

# A Continuum of Learning- Focused Interaction

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## To Consult

The intention of the consulting stance is to share vital information about policies and procedures, learning and learners, curriculum and content and standards and effective practices. The consulting mentor provides information in two important categories: information about how the district and school operates, and information about professional practice.

The first category includes the procedural expectations of the district and school, including legal and policy guidelines for matters like discipline and special education. In the consulting stance, the mentor might share information about policies for getting approval for, and conducting fieldtrips, and how to manage bureaucratic tasks such as completing personnel forms and ordering materials.

The second category includes information about the craft of teaching including such things as: establishing classroom routines, developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and implementing curriculum guidelines. This information offers protégés opportunities for making informed choices and decisions as they implement these ideas and suggestions in their classrooms.

In addition to sharing technical information, the skilled mentor-as-consultant also shares principal of practice in the ‘Why’ of the actions and options. This intentional display of habits-of-mind models professional practice at its highest level and offers a vision of growth for the protégé. As protégés internalize principles of learning and teaching, these resources help them to develop approaches and solutions on their own.

## Some Strategies to Use When Consulting

### Think Aloud

A useful template to guide mentoring practice is a pattern of sharing the ‘What’, ‘Why’, and ‘How’ of an idea or suggestion. For example, the mentor might say, “Here’s what I pay attention to in situations like this; here’s why that is important; and here are some ways to do it.” The mentor then elaborates on the variables to be considered and the reasons for the final choice of action. When a mentor connects a specific strategy to the broader principles of best practice, the protégé learns to apply the principle as well as the individual idea. When a mentor shares the thinking process that leads to a solution, the protégé benefits from a deeper understanding of the process of problem-solving. Just as important, thinking aloud debunks the myth that experienced teacher have all the answers and no longer struggle with the complexity of decision-making.

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### **Offer a Menu**

If our intention in mentoring is to increase a colleague's capacity to make decisions, we must offer opportunity for decision-making. However, there are many times when a novice has little experience to draw upon. At these times, it is useful to offer a menu of ideas; we suggest at least three. In this way, the protégé is still making a choice, but has the support of the mentor's experience. To increase the learning challenge, once a choice has been made, ask the protégé to elaborate upon the decision. The capacity to articulate the criteria for decision-making is hallmark of expert problem-solvers.

### **Produce an Idea Bank**

Similar to offering a menu, an Idea Bank also provides the support of the mentor's experience. However, while the menu is spontaneous generation of suggestions, the Idea Bank is created proactively. In many cases, we can anticipate the needs of our protégés. For example, Idea Banks relating to establishing classroom routines will always be welcome early in the school year, or later on it management issues indicate the need for them. To keep it learning-focused, however, it is important to offer the Idea Bank when the protégé sees the need for it. Otherwise, it remains in the category of good advice that may or may not be appreciated or applied.

### **Conduct a Model**

Demonstration is a powerful way to communicate effective practice. A model lesson conducted in the mentor or the protégé classroom produces a clear example that is specific and tailored to the protégé's needs. The experience is more powerful when the mentor focuses the protégé's attention prior to the model. For example, ask a protégé to pay attention to the behavior management strategies, or the teacher's response choices, or whatever observable moves are relevant. A checklist or script tape for review and reflection after the lesson is completed is also useful.

### **Review Tapes of Teaching**

Videotape is medium for slowing down, rewinding and repeating very complex series of actions. Viewing a tape of masterful teaching offers an opportunity to closely examine effective practices. The tape might be one of many manufactured for learning purposes, or created at the school site for sharing specific instructional practice that are aligned with school goals. While viewing a tape from a consultative stance, mentors label the critical attributes that make the practices effective, or even stop the tape to focus the protégé's attention or ask for a prediction or cause-effect relationship before going on.

### **Reference Current Research**

Referring to professional book and journals, or citing information from recent professional development offerings models the life-long learning journey of all learning-focused practitioners. This practice also plants seeds for a protégé's professional studies and grounds any suggestions that might be offered in concrete research.

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## **To Collaborate**

In a collaborating stance, the mentor and protégé co-develop the information pool. This is often the case once a problem has been framed or clarified and solution approaches appear. A collaborative interaction involves shared analysis, problem-solving, decision-making and reflection. The reciprocal nature of collaboration supports mutual learning, mutual growth and mutual respect. Each party participates, alternately listening, paraphrasing and inquiring towards shared understandings and productive outcomes. Ideas develop through brainstorming, elaboration, and exploration or external resources. Prioritization, evaluation, and ultimately, implementation might be the function of each colleague, or the one most involved with or responsible for the event or plan.

This stance usually arises spontaneously as an outgrowth of the mentor taking either a consulting or coaching stance to help frame a problem or planning task; or once a central issue emerges, during a reflecting conversation. Careful pausing and paraphrasing by the mentor opens up the emotional and thinking space in which this stance flourishes. The use of inclusive pronouns, such as ‘us’, ‘our’, and ‘we’ or ‘we’re’ also sends a subtle invitation to the protégé to join this stance. After paraphrasing, “so we have a list of seven items to think about...” the mentor can then shift to coaching or consulting based on her sense of which stance might be more appropriate.

Adopting a collaborative stance signals respect and the expectation of a collegial relationship. It is important to resist our own impulsivity to jump in and do the bulk of the analysis and thinking. Pausing to allow protégés time to think and prompting and encouraging idea production communicates our belief in their personal and professional capacities.

## **Some Strategies to Use When Collaborating**

### **Brainstorm**

The most fundamental collaborative action is the mutual generation of information. Remaining non-judgmental by applying the process of brainstorming keeps the exchange squarely in a collaborative stance. Among other things, we generate possible reasons or causes for a particular circumstance or event, a variety of ideas, potential solutions to a presenting problem or intervention that might be productive for an individual or group of students.

### **Engage in Co-Planning and Co-Teaching**

Working together to create a lesson or a unit of study, and extending that activity by teaching together are natural expressions of a collaborative relationship. As learning-

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focused mentors, however, we must be sure to include protégés fully in the process, creating a true collaboration.

### **Becoming Study Buddies**

A mentor and protégé might become Study Buddies, choosing to learn together about a new instructional methodology or reading current articles on classroom related research. This common focus provides a launching point for creating new ideas and trying new strategies. The learning aspect is deepened when we identify and share feedback about our mutual experimentation and set new goals for learning and sharing.

### **Design and Conduct Action Research**

Extending a Study Buddy relationship into a more formal action research project deepens the learning potential and encourages a spirit of conscious curiosity about our practice. In addition, instilling a norm of experimentation early in novice's career is a powerful way to facilitate a professional vision as a life-long learner.

### **Explore Case Studies**

Case studies provide a context for dialogue about practice. The open-ended nature of most cases offers a practice arena to consider the complexities of teaching. Exploring a case study from a collaborative stance can be an intriguing learning experience for both partners.

## **To Coach**

A coach supports a colleague's thinking, problem-solving and goal clarification. The outcomes of the coaching stance are to increase the protégé's expertise in planning, reflecting on practice, and instructional decision-making. We draw from the work of Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston (2002) whose model, Cognitive Coaching, defines this stance. Cognitive Coaching addresses the underlying thinking that drives the observable behaviors of teaching. With a focus on cognitive and related emotional operations, skillful coaches guide colleagues in accessing internal resources and developing capacities for self-directed learning.

In coaching stance, the mentor supports the protégé's idea production by inquiring, paraphrasing, pausing and probing for details. These inquiries are not focused solely on the 'Whats and Hows' of planned actions or past events. They also focus on the 'Whys' of choices, possibilities and connections. The intention is to continually enlarge the frame to take in bigger and bigger picture as the protégé's professional confidence increase. The ultimate aim of this stance is to develop internally the art of self-coaching for the protégé. Over time, the patterns of a mentor's inquiry within templates for planning, problem-solving and reflecting transfer to the protégé's inner voice so he or she can be guided by this professional self-talk.

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## **Some Strategies to Use When Coaching**

Coaching is, by definition, a nonjudgmental interaction. The only judgments are those made by the protégé as he or she plans, reflects, problem-solves and makes appropriate choices.

Ask about successes, concerns or whatever your colleague wants or needs to discuss, using open-ended questions designed to produce cognitive complexity. Questions with a wide response range encourage thinking and invite choice. (See more on reflective conversations in Section Three, Maximizing Time and Attention.)

Engage in conversations focusing on the protégé's learning interests and goals. Interactions that are goal-directed will be relevant and rigorous, balancing support and challenge by making successes and articulating new arenas for learning. (See more on reflective conversations in Section Three, Maximizing Time and Attention.)

Keep in mind that many strategies, including several of those described above, can be adjusted to align with each stance on the continuum. For example, student work samples can be explored from each of the three stances, depending upon the mentor's assessments of need. From a consultative stance, the mentor can point out what she notices or recognizes in a set of students' work, given her expert perspective. The conversation can move to a more collaborative stance by brainstorming strategies that would be most likely to produce particular qualities in student work. Or, she can shift to a coaching stance by asking the protégé to find similar examples in other student's work, or determine some cause-effect relationships regarding student performance.