

At the September PIIC PLO, the conference focused on the importance of listening: how we listen to our colleagues, why we listen to our colleagues, and how we know our colleagues listen to us. We know that listening is an active skill; it is thought-provoking, intense and contemplative. We should not fear the silence that accompanies meditation and reflection. Sometimes, however, we need to give ourselves permission to ponder more, speak less, and let our thoughts drive our actions. Remember, listening is different than hearing.

As coaches, teachers, mentors, administrators and other school leaders work together, they need to focus on why listening is essential for change. They need to understand that listening to what their colleagues say is not just about hearing what they say. It's not about meeting with a colleague, taking notes, and then checking off that a consultation took place. It's all about meeting with a defined focus and set of goals that is attainable and then working together to accomplish those goals. Of course, that can prove to be challenging if active listening is not the norm or agreed upon as a critical one. And sometimes, it's not even what your colleagues say but rather what they don't say which can be very loud indeed!

Effective communication is not always about talking. An instructional coach must be able to establish a healthy working relationship with colleagues and that cannot be achieved without effective communication skills. A coach must listen to what is (or is not) said, understand what is meant, ask questions only when appropriate, and allow time for processing and quiet introspection. A coach needs to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate on topics of interest and give them a voice to make suggestions about the kinds of professional development they want. That "speaks" volumes. When a coach follows up on recommendations, that is evidence that the coach listens to what matters to his/her colleagues.

Interesting fact... we listen at a rate of 125 – 250 words per minute but think at 1000 – 3000 words per minute (Ragan's PR Daily.www.prdaily.com, 12/30/13). Then, we just talk! It's no wonder that some things come out of our mouths without filters or without allowing us time to "listen" fully!

We all know the characteristics of good listening. Among them are making eye contact, acknowledging your colleague's comments, removing electronic devices, staying "in the moment," remaining nonjudgmental, restating your colleague's points, asking clarifying questions and helping your colleagues arrive at their own opinions before stating your own.

Effective instructional coaches need to be skillful communicators and great listeners. They must listen with the intent to understand while building trust and confidence. They bring people together to collectively problem-solve, communicate openly and frequently, and share ideas in a no risk environment. They create an atmosphere that helps professionals connect with each other by validating ideas, allotting time for thinking, and acknowledging the many voices around the table. They recognize that having two ears and only one mouth is not an accident! So, please listen twice as much as you speak...that will make all the difference in your coaching practice.

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