

# The Continuum of Interdependence™

## How to Push Teachers to be Strategically Innovative

by Bradley Williams



*Performance-Based Coaching* has at its core the active nature of real-time feedback and a focus on performance by correcting or enhancing the use of a targeted behavior. Though every coaching interaction focuses on the skillful use of said targeted behavior, the ultimate outcome of the entire coaching process is the creation of what is known as a “strategically innovative” teacher. By this, we mean teachers who consistently and independently implement instruction using a common set of highly effective behaviors and practices across all areas of instruction. So, let’s address the dynamics of organizing and implementing a coaching system that brings about teacher independence.

### **Another View of Building—or Not Building—Independence and Sustainability**

Not surprisingly, most teachers would be quick to agree that helping students gain independent control of new knowledge, behaviors and skills is highly desirable, if not critical, in today’s results-driven educational milieu. Here is a short classroom example to see another perspective on building independence and sustainability.

Ms. Kady, a fifth-grade math teacher in Flagstaff, AZ, has just finished demonstrating how to solve a multi-step algebra problem to find the value of an unknown variable. She has asked her students to attempt solving a similar problem with a partner as she walks around the room to offer support. At the first table, Ms. Kady is met with a pair of students who have nothing written yet on their paper.

Student: *"I don't know what to do."*

Ms. Kady: *"Remember to use inverse operations."*

Students: (Pause and look blankly at the problem.)

Ms. Kady: *"Since the problem says +2 on the left side, you will need to subtract the 2 from both sides."*

Students: (The students write -2 on their paper.)

Ms. Kady: *"You will have to subtract the two from each side of the equation."*

The conversation continues, with Ms. Kady telling the students each step of the problem. At each step, errors are made that need to be corrected. After several minutes the students complete the problem and it is correct, but they were unable to complete a single aspect of the skill correctly, even with the support of their teacher.

The second group of students that Ms. Kady visits has not yet begun solving the problem.

Student: *"What do we do?"*

Ms. Kady: *"Remember to use inverse operations."*

Students: *"Oh...yeah."*

Students: (The students subtract two from both sides of the equation and continue to solve the problem.)

Ms. Kady: *"Perfect! You've got it."*

As Ms. Kady walks away, the students look at the next problem and then one of their hands shoots up immediately. They patiently wait for Ms. Kady to come back to offer more support. These students would be able to complete every problem as long as the teacher was able to provide continuous support for every aspect of the targeted skill.

As Ms. Kady approaches the third group, she sees that they have also written down the equation but have not yet begun to solve the problem.

Student: *"Ms. Kady, We need help!"*

Ms. Kady: *"What do you need help with?"*

Students: *"We need to subtract two from both sides of the problem, right?"*

Ms. Kady: *"Yes! That's right."*

Students: *"OK. Thanks!"*

The students quickly finish the problem and move onto the next one. Despite having known how to complete the problem correctly, the students lack the confidence to try the next problem without checking to see if they are on the right track. As Ms. Kady walks away, their hands raise into the air.

Ms. Kady approaches the fourth table to see that the students there have moved quickly through three problems and are working on solving a fourth.

Ms. Kady: *"How is it going over here?"*

Students: *"This is easy!"*

Ms. Kady: *"Well that's good. You might want to go back and check number three."*

Students: *"Why? We did that one already.  $X = -4$ ."*

Ms. Kady: *"You are close, but go back and check your second step. You added two, but you forgot to use the inverse of the operation."*

Student: *"Ohhh...Oops!"*

The students fix the error and move onto their other problems without giving it much thought. They have already completed another problem and are continuing to work on their own as Ms. Kady walks to the final group of students.

At the fifth group, she sees that the students have completed the same number of problems as the last group.

Ms. Kady: *"That's interesting. Explain to me what you did here on number five."*

Students: *"I hate fractions. I didn't want to divide both sides by  $\frac{1}{2}$  so I changed it to 0.5 before I started the problem."*

Ms. Kady: *"Well, it would be good for you to practice working with fractions, but that is one way to solve the problem."*

Students: *"Thanks!"*

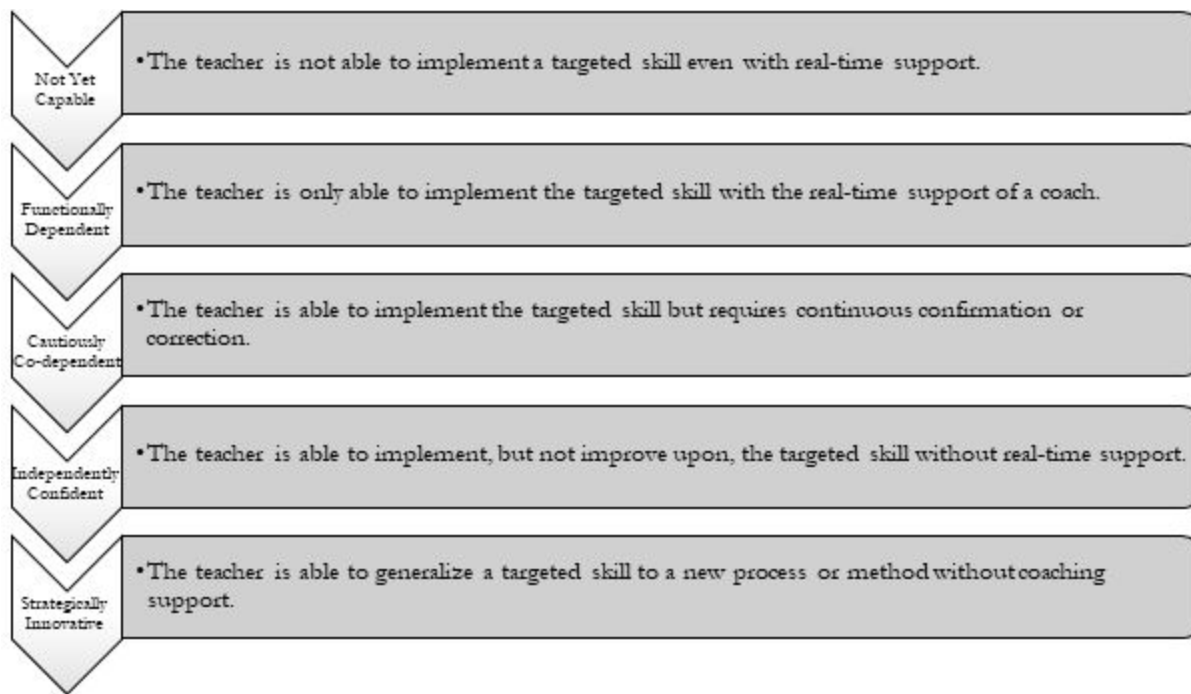
The students in the group continue working on their own. They make few to no errors, often by appropriately changing some of the more difficult problems into forms that they are more comfortable working with. When Ms. Kady moves back to the front of the room, she has worked directly with each group. Many of the groups were not able to implement the target skill at the outset on their own, but they were able to use the given skill to complete the task while she was helping them. One of the groups did not rely on Ms. Kady at all, instead, they made use of other independently controlled strategies to navigate the problem.

This classroom example shows us a parallel occurrence that happens in coaching. Our end goal for teachers is for them to independently control a behavior to a level where they use it correctly and strategically without external support.

Using Ms. Kady’s math lesson as our case study, it would not be accurate to say that all of the groups achieved equal mastery of the targeted skill, even though all of the groups arrived at the correct solution. Four of the five student groups required real-time support to solve them. It is common, however, for site administrators and instructional coaches to make this same error. They see a teacher use a new behavior correctly during a coaching session or site observation, and then erroneously conclude that the teacher has mastered it.

Using Ms. Kady’s classroom to illustrate our upcoming terms, each of the student groups demonstrated characteristics related to independence and interdependence that coaches see with teachers. This progression is known as the *Continuum of Interdependence*.

## Continuum of Interdependence™



## Independence: The Bull’s-eye of Performance-Based Coaching

Think about a time that you tried to learn a new skill or do an activity for the first time. Did you find yourself re-reading a set of directions or guidebook trying to make sense of what exactly you were supposed to do? Did you find yourself

going back to those directions again and again to double- and triple-check what you should do next? Did you try to do something differently than the directions specified, only to find out that it wouldn’t work that way?

If you are like most people, then the answer is yes to all of these.

To better understand the *Continuum of Interdependence*<sup>™</sup>, let's look at it through the lens of a teacher who is learning how to use a new reading curriculum. At first, the pallet of boxes, posters, books of all sizes, teacher's editions, reproducible masters, computer disks and fashionable shoulder bags seems exciting, so colorful and alluring in its presentation. Not knowing how they all fit together, she begins to feel overwhelmed, stranded on an island of shiny new materials sealed in plastic. At this point, even with all of the resources in front of her, the teacher is not yet capable of implementing the program. Instead of viewing the plethora of materials like a giant and glorious Christmas present, the teacher finds herself overwhelmed. With no guidance from someone more skilled with these materials, she is likely to begin "implementation" of the program by picking and choosing among the materials for what feels comfortable, or bears some similarity to something she has previously used. The alternative option is for her to rush headlong into the full array of materials, creating a complicated and incoherent blend that would likely frustrate students and confound those who arranged for the purchase of this wonderful Christmas gift. At this point, our teacher is clearly in the *Not Yet Capable* stage of the continuum.

But with support from a trained and skillful coach, her progress through the *Continuum of Interdependence*<sup>™</sup> can be planned and managed. Most teachers, whether it be with new materials, new content or new methods, can be moved from the *Not Yet Capable* box to the *Functionally Dependent* box just by the coach selecting for them an area of focus. The teacher instantly feels relieved that they can narrow their focus and is more successful than they were without support.

Then the emails begin. Weekly or even daily requests for the coach to tell the teacher what to teach next begin to pile up. All too often, coaches fall into this trap, forever telling teachers what to teach next, keeping them at a state of functional dependence because it brings a basic level of success. It is at this point that the coach must push the teacher to a higher level of independence. After a while, the teacher has become more confident about their understanding of the program, yet they are still fearful that they might miss something. This is the opportunity for the coach to select

interventions that move the teacher to the stage of *Cautiously Co-dependent*. At this phase, the coach turns the conversation around, saying: "You decide what you will teach next and we can talk about it before you teach the lesson." At the stage of *Cautiously Co-dependent*, the teacher still needs the coach;



not to tell him or her what to do, but to make sure that what he or she plans to do is correct before they try it on their own.

But the emails keep coming. The teacher is planning her own instruction but is

regularly requesting coach pre-approval. It is time for the coach to push again. The coach moves the teacher to a level of *Independently Confident* by asking the teacher to implement her plan, after which the coach will discuss the outcomes with her. Though hesitant, the teacher attempts the lesson without real-time coaching support and finds that she was indeed able to work without a safety net. There are two key points to this stage of the continuum: first, the teacher implemented the behavior with no real-time support, and second, she implemented the behavior exactly the way she had practiced it during previous coaching sessions. Our teacher now knows enough about the reading program to begin asking questions characteristic of teachers approaching the *Strategically Innovative* stage of the continuum: "How else could I use this program more effectively?"

This same continuum of interdependence applies to gaining mastery of any behavior or skill. Let's go back to Ms. Kady's classroom. There is an obvious need to move students along the continuum so that they are better able to implement new skills on their own after the teacher's support has been removed. After all, this type of real-time support is not available to students during state and national assessments, nor during the great majority of their schooling life. Teachers who neglect to focus on the progression toward independence are often blindsided by lower-than-expected test results, often stating that they don't understand how the students could have performed so poorly on a given assessment when they were able to do it in class.

## The Value of Each Step

Now that we have established the critical importance of moving teachers toward being strategically innovative, let's dig deeper into the nuances of each phase and the implications for performance-based coaches.

Unlike the development of a skill that can be easily observed in real-time, the development of independence must be observed over time and across a variety of teaching and learning contexts, i.e., subject areas, times of day, or class composition. As coaches, we also know that the teachers we work with have earned degrees and hold certifications related to their training, specializations and experience. Due to this unique intersection of factors, independence is often either

assumed to be an already achieved aspect of teachers' professional preparation, or as something that can be easily achieved with a quick demonstration. Perhaps most alarming is when teachers have spent time at a school or in a district where "self-certification" of expert competence is accepted. By simply stating, "I already know that," or "I already do that," or "I've always done that", their expert status goes unchallenged. But skipping over any of these phases – and the learning inherent in each of them-- is both detrimental to the development of new and more effective teacher behaviors, and to the organizational definition and conceptualization of what is meant by the term "teacher development".

<b>Phase on the Continuum</b>	<b>What if it's Skipped?</b>	<b>What is Gained Here?</b>
<b>Not Yet Capable</b>	The teacher feels stuck in this phase. If pushed too quickly out of this phase, early failures will solidify a belief that the targeted skill is ineffective, un-needed or impossible. Coaching may be blamed for the failure.	This phase provides an initial success for most teachers and can often challenge the assumptions a teacher has about what they or their students are capable of doing. This phase also builds quick credibility for coaches and coaching.
<b>Functionally Dependent</b>	As the skill is still relatively new, if pushed too quickly teachers will often unknowingly eliminate or adjust vital aspects of the skill due to time or past practice. They may also see coaching as a one-time, or drive-by, process.	This phase allows the teacher to practice the behavior correctly so that new habits form and the new skill begins to feel more natural. This phase also is useful for forging solid coaching relationships that can endure over time.
<b>Cautiously Co-dependent</b>	The teacher has now connected the success of the skill to the presence and assistance of the coach. If pushed too quickly, teachers will often discontinue using the skill outside of coaching sessions. Coaching can be seen as a stimulus-response interaction: coach comes, teacher performs.	This phase allows the teacher to build confidence that they have an accurate understanding and use of the target behavior. Teachers here frequently desire more intensive coaching methods to accelerate their development and expertise.

<b>Phase on the Continuum</b>	<b>What if it's Skipped?</b>	<b>What is Gained Here?</b>
<b>Confidently Independent</b>	The teacher now demonstrates mastery or near-mastery of the behavior or skill. They may refrain from seeking coaching support, relying on their own self-determined expertise. If pushed too quickly, the teacher can fossilize inefficient aspects of the targeted skill and become frustrated when the skill needs to be targeted again in the future.	This phase allows the coach to fine-tune a teacher's practice in a variety of contexts, since the teacher is able to implement the behavior without the coach present. This phase also builds the teacher's understanding of which aspects of the skill are the most critical to its efficient implementation and which aspects could be adjusted based on the needs of a given situation.
<b>Strategically Innovative</b>	This phase is the goal and apogee of the coaching process. The greatest struggle here is when other teachers overlook the time and effort that went into a teacher reaching this point. This also can be confused with being "done" with coaching. "I already did that coaching thing."	This phase brings about the greatest positive impact on student achievement, as the teacher is now able to use a collection of effective behaviors across all subject areas and can innovate their use for specific student needs.

Each of these phases provides a unique opportunity to enhance the level of sophistication a teacher is able to achieve with a given behavior. Planning and executing coaching interventions that move teachers along the *Continuum of Interdependence*<sup>™</sup> is one of the most difficult – but vital--skills that a *performance-based coach* must develop. As you design coaching cycles, it is helpful to focus on two elements for each interaction you have with the teacher: the targeted behavior the teacher is working on, and the teacher's current place on the *Continuum of Interdependence*<sup>™</sup>. Knowing that independence is always the overarching goal of coaching will help you to keep these two elements always in your mind. In simple terms, you are responsible for picking the trail and then coaching your teacher up the mountain to independence and, ultimately, to strategic innovation.



You have just read an excerpt from Chapter 10: *Building Teacher Independence* from the upcoming book “Performance-Based Coaching: Move the Training Room into the Classroom to Accelerate Teacher Development” by: Bradley Williams and Kevin Clark.

This book will be released for print on October 1, 2018

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