

The First Failure of Change: No Clear Definitions

By Bradley Williams and Kevin Clark



You've Probably Seen or Heard This Before

It's almost 2:00 pm on a Wednesday and a third-grade teaching team at Maryland Elementary School is meeting with their site reading coach to discuss student data with the goal of improving student achievement. They look at the computer screen in front of the room to see an all-too-familiar bar graph showing the number of students in each classroom that have met, approached or fallen below the standard on a recent benchmark assessment.

Mrs. Johnston, a 15-year teaching veteran, sighs and says, "We spent a lot of time on this. The test just asked it differently. It was confusing to the students." The rest of the team around the table nods in agreement.

Their school coach, Ms. Teal, interjects. "I understand the frustration. How can we help the students do better in the future?"

"Let's just look and see how it's going to be asked next time," suggests Mr. Butler. "Then we can make sure to write some questions like that."

Mrs. Johnston scoffs. "We have done that already. The next test won't ask it the same way."

Ms. Teal interjects again and asks Sally, a teacher new to the school the previous year, an interesting question.

"Sally, your students did the best on this standard. What did you do?"

Sally, the team's newest teacher, somewhat hesitantly responds. "I taught the students how to solve the problem and then they used their laptops to practice solving similar problems while I pulled small groups to help the students who were struggling." A rolling groan can be heard around the table as each of the team members agrees that what was just described is similar to their current lesson format or something that they have tried in the past without success.

Ms. Teal supportively adds, "I've seen you do that in your room and it was very effective. Can we all agree to try it like this starting next week? I'll come in and observe during your math class. When do you think you will try it out?" As the teachers take turns signing up for an observation time, they rush out of the room to get their students ready for dismissal.

The Well-Intentioned Plan That Omits Behavior

Coaches across the country are asked to lead meetings just like this, where some form of data is expected to

yield a group commitment to change. But just like at the Maryland School meeting from our scenario, the meetings frequently yield yet another educational paradox: many plans are created, yet no behaviors change. The format (in many places, this is almost like a script) for this predictable outcome goes as follows: various practices are shared, with each usually bearing the support of its sponsor. Members politely listen, nod and then share their practice. Each teacher presents his or her way as meritorious in some way or other. Having a group of teachers talk about what led to greater achievement among their students with other teachers in this wide-open format is similar to having a group of mothers talk about what practices keep their children from catching the flu. Many mothers would share similar practices such as diet, exercise or bathing routines, but most would quickly agree that they “already do those things”. This leaves two possible outcomes for the discussion: everyone leaves the gathering with little thought given to a behavioral change that differs from their norm, or some of the group members decide to give a new idea a whirl. Imagine one mother in the group sharing her practice of rubbing peppermint oil on her son’s feet at night to prevent the flu. That night, there is a

rush on peppermint oil at the store, but many of the children still catch the flu regardless of the intervention.



This tendency of a few to try something new based only on a limited endorsement by another

often happens when one teacher convincingly shares a unique app, hot tip or internet resource. The other teachers on the team often jump to purchase the magic bullet only to find again that the outcomes remain the same. The teacher who was effective before is still effective with the new app. The teachers who struggled before now struggle with the new app or resource.

When this cycle of teacher meetings was raised with Ms. Teal and her principal at Maryland Elementary School

as a possible explanation for why teacher change happened only occasionally and with a few teachers, she offered the following information.

I am in classrooms all the time. I know that all of the teachers teach with similar lessons because they plan together. What they don't realize is how differently each of them actually implements the plans that they have made. We spend so much time talking about instruction, but when I come into classrooms many people think I am just trying to “get them”. At the end of the year, most of my teachers are still teaching the same way they always have. When scores come out, if they aren't positive outcomes, I am also quick to be blamed as people often say that they did exactly what I told them to do in our meetings. It is so frustrating.

Performance: The Coach’s Singular Focus

At the risk of understatement, the change process –as we have learned-- isn’t easy. It is a complex process that requires time, commitment and consistency for everyone involved. Changing behaviors isn’t something we can easily achieve through an observation and quick discussion that glosses over the background assumptions and beliefs that led to the practices currently in place. In fact, to change teacher behavior in a way that will yield greater student achievement requires coaches to *D.I.G.* into the process.

This simple acronym will help us to remember the three parts of what we refer to as *The Coaching Cycle*, which is easily defined as the major activities that happen between a coach and a teacher during a given period of time.

D.I.G.

D: Define

I: Intervene

G: Generalize

Each letter of the acronym represents a major component of the *Performance-Based Coaching Cycle*.

Now let's look at the first part of a coaching cycle.

D = Define

Sadly, most attempts at coaching fail before they even truly begin. They fail at the point when a coach begins to speak and the teacher attempts to listen. This can actually be the most frustrating aspect of coaching to both parties and detrimental to the process, even though both parties have the best intentions. To better understand why this first attempt at communication regarding a change can quickly sour, we must recall some of the typical professional development practices that we discussed earlier, and how those can affect a teacher's view of their own learning. For example, in order to save money and to build "capacity", thousands of teachers have been sent to one-and-two-day seminars to learn about topics like student engagement, instructional rigor, differentiation and student inquiry. It is common for teachers who attend these trainings to be asked, upon their return to campus, to "train" their peers or share what they learned. The invitation and format for this may sound familiar to you. "Sheila and Mike," says the principal, "please take the last 25 minutes of our staff meeting to teach everyone what you learned at the two-day seminar on vocabulary building." That is quite a task.

What ensues next is a professional version of the telephone game. Crammed into a tight time spot, Sheila and Mike simplify for the sake of time and then simplify some more while the clock speeds toward their metaphorical version of Cinderella's midnight curfew. With no time to adequately define terms or processes, their presentation lacks specificity, theoretical foundation, and detailed descriptions of the how and why of what they learned. The audience, teachers who have heard these types of truncated presentations before, knows to expect generalities, underdeveloped descriptions and vague terminology. In short, everything about the presentation –through no deliberate fault of Mike or Sheila—is blurry, largely because no terms are fully vetted and made explicit. As a result, two things happen. Most everyone concludes that they are already doing something like what Mike

and Sheila described. But the second result is the even more troubling and creates a new coach's first big job: defining terms clearly and in a way that everyone understands and uses in the same way.

Because terms are rarely defined and agreed upon in public education settings, educators come to tolerate –and frequently promote -- a vast array of different definitions and understandings of the terms, concepts and practices related to teaching and learning. It is all too common for a teacher, coach, administrator or consultant to observe a classroom in action and blithely conclude that the teacher needs "to increase the rigor" of instruction. Given the non-agreed-upon meanings of the term, the classroom teacher is quick to disagree, arguing that the lesson was a model of "rigor". Seeking to calm the waters, the site principal opines that, for him, the lesson was "pretty rigorous for the most part." And so, it goes.



Another challenge of the *Define* phase of *The Coaching Cycle* is when all terms used relate to processes or products rather than to behaviors. (It may be helpful to read the

previous sentence again. We are swinging open a big door here.) For example, who is against *student engagement*? Is anyone anti-*meaningful instruction*? Is there a teacher in the land who is diametrically opposed to *maximizing learning*? When we accept these terms as solely representative of processes or of final products, we have sidestepped the role of specific human behaviors in bringing about an improvement in student learning. As coaches, we have to define, in behavioral terms, what we want to see teachers doing or saying. What are the five specific teacher behaviors that show us "maximizing learning"? What are three specific student behaviors that would show us "student engagement"? As a fun and enlightening game, think for a moment of all the terms bandied about during a single staff meeting, a short in-service training, or a

university education class. Notice how the terms used are simply left open. Notice how the terms are accepted on their face value, and then used again and again as if everyone is in universal agreement. This is one of the many challenges coaches are up against and is why defining terms is the foyer of *Performance-Based Coaching*.

We begin a coaching cycle by digging into the definitions of terms, usually beginning with the behaviors of the teacher we want to see, but also sometimes inclusive of student behaviors. This means working hard to establish terms that are mutually understood and that have as little vagary or wiggle room as possible. It may be helpful to define the word *behavior* itself, since it is frequently equated with thinking, intent, or desire. Behavior is best defined as an action that can either be seen or heard. You will learn more later in this book about how to identify evidence of behaviors by looking for, collecting and analyzing visual or audio evidence.

To foreshadow what is to follow later, it may be helpful to see how this emphasis on behavior translates into coaching. Here are four ways a focus on behavior transforms coaching, even in the earliest stages of working with a teacher when you are digging into terms and definitions.

1. List the observable or audible behaviors that are present during a lesson that either advance or impede student learning.

2. Describe in detail the desired behavior. What will it look like? What will it sound like?
3. Describe the differences between the behaviors that are currently being observed in the classroom with those behaviors that are desired to improve student learning.
4. Measure how often the currently observed behaviors are occurring and set a goal for how often a more effective behavior is expected.

As you can see, digging into terms and definitions early helps everyone involved in coaching to understand the lay of the land. Defining terms in behavioral parlance takes work, patience and a willingness to parse. Instead of talking with a teacher about “maximizing instructional time”, the conversation is one of identifying behaviors that indeed maximize time. If we want students to use academic words in their oral answers, what specific student behaviors would manifest visual or audible proof of that? What specific teacher behaviors get students to craft academic-sounding oral sentences?



You have just read an excerpt 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 available for sale on October 1, 2018.

<https://www.clarkconsultingandtraining.com/request-book-purchase>