

Book Review

Originally written for the Teacher Leaders Network

Quality Teaching in a Culture of Coaching

By Stephen G. Barkley

2004 (205 pp./paperback)

Performance Learning Systems

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\$28.95

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NBCT

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I volunteered to do a book review for two reasons—one professional and one personal. Since I work in the Office of Staff Development with the people who organize and facilitate my school division's mentoring and coaching programs, I thought this book might be a helpful resource for them (and I was right!). Second, what teacher can pass up the opportunity to get a free book?

This book was a real eye-opener for me. During my classroom days, I served as both a mentor and a coach. In both roles, I was considered the "expert" who was helping the "novice" learn the craft of teaching. Barkley's notion of a coach is quite different. He says that coaching should be a relationship between two equals. Coaching is not about fixing problems; rather, it is about "polishing the stone" (p. vi). Through a process of ongoing dialogue, the emphasis is on support for continuous improvement. Where mentors help, coaches assist. The "coachee" takes ownership for his/her own improvement and sets the agenda for the assistance. The focus is on improvement, not judgment.

The book is very practical and provides numerous examples to illustrate the points made. The first section of the book explains what coaching is and is not. Barkley explains how coaching adds quality and helps move teachers from good to great. While there are three kinds of coaching—technical, challenge, and collegial—the focus of the book is on collegial coaching. Coach and coachee are peers, there is a high degree of trust between them, and they work together in a non-evaluative mode.

Because coaching, as described by Barkley, is not judgmental, it is highly brain-compatible and takes those involved in it beyond the "survival" motivation level to the "fun" and "freedom" levels of motivation. As Barkley says, "When there is collaboration, when coaching is taking place, when people are allowed to take ownership of their own learning and their own professional improvement, they are motivated by power, freedom, and fun." (p. 51)

Barkley devotes an entire chapter to the skills of coaching:

- Asking empowering questions
- Positive intonation and body language
- Confirmatory paraphrasing
- Attentive and empathic listening

He encourages the use of "fierce conversations" (p. 55) so that teachers become "fiercely self-aware" (p. xiii) of the art and science of teaching. They become true reflective practitioners.

Coaching should follow a specific process, and in the second section of the book, Barkley explains the three major segments. Chapter 5 explains the pre-observation conference, in which, through conversation and questioning, the coach helps the coachee uncover his/her vision and agenda. Chapter 6 explains how the coach collects the requested data during the observation. Finally, Chapter 7 outlines the components of the post-observation conference.

If the book ended here, it would be a wonderful guide for implementing peer coaching. However, the book goes beyond good and becomes great (exemplifying Barkley's call for teachers to go beyond good to great) by including a third section that addresses issues of change, provides ideas for overcoming resistance when trying to implement collegial coaching, and features successful coaching programs from across the country. Chief among the advice is the reminder of Wheatley's "Every change begins with a conversation" (p. 153). To counter arguments of "not enough time" and "too stressful" Barkley suggests highlighting issues or circumstances that point to a need for a coaching program. Begin with a small group of interested people and grow from there.

The final chapter highlights coaching programs that are already underway. These exemplary programs help the reader "see" what Barkley has been advocating in the previous eight chapters. As I read about these different programs, I realized how seamlessly Barkley's concept of collegial coaching would synthesize with professional learning communities. I also had a glimmer of how this system of peer coaching could be nested within the Japanese lesson study model of teachers collaborating, observing, reflecting, analyzing, and evaluating their lessons.

I've already passed the book along to my Acting Director, with a recommendation that all those involved in our coaching programs read it.

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