

Reading First Coaching: A Guide for Coaches and Reading First Leaders

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Contents

Section 1: Reading First and Coaching.....	1
Overview.....	1
Information About the Reading First Program.....	2
Role of the Reading First Coach.....	4
Skills of the Reading First Coach.....	5
Section 2: Overview of Coaching.....	6
What Is Coaching?	6
Coaching and Professional Development.....	7
Coaching Skills	8
Coaching in Education.....	8
Value of Coaching to Improve Literacy Instruction	9
Section 3: One-to-One Coaching.....	10
Overview.....	10
Phase One: The Foundation.....	10
Phase Two: The Learning Loop.....	12
Phase Three: Forwarding the Action.....	14
Section 4: Coaching Groups.....	17
Group Coaching Defined.....	17
Group Coaching Skills.....	18
Coaching Difficult Situations	22
Section 5: Coaches as Change Agents	24
Perspectives on Change	24
Conclusion.....	29
References	30

Section 1: Reading First and Coaching

This section discusses the following topics:

- Overview
- Information about the Reading First Program
 - Overall Intent
 - Instructional Components
 - Professional Development Components of the Reading First Program
 - Reading First Guidance on Coaching
- Role of the Reading First Coach
- Skills of the Reading First Coach

Overview

Educators today are continuously searching for tools for excellence. Systemwide aspects of school improvement include: accountability through testing; data inspection by faculties to look for weakness in student understanding; increased professional development opportunities. These efforts help to inform faculty teams of student progress at an aggregate level. Yet we know that the difference in student learning is made in the individual classrooms and that teachers are a key change agent in this process.

In the past, the improvement of student performance and teaching practices has often been left to short-term inservice development and teacher ingenuity. Consequently, teachers have been exposed to new approaches, attempted to become sufficiently comfortable with them, and implement them in the classroom without support. Two of the biggest flaws in this thinking are: (a) the absence of follow-up, which Michael Fullan calls the “greatest single problem in contemporary professional development” (as cited in Leggett & Hoyle, 1987, p. 16), and (b) the rarity of classroom support (in the form of another educational professional) to encourage and assist teachers with the implementation new approaches. Consequently, teachers encounter great ideas and acknowledge the need for implementation, but often continue using the techniques that are familiar to them.

Reading First, which is “dedicated to helping states and local school districts establish high-quality, comprehensive reading instruction for all children in kindergarten through third grade” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), provides an opportunity to address both of these issues by requiring professional development that will prepare K–3 teachers to teach the essential components of reading instruction.

Briefly, Reading First:

- Identifies five essential elements of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension.
- Requires reading programs to be based on scientifically based reading research.

- Requires classroom-based screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring, and outcome assessments for reading.
- Provides funding for professional development at the state, district, and school levels.

According to *Guidance for the Reading First Program* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a), “professional development must be ongoing, continuous activity, and not consist of ‘one-shot’ workshops or lectures. Delivery mechanisms should include the use of coaches and other teachers of reading who provide feedback as instructional strategies are put into practice” (p. 26). The long-term presence of a Reading First coach brings with it ongoing follow-up to other forms of professional development, a safe environment for educators to try new techniques, and an opportunity for honest feedback and collaboration with peers.

This guide has been created as a resource to support those who are serving as Reading First coaches in schools across the United States. It has been designed to assist coaches in their professional growth and to provide information on the roles assigned to coaches. In addition, it is designed to assist those who support and supervise coaches. The focus is not on content of reading instruction but rather on the processes of reading coaching. However, later in this section, a summary is provided on the five elements of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel. These elements are the basis for all Reading First instructional designs.

Information About the Reading First Program

Overall Intent

The purpose of Reading First, part of the NCLB Act, is to “ensure that all children in America learn to read well by the end of third grade” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b, p. 1) by providing:

Assistance to State educational agencies and local educational agencies in establishing reading programs for students in kindergarten through grade 3 that are based on scientifically based reading research, to ensure that every student can read at grade level or above not later than the end of grade 3 (NCLB Act, 2002, Title 1, Part B, Subpart 1, Section 1201).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.):

Building on a solid foundation of research, the [Reading First] program is designed to select, implement, and provide professional development for teachers using scientifically based reading programs, and to ensure accountability through ongoing, valid and reliable screening, diagnostic, and curriculum-based assessment.

The NCLB Act (2002, Title I, Part B, Subpart 1, Section 1202) states that funds from Reading First grants can be used for the following purposes:

- Selecting and administering screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments.
- Selecting and implementing a learning system or program of reading instruction based on scientifically based reading research.
- Procuring and implementing instructional materials.
- Providing professional development for teachers of kindergarten through grade 3, and special education teachers of kindergarten through grade 12.
- Collecting and summarizing data.

Instructional Components

The National Reading Panel identified five essential components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and text comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000). These components have been identified as the cornerstones of Reading First instructional programs. In addition, the National Reading Panel noted that systematic, explicit instruction is more effective for teaching reading strategies than other forms of instruction.

Professional Development Components of the Reading First Program

Professional development in Reading First enables teachers to focus on the following:

- Becoming knowledgeable about scientifically based reading research.
- Participating in professional learning experiences that are aligned with the chosen instructional program as well as the state academic standards.
- Understanding the instruction and assessment of the five essential components of reading instruction, how they are related, in what order they should be taught, and the underlying structure of the English language.
- Becoming knowledgeable about the educational needs of children who have difficulty learning to read and learning how to administer and interpret assessments of student progress.
- Effectively managing their classroom to maximize the students' time on task. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a)

Teachers who receive high-quality professional development opportunities—such as coaching from a knowledgeable peer, vertically or horizontally designed instructional discussion groups, or job-embedded learning opportunities—are better equipped to improve students' reading achievement.

Reading First Guidance on Coaching

Guidance for the Reading First Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a) classifies coaching as one of the “practices and strategies for professional development that should be evident in an effective reading program” (p. 7). Each state defines and implements reading coaching according to its own Reading First plan. In addition to coaching responsibilities and leadership roles defined by the state plan, local education agencies (LEAs) and districts typically outline a detailed proposal for the role of the coach. One common requirement is that the Reading First coach has the responsibility to support the implementation of state policies concerning instructional programs, instructional materials, strategies and assessments.

For more information about state requirements for Reading First visit the *Reading First Subgrant Technical Assistance* Web Site at www.ncrel.org/rf. This website, designed to support state education agencies in the development of their competitive local subgrants, provides detailed information on Reading First, including available state plans.

Role of the Reading First Coach

In the implementation of a Reading First plan, reading coaches are essential support for professional development efforts, and, along with the principal, are key leaders in program implementation. Coaches must be knowledgeable about reading research and teaching methodologies. In addition to this expertise, a firm understanding of the design of Reading First at state, district and school levels is necessary in order to lead achievement in their schools.

The role of the Reading First coach includes these duties:

- Provide scientifically based professional development opportunities that are tailored to the needs of the Reading First staff.
- Demonstrate effective strategies for implementing the five essential elements of reading instruction.
- Explain *why* certain strategies, assessments, materials, and organizational structures are effective.
- Expertise in the full range of assessments required for Reading First (screening assessments, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring assessments, and outcome assessments)
- Provide single-topic mini-presentations on needed strategies
- Plan and deliver large group workshops
- Serve as a resource for new materials and ideas.
- Consult with teachers on a one-to-one basis or facilitate teams of teachers in identifying areas of need and in learning strategies, assessments, classroom organizational and management practices, and program requirements.
- Seek ways to act as a bridge between the administration and the teachers in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating the school’s reading program.

Skills of the Reading First Coach

In addition, the Reading First literacy coach possesses the following skills:

- Look for the positive in each interactive opportunity.
- Display strong listening skills, questioning abilities, and confidentiality.
- Demonstrate a willingness to embrace the teacher/coach model as a way to address professional development needs.
- Actively support the individual teacher's learning—acknowledging that the individual teachers do not come with the same professional development needs.
- Coach individuals and groups to identify their strengths, areas of potential growth, and steps to take in improving instruction.
- Provide instruction and coaching that honors the diversity of students and teachers and uses knowledge of that diversity to maximize effectiveness.
- Communicate appropriately with the principal, Reading First coordinator, and others responsible for the success of the program.

The Reading First component of NCLB provides an opportunity for schools to implement a different approach to traditional professional development for K–3 teachers. The coach's role in the creation of a community of learners is to guide the community toward their own professional growth and to serve as an example of such growth both in content knowledge and processes.

Section 2: Overview of Coaching

The following topics are included in Section 2:

- What Is Coaching?
- Coaching and Professional Development
- Coaching Skills
- Coaching in Education
- Value of Coaching to Improve Literacy Instruction

What Is Coaching?

We define a reading coach to be one who helps others to recognize their instructional knowledge and strengths, and supports them in their learning and application of new knowledge and instructional practices. Coaching promotes *job-embedded learning*, which is described by Wood & McQuarrie (1999) as “one of the most promising new approaches to professional growth in education” (p. 10). Coaching provides ongoing, sustainable support to teachers. Depending on the needs of teachers and the goals of the school, coaching can be provided one on one, in small groups, by grade level, by department, or by skills level. It is this versatile, flexible, and “just-in-time” learning that makes the coaching model so promising.

The coaching process is continuous, with each new achievement forming a platform for the next challenge (Eaton & Johnson, 2001). Flaherty (1999) suggests that a coach is more than an accountability partner who supports someone in reaching a performance goal or a disciplinarian who changes someone’s unwanted action; rather, coaching occurs in a large frame that includes the components of long-term excellent performance, self-correction, and self-generation. He describes coaching as a process “that allows for people to change, to become more competent, and to become more excellent at performance” (p. 21).

Coaching and Professional Development

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has developed standards for effective staff development (online at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm).

The concept of reading coaching is consistent with the following NSDC (2001) standards:

- Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.
- Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.
- Requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.
- Applies knowledge about human learning and change.
- Provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

In addition, the most effective reading coaching addresses these NSDC (2001) standards:

- Uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.
- Uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact.
- Prepares educators to apply research to decision making.
- Uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.
- Prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students; create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments; and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.
- Deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.
- Provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

Thus, reading coaching has the potential to provide professional development that is consistent with all NSDC standards for effective professional development.

Ultimately, the job-embedded coaching model positively influences student achievement, because it aids teachers in the development of new strategies and substantially increases the amount of time that teachers spend in their own professional development.

Coaching Skills

Coaches need the knowledge and resources to work with teachers in making decisions and solving problems related to literacy learning. For coaching to be effective, it must offer a high level of content knowledge, take into account the context in which learning is taking place, address the goals of the classroom and school, and involve individual teachers in determining the direction their learning is to go (Joyce, Murphy, Showers, & Murphy, 1989). In summary, a literacy coach's strengths should fall into three areas: knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics.

A coach:

- Has knowledge of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and standards.
- Has knowledge of curriculum-driven support materials and technology-enhanced resources for grade levels, subject areas, and student needs.
- Possesses the characteristic of being a good listener, which includes asking open-ended questions and using pauses effectively.
- Possesses the characteristic of being trustworthy, which includes honoring confidentiality and being consistent in language and behavior.
- Has skills in collaborating with others and being a team player.
- Has skills in being a good note taker, collector of data, and researcher.
- Possesses teaching skill that can be used to model lessons and strategies.
- Uses knowledge, skills, and characteristics to provide feedback and new ideas for various situations.

When learning partners are well matched in knowledge and experience, the ebb and flow of professional growth can be effortless. However, this is not always the case in coaching; therefore, coaches need many tools to establish productive relationships.

Coaching in Education

The value of coaching in education has been well documented. Researchers Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1985; 1988) pioneered work in this area by demonstrating that coaching is a positive and essential component of effective professional development. Joyce et al. (1989) demonstrated that student achievement increased when coaching was part of a professional development program. In addition, Joyce and Showers (1982) found that coaching helps schools staff members to build community and develop a shared language.

Value of Coaching to Improve Literacy Instruction

In literacy education specifically, the following studies stand out as support for reading coaching:

- Coaching has been shown to have a positive effect on student achievement in a large-scale evaluation of early literacy learning (Foundation for California Early Literacy Learning [CELL], 2001). The CELL model includes a literacy coordinator in each school who supports the implementation of the CELL frameworks for literacy instruction through coaching and mentoring other teachers.
- Lyons and Pinnell (1999) found a connection between literacy coaching and increased achievement in reading and writing. They also found that teachers and coaches who work together do so as colleagues, engaging in collaborative problem-solving and inquiry-oriented conversation (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).
- Norton (2001) reported positive results of the statewide Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) on the literacy of seventh-grade students. The ARI includes a strong literacy coaching component and led to a significant improvement in student test scores.
- In San Diego, reading specialists provided half-time peer coaching and half-time student tutoring in three high-poverty schools. As a result, student literacy achievement increased markedly (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003).

Section 3: One-to-One Coaching

Linda Tarr, Contributing Author

The topics included in this section are:

- Overview
- Phase One: The Foundation
 - Understanding the Coaching Process
 - Creating a Safe Environment
 - Establishing the Relationship
 - Setting Mutual Goals and Outcomes
- Phase Two: The Learning Loop
 - Nonjudgmental Observation
 - Assessing the Situation
 - Recognizing Strengths
 - Listening and Use of Silence
 - Questioning
- Phase Three: Forwarding the Action
 - Authenticity and Integrity
 - Providing Resources and Ideas
 - Setting Goals and Getting Commitment
 - Providing Feedback
 - Coaching Yourself Out of a Job

Overview

Professional development programs that use the coaching model depend on the effectiveness of the coach in creating a learning-rich environment that is nonjudgmental and supportive in nature. Crane and Patrick (2002) designed three distinct phases to coaching: The foundation, the learning loop, and forwarding the action.

Phase One: The Foundation

The foundation is the most important phase of coaching because it provides the groundwork for a successful coaching relationship. Coaches may need to invest extra time and effort in this phase in order to develop the building blocks of trust and open communication. In the process, coaches provide a clear understanding of the expectations, outcomes, and nature of coaching, and teachers provide information about their strengths, needs, and concerns. This is the beginning of shared trust and shared focus.

Coaches who have the skills necessary for this phase will be able to lead the relationship forward and move coaching to the next levels. When this foundation is not in place, the coaching relationship can become dysfunctional, and one or both partners may feel frustrated.

The skills used in the foundation phase are:

- Understanding the coaching process.
- Creating a safe environment.
- Establishing a trusting relationship.
- Setting mutual goals and outcomes.

Understanding the Coaching Process

Teachers need to be assured that the coach is not a supervisor but rather a champion, cheerleader, and advocate. In general, teachers have been conditioned to expect professional development to consist primarily of “experts” who tell them what to do. Coaching is a very different approach because it encourages teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and development. To avoid a frustrating experience, coaches should clarify their approach from the start. At the beginning of the coaching relationship, they might consider having a dialogue both with the teachers in a large group setting and with individual teachers.

Creating a Safe Environment

The success of coaching is dependent on the coach’s skill in creating a favorable environment. In such an environment, participants feel safe in making mistakes, experimenting without fear of reprisal, and understanding that innovation is encouraged and supported. Asking questions is important and comfortable for both participants. Creating an overall school environment that is safe requires the active support from administrators and an understanding of the coaching process by everyone involved.

Establishing the Relationship

Building rapport and trust is a key to the coaching relationship. Without trust, the relationship will not support the changes teachers attempt to make. This is not to imply that every coach must have a deep personal relationship or even fondness for every teacher. However, it does imply that the coach and teachers must have a strong foundation of professional trust and openness. This takes time—more time in some situations than others.

Setting Mutual Goals and Outcomes

Coaches and the teachers with whom they work need to understand the intended outcomes of coaching in general and the methods for reaching them. At this stage, the process does not refer to the individual teachers’ goals and outcomes for their work, rather, the outcome of the coaching relationship. It is difficult to know whether a goal or outcome has been met if it has not been clearly described and understood by both parties.

According to Flaherty (1999), coaches make some mistakes in this process, including these:

- Presuming a level of commitment that the teacher doesn’t have.
- Acting as if no commitment is necessary from the coach.
- Failing to state in a mutually clear way the intended outcomes and the potential obstacles to their realization.

Phase Two: The Learning Loop

In one-on-one coaching, coaches work with individual teachers to understand the current situation, agree on goals or outcomes, assess the gap between the current situation and the goals or outcomes, and develop an accountability system for determining whether goals or outcomes have been met. Along the way, the coach and teacher establish a two-way learning process in which both learn the values, beliefs, attitudes, and unique perspectives of the other. The strengths and talents, as well as limitations of each individual and of the situation, are assessed and taken into account as well.

The skills used in the learning-loop phase include:

- Nonjudgmental observation.
- Assessing the situation.
- Recognizing strengths.
- Listening and use of silence.
- Questioning.

Nonjudgmental Observation

Teachers are much more likely to listen to and respect the coach's suggestions and advice when they know that the coach is being nonjudgmental. This nonjudgmental attitude is the foundation for building trust and creating a safe environment as well. In addition, teachers can learn how to conduct nonjudgmental observations of students from the coach's modeling of such observation.

Nonjudgmental observations reflect what has been perceived by the senses, without additional information from the mind of the observer. For instance, a nonjudgmental observation is "Johnny turned his chair over before he answered your question in class." From a judgmental perspective, the same incident might be described this way: "Johnny was so anxious to be recognized by you that in his eagerness to show you that he knew the answer, he noisily turned his chair over."

Assessing the Situation

As the saying goes, "If you don't know where you are, you won't know where you're going." When a teacher and coach work together to assess the current situation, they develop an understanding of "where they are." By using questions, nonjudgmental observations, and reflection, the coach and teacher can develop a clear picture of the current situation. At first, the coach may take the lead in this process, or the coach may even have to steer a teacher into this process if the teacher is in the habit of jumping to conclusions or trying any new practice without reference to the current situation. In time, though, the teacher as well as the coach will become skilled in assessing the situation.

Recognizing Strengths

For some teachers, the literacy coach is the only person they speak to who focuses on the positives of the work they do. Coaches need to find out what is right about a teacher's work and situation and serve as a mirror to help the teacher see that as well. In this way, both parties identify strengths on which they can build.

When a teacher is struggling, a coach may find it difficult to recognize strengths. In this case, the coach might say, “That sounds like a very tricky situation, and what you are describing sounds like you did the best you could with what you had at that moment.” Coaches should be careful not to hand out compliments but to report what was observed, which reflected a strength. When a coach states an observation rather than a compliment, it is much easier for the teacher to believe and hold on to. For instance, when a coach is observing and states, “The kids all wanted to talk at once, and you gave them clear and helpful directions for taking turns,” it is more productive than saying “You are excellent at classroom management!”

Listening and Use of Silence

Listening is one of the most fundamental action skills in the coaching process. Most individuals believe they are already good listeners, but listening at the coaching level is a much more advanced skill than everyday listening. To listen deeply, coaches learn to turn off their own internal dialogue and be completely present with the teacher being coached. Hargrove (2002) provides a description of what he terms a committed listener:

A committed listener helps people think more clearly, work through unresolved issues, and discover the solutions they have inside them. This often involves listening beyond what people are saying to the deeply held beliefs and assumptions that are shaping their actions. (p. 57)

All of coaching hinges on listening. Effective coaches listen for what is important to teachers—their values, goals, dream, emotions, motivations, and hindrances—and for what is *not* said as well as what is said. These coaches listen to the pauses, tones, expressions, sighs, and silences. To listen fully, coaches must “clear the decks” of judgments and evaluations. They must also be aware of their own beliefs, biases, filters, and frames of reference and how those may inhibit their ability to listen fully.

Accomplished coaches actively seek to be fully present and make every effort to hear all that is being said. An 80/20 rule is useful: listen for 80 percent of the time and speak for 20 percent. Teachers who feel heard will share more. In addition, when teachers hear their own perspectives aloud, they may discover their own solutions.

Coaches also need to be adept at being silent. If the coach is quiet, the teacher will often fill the void. Prolonging silence a bit will often elicit more information or the “gem” of an insight from the teacher.

Questioning

Learning to question rather than using “telling” techniques can be a difficult challenge for coaches. A goal in coaching is for teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and growth. Questioning is a tool that will help them do so. Knowing the right question to ask at the right time is the mark of a talented coach.

Questioning should follow the interests and direction of thought of the teacher being coached. An effective questioning technique is to use language that reflects what the teacher said. For instance, a coach might say, “I’m curious. When you said that the students didn’t use ‘fix-up’ strategies, did you mean that they didn’t know when they needed to pause and correct what they had read or that they didn’t know what to do when they paused in order to make the corrections?” Or, a coach might say, “Let’s clarify this. What does ‘successful reading’ mean to you?” Some coaches create a list of key questions that they keep nearby in coaching situations to refer to when stuck.

Coaches also benefit from asking themselves questions in order to forward their own growth and development as coaches. Flaherty (1999) suggests these questions:

- What am I learning about myself and others in coaching?
- What makes my coaching most potent?
- What in coaching makes me most uncomfortable? (The most growth probably can happen here.)
- What am I discovering about the relationships I form with people?
- What ideas of mine are being challenged in the coaching program?
- What mood of mine seems to work best in the coaching program?
- Am I modeling what I am coaching? If not, how am I justifying this? (p. 148)

Phase Three: Forwarding the Action

Forwarding the action includes:

1. Setting goals for learning.
2. Taking the action.
3. Supporting that action with reflections and additional modifications based on observation and data collected.

These steps are exemplified by a long-distance runner who (1) works with her coach to develop a plan for how fast she will run a race and at what time she will complete each mile (goal setting); (2) runs the race with the assistance of the coach, who occasionally flashes the actual time on a card from the sidelines (action); and (3) after the race, sits down with the coach to evaluate her time, determine what helped and what hindered her speed and endurance, and develop a plan for the next race (reflection and modifications using data). In a similar manner, a literacy coach assists a teacher in developing a plan for meeting a goal, implementing the plan, and evaluating afterward how well the goal was met and how to do things differently the next time.

Some educators believe that coaching is for people who can’t “do it on their own.” As the example of the runner illustrates, individuals who accomplish their goals in many fields benefit from the assistance of others. This is a point that literacy coaches will need to explain and demonstrate repeatedly so that, over time, teachers will see that coaching

supports the growth of the strongest teachers as well as or better than the growth of teachers who are less skilled.

The skills used in the forwarding-the-action phase include:

- Authenticity and integrity.
- Providing resources and ideas.
- Setting goals and getting commitments.
- Providing feedback.
- Coaching yourself out of a job.

Authenticity and Integrity

Effective coaches approach the coaching relationships as themselves, neither as “experts” nor as their idea of what they “should” be. They know their strengths and talents as well as the areas in which they want to improve. They understand their biases and the perspectives they bring to coaching, teaching, and literacy instruction. These coaches acknowledge who they are and approach the coaching situation as authentically as possible. In the process, they model authenticity for others as well.

One of the most important values in coaching is integrity. Coaches with integrity are honest, consistent, and reliable. The teachers who work with such coaches trust that they will display the same basic characteristics, values, and attitudes from day to day. These coaches will maintain standards of professionalism in all that they do.

Providing Resources and Ideas

Coaches provide many opportunities for teachers to reflect and to attempt to find their own solutions. However, at key points, coaches also make suggestions and share their own reflections. The most effective coaches will ask permission before offering such assistance and then will offer options rather than “solutions.” For instance, a coach who has listened to a teacher express dismay over her guided reading instruction might say, “Would you mind if I share something I read the other day?” Then, if the teacher agrees, the coach might say, “I read about some teachers who identify particular instructional needs, rather than instructional levels, for students and then form guided reading groups according to those needs. Would that be an option you’d like to consider?”

Successful coaches are not attached to any one “solution” to teachers’ concerns. Rather, they remain open to possibilities as they listen carefully to various teachers’ situations and efforts and assist teachers in reflecting, analyzing, and using data to continue to refine practices and seek new directions.

Setting Goals and Getting Commitment

The processes discussed so far, such as listening, questioning, and suggesting possibilities, will lead coaches and teachers to set goals together. Goals must be clear, specific, and able to be assessed. Setting benchmarks along the way will help teachers gauge their progress and give coaches guidelines for providing suggestions and asking questions.

Coaches can help teachers keep moving forward toward their goal by asking good questions. For instance, coaches can ask:

- How does this activity lead toward your goal?
- What will your goal look like or sound like when you accomplish it?
- If you could attain any solution, regardless of time or money, what would you do?
- Based on your observations and ongoing student assessments, how would you like to modify your plan to meet your goal?

In addition to helping teachers set goals, coaches can help teachers stick to those goals. A tool to guide this commitment is a written plan of action that includes a timeline, steps to take, resources needed, and a realistic accountability system. Effective coaches find the right balance between honoring a teacher’s own pace and gently prodding that teacher to keep moving forward.

Providing Feedback

Feedback is important for moving forward. Coaches can accelerate teachers’ learning by sharing observations, providing another viewpoint, or sharing information. Feedback should relate directly to goals. In other words, feedback should assist teachers in assessing their movement toward their goals and refining their actions to better meet their goals.

Coaching Yourself Out of a Job

Coaches support and encourage teachers to develop their strengths and take effective action. Effective coaching builds teachers’ confidence and skills in continuing to grow professionally. Ultimately, these teachers become responsible for their own learning and rely on the coach less and less. They may always turn to others for professional support and ideas but will have their own repertoire of skills for “self-coaching” in order to improve instruction.

Section 4: Coaching Groups

Linda Tarr, Contributing Author

This section includes the following topics:

- Group Coaching Defined
 - Advantages of Group Coaching
- Group Coaching Skills
 - Sharing Expectations
 - Building Relationships
 - Creating an Environment for Learning
 - Listening
 - Questioning
 - Giving Feedback
 - Acknowledging Strengths
 - Forwarding the Action
- Coaching Difficult Situations
 - Handling Disagreements
 - Averting Gripe Sessions
 - Dealing with Difficult People

Group Coaching Defined

Literacy coaches frequently coach groups as well as individuals. The purpose and many of the skills are the same in both kinds of coaching. However, group coaching offers an opportunity to accelerate learning through the synergy of shared knowledge and experience in a learning community.

Group coaching requires more time than a single meeting and cannot be delineated in an agenda. Ideally, groups should be small, consisting of no more than 10–12 people. The role of the coach in groups is the same as it is in individual coaching—creating relationships that expand participants’ capacities to grow and produce results (Hargrove, 1998).

Literacy coaches work with two types of groups:

- Teams of teachers who are working toward the same goals, in which individuals grow as individuals within the context of the team goals. (*Example:* A team of fourth-grade teachers who are all trying to improve fourth-grade students’ expository writing.)
- Teams of teachers who have common interests, typically inquiry or study groups, who may represent different grade levels and have varying goals that all center around a related topic of interest. (*Example:* A team of teachers from Grades K–3 who are all interested in learning about vocabulary development and how they might assist their particular students’ vocabulary growth.)

Advantages of Group Coaching

There are several advantages to group coaching:

- *Efficiency*: Literacy coaches can meet with more teachers or even meet with teachers in more than one building if they do group coaching.
- *Synergy*: When teachers are coached in a group, they develop a learning community that breaks the isolation in which they often work and benefits from the power of multiple perspectives as well as shared ideas and experiences.
- *Upward momentum*: As teachers within the group make positive forward progress on their goals, the momentum becomes contagious. It serves as a powerful catalyst for those who may move at a slower pace, because no one wants to be left behind.
- *Support network*: When a literacy coach models good coaching skills, teachers begin to coach each other, developing a network that supports their learning and growth outside of the group-coaching sessions.
- *Accountability*: Group coaching provides a safe environment for individuals to openly discuss their goals and to support each other as they monitor and refine progress toward those goals.

Group Coaching Skills

Sharing Expectations

Most teachers have had little experience in group coaching. They may see the group as a “meeting” rather than a coaching process. Effective coaches assist groups in understanding the nature of coaching, the time involved, and the kinds of discussions the group will have. Successful groups will understand that the group process is more than a conversation or the sharing of ideas for implementing reading strategies; rather, the group process will include discovering barriers to learning and growth, setting and achieving goals, reflecting deeply, collecting and analyzing data, and assisting participants in maximizing their talents.

Building Relationships

The most effective groups have developed trusting relationships among the members, teachers, and coach alike. Coaches can begin this process by making a phone call or stopping by a teacher’s classroom to make a personal introduction. Coaches can continue developing relationships at the first group meeting by inviting group members to tell a bit about themselves as professionals and by leading the group in a discussion of the characteristics that will make for a trusting environment. Overall, a coaching stance that demonstrates appreciation and respect for each group participant will serve as a model for all members of the group.

Creating an Environment for Learning

Developing an environment for learning occurs early in the coaching process. As with the process of setting expectations, it helps to develop trust. The creation of a safe environment is not only the coach’s responsibility but also the responsibility of all

members of the group. However, the coach takes the lead in modeling behavior and encouraging group members to think about what is needed for a learning environment.

Confidentiality is a key concept for group coaching. Group members must feel certain that their discussion will stay within the group. Coaches are wise to raise this issue at the first meeting and to ask all group members to commit to it.

Setting ground rules is a fairly routine procedure when groups come together. However, in group coaching, ground rules go beyond and sometimes against traditional norms. For instance, in a traditional meeting setting, one of the ground rules might be to start and end on time. In group coaching, however, ending on time may not be a priority when the conversation is particularly meaningful to the group or to an individual's learning, or if it is on the verge of producing breakthrough thinking. This is only an example of how group coaching may proceed differently than a typical meeting. In any particular group, ground rules will be determined by the needs of the group and may change over time. For instance, a group of teachers may decide to end on time when they are meeting during their planning period because time is highly limited, but for a meeting after school, they may be more flexible about their time.

Ground rules for group coaching might include some from a list provided by Hargrove (1998):

- Maintain confidentiality.
- Test assumptions and inferences.
- Share relevant information and experiences.
- Be specific—use examples.
- Agree on a common understanding of important concepts.
- Disagree openly but constructively with any members of the group.
- Discuss the undiscussable.
- Keep the discussion focused.
- Be respectful of all group members, their opinions, and ideas.
- Make decisions by consensus.
- Self-evaluate.

Listening

Literacy coaches' listening skills become even more acute in a group setting. With groups, coaches need to listen to several teachers consecutively and attend to undercurrents, beliefs, assumptions, and group dynamics. Effective coaches seek threads of a conversation that they can tie together or connections that can be made to forward the learning.

Coaches need to listen for assumptions made by individuals or shared by group members. They then need to use questioning to help participants test their assumptions. Teachers' assumptions can be checked by nonjudgmental observation of classrooms or individual students or by an examination of student behaviors and products. Assumptions can also be tested by reviewing data collected on individual students, classrooms, grade levels, the

school, or the school district. Reviewing solid research can also assist teachers in testing their assumptions.

Listening in a group coaching situation is a skill that most coaches will refine with practice. The key is to remain intellectually detached (although the coach may be personally highly engaged), be a nonjudgmental observer, and resist losing oneself in the conversation.

Questioning

Literacy coaches use questioning to move the group to deeper learning and reflection. Careful questioning assists group members in testing their assumptions and recognizing beliefs and attitudes that motivate their actions. Questioning at its best allows teachers to recognize their strengths as well as their nonproductive behaviors and perspectives.

Coaches question groups in one of two ways: by questioning the individual while others in the group listen and learn, or by posing a question to the group as a whole. In either case, coaches need to monitor the nature, tone, and timing of their questions so that they feel supportive and thought provoking and do not appear to be a cross-examination. Participants in a group setting tend to be more defensive and self-protective than in an individual setting.

Early in the group-coaching relationship, coaches' questions are most effective when motivated by curiosity. The goal at this point is to learn about group members and clarify their understandings of the current situation. Some questions used by coaches during this time might include, "Can you tell me more about that?" "What leads you to say that?" "What do you mean when you say _____?" "Can you give us an example?" "How do you see it differently?" "Why is that important to you?" (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999, pp. 174-175).

When coaches have established strong and trusting relationships, they can question in a more direct manner. For instance, they may ask, "How does that way of thinking help or hinder you?" "You say you don't know, but if you did know, what would your answer be?" "How can you test your assumption?"

All questions in coaching should be open ended, meaning that they could be answered with accuracy in more than one way. Open-ended questions encourage dialogue and discussion; questions with single correct answers tend to shut down conversation.

Giving Feedback

Providing feedback in a group setting requires finesse. It necessitates the ability to connect strands of the conversation, emphasize the learning that has taken place, highlight and celebrate "aha" moments, and link multiple perspectives and views. Coaches need to be intuitive about group members' understandings and perspectives at any moment and the kind of feedback that would help them most.

Hargrove (1995) offers some guiding principles in providing feedback:

- Ask that participants take a learning approach and avoid becoming defensive.
- Allow participants to agree or disagree with feedback provided.
- Speak with honesty, integrity, and good intent.
- Identify a problem and seek behaviors or thoughts that would help the group recognize its source.
- Help group members see inconsistencies between what is said and what is done.
- Present feedback as an opportunity, not a threat.
- Use specific examples, not generalities.
- Share nonjudgmental observations, not opinions.

Acknowledging Strengths

Coaches need to recognize group strengths as well as individual strengths. Effective coaches help the group to see what they are doing successfully rather than focusing on what they are not doing right. In doing so, they set the tone for a positive learning environment. Successful individuals focus on developing their talents and strengths while *managing* their weaknesses (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

In successful group-coaching situations, literacy coaches draw on the power of the learning community to assist teachers in pooling their collective wisdom and drawing on their collective strengths to support and learn from each other. “To have an empowering coaching relationship, the coach must recognize that people have the inherent creativity, intelligence, and tacit knowledge they need to succeed but may need helping gaining access to it” (Hargrove, 1995, p. 57).

Forwarding the Action

Coaching must lead to action. “Forwarding the action” refers to leading group members from where they are to where they want to be.

As in one-on-one coaching, moving a group forward requires asking the group to set a “stretch goal”—one that is attainable yet encourages stretching and growth. Coaches offer possibilities but allow the group or individual group members to set their own goals. If the goal is shared by the entire group, individual participants should identify their contributions to making it happen.

Literacy coaches support groups in reaching their goals by reviewing teachers’ work and related data, providing feedback, helping the group set timelines, and assisting the group in developing and implementing an accountability system (Crane, 1998). Coaches don’t take on responsibility for accountability; rather, they assist participants in understanding what they have committed to and in monitoring their forward action. Coaches may ask participants for more, but in a manner that allows participants to agree, reject, or modify the request.

In a group setting, participants can coach each other to meet their individual goals as well. The collective strengths and wisdom of the group allow individual participants to receive multiple ideas and feedback while providing a support network in the process.

Coaching Difficult Situations

Handling Disagreements

If group participants disagree, celebrate! When open and productive disagreements take place, the coach has been successful in creating a safe environment.

Disagreements arise when participants see things from different perspectives or have different interpretations based on past experience and knowledge. All group participants, including the literacy coach, see the world through their own filters. Acknowledging that those filters exist in all of us helps deflect potentially heated disagreements from getting out of hand.

Disagreements are ideal opportunities for learning. An individual's view or perspective often changes as a result of listening to another's point of view. However, this happens only when group participants remain open, putting aside defensiveness, and when they understand that disagreement does not mean there has to be a winner or loser. Such attitudes toward disagreement do not occur by chance, and they don't occur easily. However, when literacy coaches employ all of their best strategies—listening, developing trust, creating a safe environment, using nonjudgmental observation, asking productive questions, and providing feedback—and when they model those strategies for group members, they are assisting the group in reaching the point of having productive disagreements.

When disagreements become heated, participants are usually frustrated that no one understands their perspective. Coaching skills that prevent such frustration include allowing individuals to voice their views and concerns completely, asking leading questions (e.g., “What else?”), and providing feedback to indicate that participants have been heard.

In order to decide how to move the group forward during disagreements, coaches might silently ask themselves these questions:

- What are the intentions? What do the dissenters want from the conversation?
- Are they willing to be influenced?
- What led them to that view? Is their meaning clear?
- What is the hidden meaning? What are they really saying? Is there something more behind the words?
- What are the dissenters feeling? What do they want in this moment?
- On what do participants in an impasse agree? On what do they disagree? (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994)

Averting Gripe Sessions

Complaining is a nonproductive behavior stemming from negative thinking habits. It is also contagious—when one person in a group starts complaining, others join in, and a gripe session often results.

Coaches are advised to disrupt a pattern of negative thinking as soon as it becomes visible. Often, this can be done by asking the group to do or discuss something completely unexpected (Robbins, 1991). Disrupting the negative thinking can also be done by asking a key question that steers the group toward productive thinking. For instance, if a group of teachers is complaining that children come to school hungry and therefore cannot concentrate, the coach might say, “Clearly, we can’t control what the children eat before they get to school. What can we do after they get here?”

Dealing With Difficult People

Literacy coaches sometimes work with groups in which one or more participants are disrupters. Disruptive behavior includes blaming, negativism, sarcasm, insults, or a know-it-all attitude. Coaches are often tempted to overlook these behaviors, but it is in the best interest of the group for coaches to handle such situations in a timely manner. However, addressing a disrupter requires a highly developed intuitive sense of the group and its individual participants. Coaches are advised to move ahead with caution and perhaps to reflect on the situation or even discuss it with a trusted colleague before taking action.

In many cases, disrupters are not aware of the effects of their behaviors. Coaches might use questioning to assist disrupters in becoming aware of and understanding the basis for their thinking or behavior. For instance, a coach could ask a sarcastic participant, “What is your reason for saying that? What is it you are trying to accomplish by saying it in that way? What result or information are you looking for?” “How does saying or doing that help us to accomplish our goal?” Such questions are often best asked outside of the group session, in order to avoid embarrassing the disrupter and perpetuating the negative behavior. However, when the group has established a good deal of trust, such questions might be asked at the moment the negative behavior arises.

Another strategy for addressing disruptive behavior is to name the behavior. For instance, a coach might say, “Tom, from my perspective, you appear to be in a blaming mindset.” The coach should not say anything else but rather should continue to observe the behavior and report it. If the disrupter disputes your observation, allow him or her to do so and then move the conversation forward.

A final strategy is to interfere with a negative pattern of behavior by doing the unexpected. For instance, coaches might ask complainers to speak for five minutes without stopping about all of the negative aspects of a situation or topic. By forcing an exaggerated behavior, coaches bring the behavior to individual’s attention.

Section 5: Coaches as Change Agents

The topic for Section 5 is

- Perspectives on Change, with the following subtopics:
 - Overview
 - Change Focused on Behavior
 - Change Focused on Attitude
 - Change Focused on Cognition
 - Change Focused on Inquiry
 - Change Focused on Systems
 - Change Focused on Culture

Perspectives on Change

Overview

Several perspectives on change can be found in educational literature. Some perspectives on change are compatible and others are contradictory. Literacy coaches will find it helpful to be familiar with all of these perspectives. In this way, coaches will have a number of lenses through which they can understand change and through which they can consider the situations in which they work. This is comparable to having several ways to get to work. You might usually drive to work, but you'll benefit from knowing the bus routes on days when your car is in the shop and understanding the train system when you go to conferences in nearby cities. Similarly, you might think about change at your school in one way that serves you well much of the time, but for some situations in which your usual frame of reference does not seem productive, it will help to have some additional perspectives on change.

In addition, literacy coaches will benefit from understanding a number of perspectives on change because their colleagues may hold a variety of perspectives. In other words, it will be helpful to coaches if they can “spot” a different understanding of change among some colleagues. For example, if a principal believes that change is a matter of changing behaviors and you believe it's a matter of changing thinking, recognizing this difference will help the two of you discuss your views and work more productively together.

Change Focused on Behavior

Some change efforts emphasize the behavior of participants (see Blanchard, Lacinak, & Tompkins, 2002, for example). These efforts make explicit the behaviors that are desired and the method that will be used to gauge such behaviors. Traditional supervision models have often used behavior-focused approaches. For instance, a principal might state that he or she wants to see a word wall in every classroom. The gauge of change is whether the appropriate behavior—in this case, posting a word wall—can be observed when the principal visits the classrooms.

When a change in behavior is the goal, coaches will want to make clear the following:

- The desired behavior(s). (*Example:* All teachers will use running records.)
- How the desired behavior(s) will look and sound in a classroom, or the frequency of the behavior. (*Example:* A running record will be recorded during an individual conference for each child at least monthly.)
- How the behavior will improve student achievement. (*Example:* The running record will guide teachers in providing instruction targeted at students' instructional needs.)

Many behavior-focused approaches will include rewards for those who demonstrate the desired behaviors and/or punishments for those who don't. Because coaches are not supervisors, they may wish not to get involved with reward or punishment systems.

Change Focused on Attitude

The best example of a change perspective that focuses on attitude is the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Loucks-Horsley, 1996). This perspective suggests that it is the participants' attitude toward a proposed innovation that matters when one attempts to promote change. For instance, if guided reading has been proposed at a school, a literacy coach using the CBAM would want to gauge the levels of concern that teachers have toward guided reading.

The CBAM levels of concern are enumerated here. Each level is described by a teacher's stance toward a proposed innovation.

- 0 – The teacher knows nothing about it.
- 1 – The teacher is collecting information to learn about it.
- 2 – The teacher is wondering how the innovation will affect him or her personally—will he or she have enough time, will it sap his or her energy, and similar concerns.
- 3 – The teacher is trying to address practical issues raised by the innovation—fitting it in the schedule, managing the materials, and other issues.
- 4 – The teacher is determining the effect—positive, negative, or nonexistent—that the innovation is having on his or her goals, particularly student achievement.
- 5 – The teacher is interested in elaborating on the innovation, making modifications and fitting it into other goals or programs, and sometimes sharing ideas with others.
- 6 – The teacher is satisfied with the innovation and interested in moving on to new problems and questions, perhaps those that are raised by the innovation itself. (National Academy of Sciences, 2004; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2003)

A coach familiar with the CBAM might notice the attitudes of teachers when presented, say, with guided reading as a new component of the literacy program. Is a teacher saying that he or she is not interested (Level 1), asking questions about where to fit it into his or

her already-crowded day (Level 3), or excited about sharing how he or she is already implementing guided reading (Level 5)? The coach would respond differently to each level of concern.

Change Focused on Cognition

In some change endeavors, the emphasis is on the participants' thinking. These efforts attempt to get participants to change their thinking by building a trusting relationship in which the coach or other participants are viewed as valued colleagues. From this point, participants then feel comfortable challenging their own ideas and learning from each other (Center for Cognitive Coaching, 2002; Costa & Garmston, 2002).

The notion of cognitive dissonance is important here. This term refers to an individual's discomfort when faced with two seemingly incompatible ideas. For instance, a teacher may have the understanding that "round-robin" reading is a productive use of class time and may also have the understanding that children cannot understand what was read during round-robin reading. This creates cognitive dissonance. In a trusting environment, that teacher will be able to learn new information to resolve this cognitive conflict. A coach can play a significant role in this new learning by asking important questions, providing information, and giving the teacher feedback on the process used.

Viewing change as a process of changing one's understanding is perhaps the most common view among coaches. Many coaches believe that their role is one of providing information to others. Although this is an important role, it is usually not adequate. Therefore, coaches are encouraged to learn about coaching the thinking of others and to combine such efforts with other understandings of change.

Change Focused on Inquiry

When educators view change as inquiry, they emphasize the *process* used to find new understandings and practices (see Chandler & Mapleton Teacher-Research Group, 1999; National Council of Teachers of English, 1998–2004.) This process includes the following characteristics:

- It is driven by questions asked by the participants (usually teachers but sometimes parents, administrators, students, or community members).
- It begins with extensive data collection. Such data might include student work samples; surveys of students, teachers, parents, or others; test scores; peer and self-observations; any other evidence that sheds light on the inquiry.
- It includes reading of professional literature related to the topic.
- It may include consulting with others in the field (colleagues at other schools or in other districts, university researchers, or content experts, e.g., in science or social studies disciplines).
- Extensive review of data and information collected, combined with extensive reflection and discussion among participants, leads to hypotheses.
- Hypotheses are used to develop new practices, about which additional data are collected.

- The process continues until the inquiry leads to desired changes.

Change Focused on Systems

Some who think about educational change have learned from physicists and others who study systems (Black, 2002; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). *System* refers to a network of units—be they cells, neighborhoods, family members, or members of a teaching staff—which together form a system that has one purpose: to continue to exist. When a system is healthy, each component (for example, each teacher) contributes to the well being of the system; all contribute for the mutual benefit of all. When a system is unhealthy, it contorts to maintain its existence, and each member contributes to the contortion.

For example, when a new basal series is adopted by a district, the staffs at two schools in that district might approach this adoption differently based on the system inherent to those staffs. In one school, where the staff has succeeded in cooperating and in helping students to succeed, this disruption in their system (i.e., the introduction of the basal) creates some struggles, but the system maintains itself. In order to do so, one staff member “steps up to the plate” and becomes a building leader, organizing the new basal materials and scheduling meetings to discuss how the implementation is going. Another staff member, who is good at quickly finding what is wrong, begins sharing her solutions to some trouble spots and works with a colleague to develop a new record-keeping procedure. And on it goes, until the system of cooperation and success has restored itself.

In the other school, where the staff has succeeded in mistrusting each other and in blaming the students for their lack of success, the adoption also disrupts the system for a brief time. Soon, though, a building leader who complains loudly to parents about what she doesn’t like has created alarm at a PTO meeting, and a teacher who is good at quickly finding what is wrong begins telling others that the district administration is trying to destroy the strong literacy program that they had previously. Very quickly, the system of mistrust and blame is returned.

A coach’s role, from a systems perspective, includes providing assistance to a school staff in examining “big picture” issues, such as how the staff functions and how it would like to work. These are difficult activities and best done when the principal is supportive. Another use of a systems perspective for a coach is the understanding that any change in a system produces other changes in the system, with equilibrium (i.e., returning to “normal” as the ultimate goal). If a staff is unhealthy, this means that the coach needs to be realistic about the effects he or she can have.

Change Focused on Culture

Both approaches—systems-focused change and culture-focused change—recognize that organizations often need to be different at the macro (i.e., school) level before they can be different at the micro (i.e., teaching strategy) level. When culture is the focus of change, the emphasis is often upon relationships and processes. Trust building is essential (although it is important for each of the previously discussed perspectives on change as

well), and staff processes that engage and empower are often the tools for bringing about cultural change in a trusting environment (Hargreaves, 1994; Schlechty, 2002).

Literacy coaches can't change school cultures by themselves. The entire school staff must be committed to such efforts, and the principal must provide strong leadership. However, a coach who is familiar with culture-focused change can ask important questions, such as:

- How do we want to solve problems when they arise in our new literacy program?
- How will we decide how to share limited resources?
- What kind of readers and writers do we want to come out of our school?
- What information should we share with each other about what we do in our own classrooms?

Questions of this kind are powerful in their ability to raise awareness of “how things are done around here.” And when usual procedures are made visible, the potential exists for culture to change.

Conclusion

Literacy coaches play a significant role in efforts to change literacy instruction and, ultimately, student achievement. In a Reading First program, literacy coaches have a high profile and, along with the principal, are key leaders in program implementation. Therefore, Reading First literacy coaches should be chosen carefully in order to select those who have essential knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics. Once Reading First literacy coaches are selected, they need a great deal of support in order to identify their strengths, develop their strengths further, and develop new strengths. In other words, these coaches need their own coaches.

This document has been designed to support Reading First literacy coaches and those who support them. The intent is to give an overview of coaching as well as information about the manner in which coaches can best perform their duties.

Coaching is a valuable form of professional development and an effective way to promote change in literacy instruction. Coaching is also an exciting endeavor for coaches themselves. In a similar manner, coaching Reading First coaches is valuable, effective, and exciting.

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