So what should a literacy coach do? Frame the work ahead in terms of what teachers want to do for their students. In this way, a teacher doesn't feel singled out as in need of being "fixed." Rather, the teacher and literacy coach focus on how to help the students. Here's the start-up question that works well for me:

When you think about the kind of reading and writing you want your students to do, the kind of literate lives you want students to have, the kind of classroom you want to have, the kind of teaching you want to be able to do, what gets in your way?

I think this question (which I'll refer to as The Question from this point on) works because it avoids any implication that something is wrong with the teacher. In addition, while it does make an assumption, it makes one that is virtually always accurate: Teachers want their students to succeed and have an idea of what kind of learning and teaching will lead to that success. Various teachers may disagree about what those paths to success are or how they can gauge success, but they do want students to succeed. In addition, The Question focuses on the limitations to success "out there," not within the teacher. You might think this is naïve (e.g., what if the teacher needs to change?), but I'd suggest it is the only way you can develop trust and is an excellent way to start a conversation with a teacher. A statement that sums up this concept of acceptance before change is a well-known quote usually attributed to Carl Rogers: "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

Meeting Students

Literacy coaches frequently are in classrooms, so it is important that the students get to know them. I'd encourage you to ask each classroom teacher for permission to read a book to his or her students in the first two weeks of the school year. By doing this, you will accomplish several things: First, the students will become familiar with you. This process will be helped if

you say a few words about who you are and why you are working in the school before you read to the students. Second, you will provide one more reading experience for students. Third, you will get a feel for each class. Fourth, you will let the teachers get a feel for you. Finally, you will be of service at the start of the year before your more intense coaching duties may have begun. The odds are that some teachers will not have time to meet with you for any serious work in the first week or two of the school year anyway.

I'd encourage you to make yourself visible and accessible to students throughout the school year as well. Attend assemblies, visit the lunchroom, and show an interest in the students. One strategy that has worked for me is to tell the students when I introduce myself that I would like to share a secret signal they can use to indicate that they've been reading. I tell them it will be the thumbs-up signal, and when I see them in the hall or elsewhere, if they have been reading, they can quietly give me this signal. I make sure to make the signal back to the students as well. In this way, I communicate the expectation that reading is something that is a frequent activity and something to be proud of. This signal also gives the students a way to greet me without causing a lot of noise. Of course, this practice would probably seem silly to middle school students. As an alternative, you might merely engage middle school readers in informal conversations about what they've been reading. To create such conversations, you might routinely chat with students in the lunchroom or hallways. Carrying an interesting book that appeals to middle school students is a good way to begin such discussions.

Literacy coaches are typically very comfortable interacting with students. However, as they become busy working with teachers, they may struggle to find time to interact meaningfully with children. Moreover, if the coach is new to the building, the students may not recognize the literacy coach when they see her. By introducing herself to students at the beginning, the literacy coach begins to get to know the students and starts to develop routines that will enable ongoing interaction throughout the school year.

Meeting the Parents

As you plan the start of your literacy coaching duties at a new site, include plans for meeting students' parents. You may think of this as a lower priority task; however, literacy coaches need parents' support, and they have expertise to share with parents. Moreover, a growing body of research is demonstrating the value of bridging children's home and school literacies

(see Appendix B for more information). If you as a literacy coach want to support such an effort, you will be wise to get to know the parents at your school and the literacies they possess.

There are easy ways to introduce yourself to parents, such as a note in a school newsletter or an appearance at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting. I'd encourage you to go beyond these steps, though, to create opportunities for *meaningful* interaction with as many parents as possible. For example, offer evening Read-a-Thons for all families. Have families rotate to four stations over a two-hour period. These stations might include a Guest Reader station (featuring the principal, the mayor, area sport figures, and local celebrities), a Silent Reading station (to which families can bring pillows, sleeping bags, and stuffed animals to make it a cozy experience), a Film station (featuring a film based on a popular children's book), and a Buddy Reading station (at which kids read with each other and the adults have a short session with you).

Another way to introduce yourself to parents is to arrange a special reading-related program for each grade level. Include the students in the program, and provide a motivation for them to get their parents to the event, which could be scheduled during the school day or in the evening. The event might include opportunities for students to read their own writing to their parents or to perform a play based on a book they have read. Those in attendance might receive a take-home writing kit or engage in a make-your-own-bookmark art activity. When the event includes students and enables them to have fun, they are motivated to attend and will encourage their parents to be there.

These are just a few ideas for making yourself visible and accessible to parents. Wise coaches will develop two or three strategies that they'll regularly use to make themselves visible and accessible to parents.

If You Previously Have Been Part of the Staff

Special challenges face literacy coaches who previously have been a part of the staff. Typically, when this occurs, the literacy coaches were classroom teachers until the point when they became coaches. The challenges accompanying this change are rooted in the reality that, if you've been teaching in the school, you've probably established affiliations with some staff members but not others, and you've probably provided the staff with at least some idea of what you believe about literacy, teaching, and learning. These are not bad things to do. Whether you are a literacy coach or a classroom teacher, you are entitled to have close colleagues and to have beliefs and preferences. However, as a new literacy coach who has previously taught

at the same school, you are not really “new.” In other words, many staff members probably have formed opinions of you already.

My best advice is to be consistent and honest. As far as consistency goes, continue to be the person you have been. Don’t suddenly change your views or become cool to your on-staff friends. This will lead to distrust for you among many staff members. As for honesty, speak up when you are in a situation where you have previously voiced an opinion other than the group’s or other than the one you now must consider as a literacy coach and instructional leader.

For example, let’s say that you’ve been vocal about the need for students to have access to materials that are not leveled when they are reading for pleasure, inquiry, or in the content areas. (This is in opposition to a growing trend in thinking that students should always read at what is perceived to be their grade level.) If the staff is discussing the value and use of leveled books, don’t pretend to be neutral on the subject. Instead, acknowledge your previously aired views and then affirm your interest in hearing and considering others’ views as well. You might say the following:

As many of you know, I’ve been vocal in my support of children reading non-leveled books during parts of the day. I know that some of you agree with that position and some of you don’t. My job now is not to make sure that my viewpoint wins but to make sure that we use an effective process for dealing with this disagreement. I promise to do my best to be a fair leader and consider all perspectives on this issue.

Then—do exactly what you said!

Repairing a Poor Start

Don’t panic if you already have started your literacy coaching job and you have not had a smooth beginning. Some Buddhist teachers say, “Everything is workable,” and I think that applies here. You can still apply the ideas in this book. However, if they contradict what you’ve said or done previously, you need to be open about that discrepancy. Admit that you started out thinking differently and have decided that a different approach might be better.

It can be difficult to admit you’ve made mistakes, and it can be humbling to ask your colleagues to give you another try. But think about it: Your job will only get more difficult if you continue down a path that is ineffective. In addition, mature individuals on the staff will respect you for your willingness to reflect upon your actions and to continue growing. In fact, isn’t that what you are hoping the teachers will do themselves?

Conclusion

A good start will serve you well as a literacy coach. It will help you establish yourself as a positive, likeable, and trustworthy individual. Moreover, it will give others a sense of why you are there and what you hope to do in your job. It is an investment in the rest of the school year (or beyond) because it gives you a solid starting point of mutual respect and openness, as well as a sense of direction. This strong start, like all work of literacy coaches, requires strong personal qualities. The following chapter will help you to understand and enhance such qualities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR LITERACY COACHES

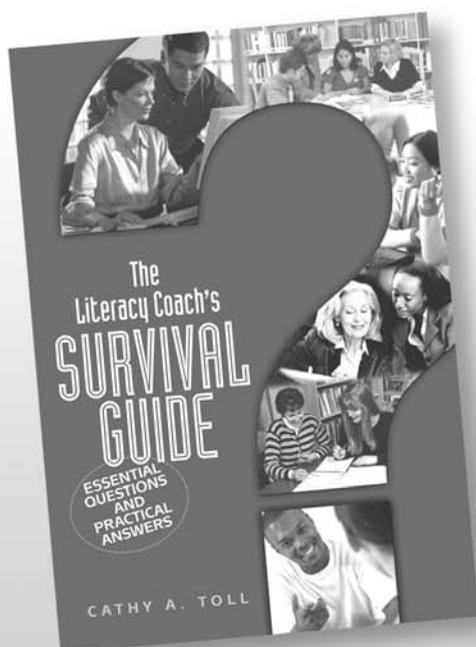
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