



## PART ONE

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# INTRODUCTION TO EVOCATIVE COACHING

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## CHAPTER 1

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# WHAT IS EVOCATIVE COACHING?

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*You cannot teach a person anything. You can only help him find it within himself.*

GALILEO

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## The Promise and Practice of Coaching

Teachers are capable adults who, with the right mix of understanding and engagement, are well equipped to improve the quality and outcomes of their instruction. Take, for example, Renee, a third-grade teacher who took her teaching to a new level through an evocative coaching process that appreciated her efforts, focused her attention, brainstormed ideas, and celebrated her progress.

When I met with Renee before my first observation, I was very clear that this process was not about evaluation and that it was solely my desire to be of assistance to her to improve her instruction. She said that she welcomed visitors to her room and thought the observation would be helpful, but she seemed anxious, e-mailing me twice to explain what I would be seeing during my visit. I assured her that she was not going to hear any judgments, either positive or negative, from me; that this was an opportunity for learning and that we were going to let the data do the talking from the observation tool she'd selected.

I observed two lessons: a reading lesson and a math lesson. Despite my assurances and calm demeanor, Renee began our conversation afterward saying, "I'm sure you've written, 'What a horrible lesson.'" I reflected back her concern

*(Continued)*

and frustration, but not her conclusion. Inviting her to review the completed observation tools, she immediately started comparing the two lessons. She was shocked to see the differences. In reading, she engaged with all of the students, and there was a lot of praise and encouragement, while in math, she neglected whole groups of students and there was much more scolding. After a few minutes, hunched over the data, she sat back and said with a sigh, "This is right. I do teach math differently."

Renee confided that she enjoyed reading instruction and that she was much more confident in this area. Concerning math, she noted, "I just think of math as something to get through." The instruction in her math lesson reflected this discomfort; she was more rigid in her delivery and impatient when students made errors. Initially, she seemed overwhelmed, so I suggested we focus on just two things: planning for math instruction and the introduction of new math concepts. Then we talked about what she knew about herself as a learner and how she wanted to learn about these two things. She was very clear that workshops were not helpful to her. She said, "I go to these workshops and I get my head full of ideas, but when I get back to my classroom, I still don't know what to do differently." So we brainstormed and designed a different learning strategy for her. We made plans for her to observe in the classrooms of two colleagues on her grade level and to meet with them to discuss what she'd seen. Out of that grew more joint planning. The next time I observed, using the same observation tool, there were dramatic differences in the quality and tone of the math lesson. Now, this year, she has had several special education students placed in her room for the first time, which again caused great anxiety for her. I suggested that she use the same learning strategy, and she is having a very successful year and has developed so much more confidence as a result.

*Beth, elementary resource teacher*

Results like Renee's have made coaching a popular approach for fostering skills and performance improvement, whether in the context of schools or other organizational settings. Coaching facilitates learning that sticks. Like Renee, most people recognize the limitations of training, demonstrations, and professional development seminars. Regardless of how inspiring and memorable such experiences may be, they seldom translate into sustained attitude and behavior changes. Instead, they get relegated to the proverbial bookshelf as dispassionate reminders of what might have been.

Coaching has arisen, then, to fill the professional development gap. It does so not only by getting people to think about their own experiences and to practice

new behaviors over time but, more importantly, by getting people excited about the prospect of learning new things and becoming masterful practitioners. At its best, coaching enables people not only to make incremental improvements in technique but also, on occasion, to make quantum leaps forward in their ways of working and being in the world. And it does so through the age-old art of conversation. Simply put, coaching is a conversational process that brings out the greatness in people. It raises the bar of the possible, so that people reinvent themselves and their organizations in the service of transformational learning.

If ever there was a setting ripe for the new possibilities and energy that such conversations have to offer, it is the twenty-first-century schoolhouse. Teachers and students alike are adrift in a sea of expanding requirements and dwindling resources. The toll of such pressures is evident in both the process and outcomes of education: people are neither having fun nor doing well. People are discouraged, frustrated, and spiraling downward. It is time for the change coaching can bring. That promise can be realized, however, only when coaches develop strong learning partnerships with teachers and only when coaching conversations move beyond the two most common and rudimentary of educational practices: “show and tell” as well as “review and comment.” Familiar with these practices since childhood, people often return to them when they have the opportunity to coach someone else. But such practices, especially in adult learning, undermine the quality of relationship, limit the scope of conversation, and diminish the effectiveness of coaching. With adult learning, a different coach approach—the evocative approach—is required. That approach is what this book is all about.

The evocative approach aims to inspire motivation and movement without provoking resistance or power struggles. Evocative coaching honors both the autonomy needs of teachers and the educational standards of the schools in which they teach. It is challenging but not impossible to address both at the same time. As one person once remarked, my coach “held my feet to the fire and made it feel like a foot massage.” That is the tightrope evocative coaches seek to walk, and it only happens when teachers are viewed as having the inherent creativity, intelligence, and tacit knowledge to figure out for themselves how to be successful. Rather than taking an instructional approach, evocative coaching emphasizes listening more than talking, asking more than telling, and reflecting more than commenting. Such coaching is not about giving advice, demonstrating techniques, solving problems, or offering constructive criticism (Crane & Patrick, 2007). Although these approaches occasionally become part of the process, they are neither the starting point nor the primary method we employ. We prefer empathy and inquiry as approaches because of how they open up teachers to the prospect of change and because of how they engage teachers in their own, unique performance-improvement processes.

Mastery in any profession, including teaching, is a lifelong journey. People must believe that they have what it takes to learn and grow. Evocative coaching is rooted in that framework. It delivers a growth-fostering relationship that challenges and supports people along the journey. Instead of taking over and directing traffic, as though one could mandate how to get from Point A to Point B, evocative coaches assist teachers to clarify and define their own paths of development. What works for one teacher may not work for another. Evocative coaches respect the individuality of teachers and collaborate with them by exploring their stories, understanding their feelings, appreciating their strengths, and enhancing their strategies. The process of evocative coaching can be viewed as a dance that builds self-efficacy through awareness, trust, and experimentation.

Yet this is neither a common understanding nor common parlance of coaching in schools. Indeed, the expression, “Can I give you some coaching about that?” usually means, “Can I tell you what I think you should do differently?” But the “tell you what I think” approach to coaching, often coupled with explicit or implicit rewards and punishments, tends to generate resistance and impede change. That is because it undermines teacher autonomy and provokes enemy images, both internal and external. Such interference makes it harder rather than easier for teachers to find motivation and movement (Pink, 2009). It may be commonplace for supervisors, consultants, and trainers to diagnose problems, give instructions, and provide incentives for performance improvement, but these approaches contradict what we know about adult learning. “Change or die” is not an effective threat (Deutschman, 2007). At best “facts, fear, and force” generate temporary compliance; at worst they generate resistance and outright rebellion. No wonder we face so many power struggles and political battles in schools. The collection and analysis of student-performance data highlights problems, identifies gaps, quantifies deficiencies, and creates a widespread sense of urgency and threat. In such an environment, it is easier to point fingers and throw stones than to open up and change. Coaches can end up guilty by association when we are brought in to “fix” low-performing teachers or departments. We become part of the problem when teacher energies are diminished and diverted by criticism, defensiveness, and self-protection. Such dynamics tend to immobilize teachers and make things worse, even when they are offered with the best of intentions.

*Personally, I'm always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.*

*Winston Churchill*

Fortunately, there is a way for coaches to cut this Gordian knot: we have to stop trying so hard to make teachers do better. Teachers do not resist making changes; they resist people who try to make them change. Once coaches abandon

the role of change agent, we can build trust and rapport and engage teachers in nonjudgmental conversations about their experiences, feelings, needs, ambitions, and goals. We can assist teachers to outgrow negative data by working with positive data regarding their strengths, vitalities, aspirations, and possibilities. We can see teachers come alive, right before our eyes, as they brainstorm new ideas and experiment with new approaches. When learning becomes a self-directed task, it becomes an enjoyable task, as teachers come to appreciate and live into their “destiny, cause, and calling” (Secretan, 2004). That is what we have witnessed and hope for from evocative coaching: it connects teachers to the best of what is and moves teachers to the best of what might be. In even the worst of circumstances, with even the most problematic of data, evocative coaches can use the process of Story–Empathy–Inquiry–Design to shake loose something new. These four steps make up the dynamic dance of evocative coaching conversations, conversations that enable teachers to loosen their sense of constriction, to reconnect with their passion, and move to ever-higher levels of personal and professional mastery.

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## Evocative Coaching Defined

To understand why we have come to call this approach “evocative coaching,” it helps to consider the root meanings of each word:

- *Evocative*: Calling to mind, bringing into existence, eliciting emotions, causing to appear, summoning into action, finding one’s voice (from Latin *ēvocāre*, to call, akin to *vōx*, voice)
- *Coaching*: Transporting to a desired destination in a comfortable carriage (from Hungarian *kocsi*, after Kocs, a town in northwest Hungary where such carriages were first made)

Putting those two words together captures both the power and the promise of a coaching process that respects and fully applies the insights of adult learning theory and growth-fostering psychologies. Building on their root meanings, we define evocative coaching in this way:

- *Evocative coaching*: Calling forth motivation and movement in people, through conversation and a way of being, so they achieve desired outcomes and enhance their quality of life

This definition differs significantly from what might be called “provocative coaching.” When we “provoke” someone, we do something *to* them in ways that provoke

a reaction. To “evoke” means that we do something *with* someone that unleashes or calls forth their full potential. When that happens, when coaching evokes the very best from people en route to ever-higher levels of personal and professional mastery, coaching generates transformational shifts rather than mere incremental improvements. Instead of generating resistance, such coaching metaphorically transports people to where they want to go by unleashing their innate cognitive, emotive, aspirational, and experiential processes. It enables people to find their voice, to answer their call, and to affect the systems in which they live and work.

It is one of the most rewarding things I’ve ever done, to reconnect a person with their passion and then to see the difference that makes for all of their students as a result.

*Matt, social studies department chair*

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## Why Evocative Coaching Works

Evocative coaching works because it applies the principles of both adult learning theories and growth-fostering psychologies. It not only supports self-directed learning, it also draws upon the increasing evidence base regarding the impact of positive relationships, images, energy, and emotions in fostering positive actions (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003; Fredrickson, 2003, 2009). Evocative coaching is definitely a feel-good process. By respecting the underlying interests and abilities of teachers, by empathizing with and appreciating their experiences, and by building on their strengths, evocative coaching enables teachers to achieve better results than they would on their own or through the use of more traditional methods.

As children, most of us were taught through a combination of two processes: instruction and incentives. Parents and teachers told us what to do and how to do it correctly. They may then have offered incentives, such as rewards, compliments, punishments, and reprimands, to get us to do the work and master the domain. Although it is not uncommon for these same processes to be used with adults, especially in training and knowledge transfer, research by both educators and psychologists documents the limitations of this approach. Adults seek to figure things out for themselves, for their own reasons, in their own ways, on their own schedules, and with their own resources. For coaching with adults to be effective, it needs to take these and other adult-specific factors into consideration. It needs to be evocative.



Timothy Gallwey's (2008) book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, first published in 1974, was a call to limit the use of instructions and incentives in coaching because of their oftentimes debilitating impact on the internal dynamics that make for optimum skill development and performance improvement. Ironically, he noted, the more important the stakes of the external requirements and reinforcements, the more instruction distracts people from their own "natural learning" styles (p. 22). Gallwey's book marked a turning point for athletic coaching and is frequently hailed as a milestone in the modern coaching movement, particularly since the publication of his companion book, *The Inner Game of Work* (Gallwey, 2000). Gallwey's inner-game principles, however, are inextricably tied to the research and practice of adult education and learning theories dating back throughout the past century (Cox, 2006; Knowles, 1950, 1990; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Lindeman, 1926). Through this rich body of knowledge, the following characteristics of adult learners have come into focus:

- Adults are autonomous and self-directed.
- Adult learning builds on a wide variety of previous experiences, knowledge, mental models, self-direction, interests, resources, and competencies.
- Adults are relevancy oriented. They must see a reason for learning something, often connected to the developmental tasks of their social roles.
- Adults are solution focused. Instead of being interested in knowledge for its own sake, adult learning seeks immediate application and problem solving.
- Adult learning needs to be facilitated rather than directed. Adults want to be treated as equals and shown respect both for what they know and how they prefer to learn.
- Adults need specific behavioral feedback that is free of evaluative or judgmental opinions.
- Adults need follow-up support to continue and advance their learning over time.

These characteristics of adult learners help to explain why instructions and incentives so often interfere with high performance. Although it is tempting to tell people how to do things better, to make them practice, and to reward their progress, such "tell-and-sell" approaches fail to inspire and leverage the best of human learning and functioning. Indeed, they can just as easily undermine motivation, provoke resistance, usurp responsibility, rupture relationships, ignore reality, discourage risk taking, limit imagination, and restrict results (Pink, 2009; Kohn, 1999). They may "work" in the short run (if *work* is understood as compliance), but they seldom work in the long run (if *work* is understood as mastery), and they rarely generate significant improvement, at least not until they are abandoned in favor of self-directed learning. Instructions come with an implicit *should*

as to what is to be done, implying that there is a right way to do something. That *should* undermines autonomy and self-direction. Instructions also build more on the experience base of the coach than of the teacher, which may or may not be viewed as relevant and workable in the eyes of the teacher. Incentives only make this worse, setting up a dynamic of enforcement rather than support. In short, the use of instructions and incentives violates much of what has been learned about adult education and learning theory. They generate the resistance with which many teachers and schools are all too familiar. Gallwey (2000, 2008) was right when he asserted there must be a better way to learn.

Todd left the business world to become a teacher because he wanted to do work that was more meaningful to him. But he had just two months of training in the summer and he was assigned to teach freshman English in an urban high school to a class who were reading between a second- and a sixth-grade reading level. He was scared and unsure. He didn't understand the students' behavior. He felt defeated and ineffective. He wasn't sure he could make a difference. The students sensed his fear and took advantage of it. He knew I wanted him to be successful. He was open to suggestions, and we worked on setting up routines and procedures. We worked by brainstorming, planning, and problem solving. As time went on, he began to come up with more and more of the ideas on his own. I did a lot of scaffolding, with a kind of gradual release model. Now he's using that same philosophy with his students. He's becoming an effective teacher and he plans to continue teaching!

*Cheryl, high school literacy coach*

At the same time that educators were studying and developing adult learning theories, psychologists were seeking to understand and improve the dynamics of growth-fostering relationships. These psychologies include many schools of thought and a wide variety of therapeutic orientations. Traditions that most directly inform evocative coaching include humanistic psychology, positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, social cognitive theory and neuroscience, motivational interviewing, and Nonviolent Communication. Drawing upon these traditions, we can say that the following recognitions undergird evocative coaching (Tschannen-Moran, B., 2010, p. 213):

- People are inherently creative and capable.
- The human brain is hardwired to enjoy novelty and growth, which leads to an inherent joy of learning.

- Learning takes place when people actively take responsibility for constructing meaning from their experience (either confirming or changing what they already know).
- The meanings people construct determine the actions they take.
- Every person is unique, and yet all people have the same universal needs.
- Empathy, mutuality, and connection make people more cooperative and open to change.
- “People don’t resist change; they resist being changed” (Borwick, 1969, p. 20).
- The more people know about their values, strengths, resources, and abilities, the stronger their motivation and the more effective their changes will be.

These recognitions explain why evocative coaching represents such a promising model for generating performance improvements in teachers and other educators. By assisting teachers to explore their experience with empathy and inquiry, rather than with evaluation and interrogation, evocative coaching produces freedom, increases positivity, stimulates curiosity, elevates self-efficacy, and leverages latent competencies in the service of desired outcomes. Such coaching does not try to change teachers and does not try to persuade them to do things the “right” way; rather, evocative coaching dances with teachers as they consider their options and invites them to become fully engaged in the process of discovering their own unique strategies for doing better.

When I first started as a coach, there were not many people doing this, so we pretty much had to make it up. They said, “Here’s the school you’re assigned to. Go to it.” The principal didn’t seem to know what I was supposed to do either. So I embraced that. I knew how to teach, so I adapted what I knew about teaching kids to teaching adults. I differentiated according to their differing needs.

*Nancy, technology integration coach*

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## What Makes Coaching Evocative?

The consistent awareness and application of the aforementioned principles from adult learning theories and growth-fostering psychologies is what makes coaching evocative. Teachers open up and find their voice when coaching taps into five salient, animating factors: consciousness, connection, competence, contribution,

and creativity. If coaches do not properly attend to these five concerns, the promise of transformational change is unlikely to be realized. When coaches do properly attend to them, educators often rise to new heights of ambition and ability, discovering, in the process, powerful new solutions to even the most persistent and complex of challenges.

## Concern for Consciousness

Coaching becomes evocative when the coach's concern for *consciousness* generates increased self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-monitoring on the part of the teacher. This lays the groundwork for all experiential learning. *Mindfulness*, defined as the nonjudgmental awareness of what is happening in the present moment, represents both the consciousness that makes conversations evocative as well as the consciousness generated by such conversations. There is no way to foster learning and growth apart from mindfulness. What happens in coaching conversations, both positive and negative, gets transferred to the learning laboratory of life experience. When coaching conversations are full of pressure, demands, and instructional "how-to's," teachers take that consciousness into their efforts to improve performance. They want to do things right, and they bring back reports of what they did wrong. When coaching conversations are full of empathy, requests, and curious "what-if's," however, teachers become more willing and able to play with different variables and to make appropriate, just-in-time innovations. They want to try new things, and they bring back reports of what went well.

Understanding this, evocative coaches enjoy listening to stories, expressing empathy, asking questions, and co-creating experiments that increase mindfulness. By demonstrating an appreciative interest in the whole person, including the fullness of their experience, evocative coaches expand awareness to include what is happening in the moment, what needs are being stimulated, and what strategies or approaches are working better than others. Assisting teachers to attend to such matters facilitates "natural learning." Paulo Freire (2000) called such facilitation the raising of a "critical consciousness" that engages learners in "reading their world." The goal of critical consciousness, according to Freire, is for people to become active agents in the creation of their own lives and of the democratic ideal in society.

A clear and accurate appreciation of the present moment, without generalizations, exaggerations, or evaluative judgments, is critical to continuous skill and performance improvements. One must recognize what is really going on. Evocative coaches learn to listen for the observational core behind stories and then, through empathy and inquiry, to make those dynamics known to the teacher. It is not a matter of pointing them out; it is rather a matter of helping teachers to

recognize and understand those dynamics for themselves. As Zeus and Skiffington (2000) write, “Coaching involves helping individuals access what they know. They may never have asked themselves the questions, but they have the answers. A coach assists, supports, and encourages individuals to find these answers” (p. 3).

As part of the self-awareness that grows from evocative coaching relationships, teachers may come to a greater awareness of their readiness to change. When teachers are feeling ambivalent about how best to meet instructional challenges, for example, evocative coaching can assist teachers to appreciate what that ambivalence is about and what they can learn from it. When teachers express resistance or defeat, communicating either an “I won’t” or “I can’t” attitude, the adroit use of empathy and inquiry, rather than analysis and pressure, soon translates into attitudes of “I might,” “I will,” “I am,” and “I still am” (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994). Building motivation and mobility is the key work of evocative coaching.

## Concern for Connection

Coaching also becomes evocative when coaches establish a life-giving *connection* with teachers. As with consciousness, this connection spills over in the ways teachers connect with themselves and with others in the school environment. The carrot and the stick may goad and prod people into action, but only life-giving, high-trust connections have the ability to inspire greatness. They free up teachers to venture out and take on new challenges by virtue of the safety net they represent. When the connection between teacher and coach is strong, the adventure of learning and performance improvement becomes an enjoyable game rather than a punishing task. Without such connections, coaches and teachers inevitably fall short of accomplishing their mission to promote student learning and success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). With such connections, a zone of possibility opens for teachers and schools to accomplish that mission in new and satisfying ways.

Attachment theory holds that incentives are not required for people to want to connect in productive ways with themselves and with others, because human beings are hardwired for connection. Connection is a universal human need that people seek to meet throughout the course of our lifetimes. Evocative coaching accepts and applies that view to the conversational process. It recognizes the power of listening, empathy, and inquiry to establish connection and foster growth. Freire (1970) attributed this power to “dialogue” and the action-reflection model of praxis learning. He noted that “dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants.” It is rather an act of co-creation that

comes from the connection itself. “Dialogue cannot exist,” Freire observed, “in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (p. 89). It is an act of courage and a sign of commitment to others.

Evocative coaching is dialogue coaching in Freire’s sense of the word. It is neither depositing ideas nor consuming information. It is rather engaging, energizing, and challenging people to discover the best in themselves and in their methods through the “miracle of dialogue” (Howe, 1993). That only happens when nobody is trying to win (Bohm, 1996). When coaches are trying to win over teachers to our point of view, dialogue does not happen, and no real connection is possible. Evocative coaching sets aside the desire to be right. It is love in action. It seeks to establish the quality of connection that makes learning and growth possible.

That quality of connection in schools has been heralded as the key for transforming schools into professional learning communities that have a shared focus on student learning (Lieberman, 2005; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). When they are functioning as they should, professional learning communities evidence productive collaboration, deprivatized teaching practice, and reflective dialogue (Seashore Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Members of the community continually research best practices to better serve students. Ongoing, rigorous professional inquiry supports joint deliberation as participants pursue data to bolster decision making (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Fullan, 2003). Because of the complexity of the decisions to be made by teachers, the quality of those decisions is enhanced by structures and time that foster connection and allow for collective deliberation. These processes, in turn, create the conditions that support educational excellence and student learning (Tschannen-Moran, M., 2009). Evocative coaching is one such process.

*Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that their students can learn to weave a world for themselves.*

*Parker Palmer (1998, p. 11)*

## Concern for Competence

Evocative coaches believe that teachers are whole (not broken and needing to be fixed), creative, resourceful, resilient, and able to master the art and science of teaching, even when teachers are out of touch with these abilities (Stober, 2006). The concern for *competence*, then, is not to “make” teachers competent. That approach gives priority to the expert knowledge of the coach. The concern is rather to discover, recognize, and celebrate the competence teachers already have. By

appreciating that competence, both obvious and latent, evocative coaches give priority to the learning process of teachers. Assisting teachers to clarify what they want and need, to identify and build upon their strengths, and to conduct no-fault learning experiments in the service of mutually agreed-upon goals are the keys to assisting teachers to make quantum leaps forward in the identification of designs and strategies that work for them.

The challenge for coaches, as already noted, is to suspend the desire to be right and to demonstrate our expertise. As well intentioned and as evidence-based as that demonstration may be, the expert approach communicates judgment and undermines confidence in the abilities of teachers to figure out their own best ways to meet both personal and professional requirements. Professional competence is not just a matter of knowing the right way to do something; it includes adaptively applying skills to masterfully meet the changing needs of emerging situations.

All professions deal with this dynamic. Professionals work within systemic constraints. Professional athletes, for example, compete within the rules of the game. The work of architects is governed by a set of codes and standards. So, too, with teachers, whose competence is increasingly being judged by the documented, standards-based learning of their students. The challenge of evocative coaching is to inspire teachers to meet those standards for their own good reasons and in their own unique ways. There is no one universal path to competence in any profession, unless that path is the love of learning and a commitment to continuous performance improvement. Until and unless that passion is evoked, the process of coaching will revert to instructions and incentives, and the competence of teachers will go both unrecognized and unfulfilled. Once that passion is evoked, however, coaching enables teachers to engage their competence for performance improvement. By paying attention to strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results, teachers find the motivation and self-efficacy for taking their competence to another level. Instead of a remediation of problems, evocative coaching generates an appreciation of possibilities. This shift from incompetence to competence changes both the tone and the outcomes of coaching.

## Concern for Contribution

Most teachers enter the field of education for more than just a paycheck; they want to make a *contribution* to the learning and well-being of students, families, and communities. Unfortunately, that interest too often gets buried under the stresses and strains of life and work. The pressures of schooling, exacerbated in the era of data-driven, standards-based accountability, can cause teachers to lose sight of the reason they became educators in the first place. Evocative coaches never fail to remember and always manage to communicate respect for that original inspiration.

Contribution, like all the other life-giving concerns of evocative coaching, is a universal human need. When it is recognized, honored, and met, people gain not only a sense of their destiny, cause, and calling (Secretan, 2004), they also gain the satisfaction that comes from connecting the dots between everyday realities and transcendent activities. When teachers believe that they are making a difference—a contribution—then they yearn to express and improve that contribution on every front.

That is the powerful gift evocative coaches give to discouraged and burned-out teachers. By honoring teachers' contributions, evocative coaches awaken teachers' passions. That alone is enough to trigger a quantum leap forward for some teachers. When the need for contribution is dismissed, minimized, ridiculed, or caught in the crossfire of conflicting interests, teaching becomes a chore, and surviving to retirement becomes the goal. No wonder such teachers fail to experiment with new methods and inspire student success! They no longer believe in even the possibility, let alone the certainty, of contribution. Evocative coaches turn the tables on this dynamic by our own certainty that a contribution can always be made. "My certainty is greater than your doubt" is a key framework of evocative coaching (Buck, 2006). Evocative coaches never fail to acknowledge contribution, regardless of how small or seemingly insignificant, in the experiences teachers share. By framing manageable goals and celebrating successful moments, by sharing in what is all too often the private glory of a teachable moment seized, evocative coaches build teacher self-efficacy.

*Self-efficacy* is the belief that one has the capability to initiate or sustain desired performance improvements (Bandura, 1994, 1997). This belief has been linked to effort, persistence, and resilience in the face of setbacks. It is the coach's job, then, to communicate a contagious confidence in the teacher's capability. When coaches have a "can-do" attitude, teachers develop a "can-learn" attitude. That is the subtle shift we hope to stimulate through the evocative coaching process. Evocative coaches support the development of self-efficacy beliefs through four sources: encouragement from others (verbal persuasion), modeling (vicarious experiences), awareness of emotions (somatic awareness), and experiences of success with the target skill (mastery experiences) (Bandura, 1997). This becomes easier and more effective when people shift from aversive motivators, such as fear and disgust, to attractive motivators, such as hope and contribution.

## Concern for Creativity

In addition to paying attention to consciousness, connection, competence, and contribution, coaching must also unleash *creativity* if it is to be evocative. That happens naturally when coaches approach the coaching space as a no-fault playground in



which teachers can follow their intrinsic motivation and adopt a beginner's mind as to what exactly will be the best steps for them to take in order achieve desired outcomes and enhance their quality of life. Creativity cannot be coerced; it can only be invited. The more attached coaches become to a particular strategy, and the harder we press for teachers to adopt that strategy, the more we will generate constriction and conformity rather than expansion and creativity. Instead of entertaining new interpretations and possibilities, brainstorming and exploring a wide variety of hypotheses, coaches can have the opposite effect on teachers when we push or incentivize them to do things the "right way." Although evidence-based methodologies are worth watching and practicing to see how they go and how they feel, true performance mastery emerges only when teachers have the freedom and desire to creatively adapt and appropriate these methodologies for themselves.

Creativity starts with curiosity, an intrinsic part of human nature that needs only to be unleashed and encouraged. Just as little children leverage curiosity to learn through the process of trial and correction, falling down and picking themselves up again to get where they want to go (much to the delight of adoring parents and significant others), so do mature adults have a natural inclination to explore new frontiers, to test their limits, and to make just-in-time adjustments in the service of desired outcomes. Unfortunately, this natural inclination is thwarted by the adult tendency to frame experience in terms of "trial and error" rather than "trial and correction," "win-lose" instead of "win-learn." Nothing blocks the creative impulse more than judgments of failure, both internal and external.

*The problem with judgment is that it makes people feel shamed. They are humiliated by being judged, and this lessens their ability to listen actively, recognize what they might do differently, and learn from the experience.*

*Terry Bacon (2006, pp. 86–87)*

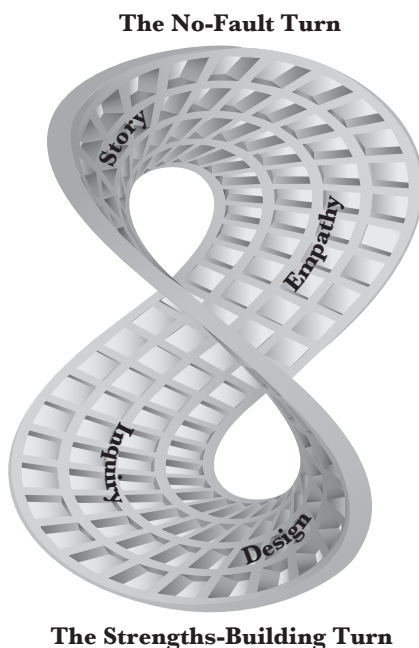
Understanding this, evocative coaches use empathy and inquiry to turn the coaching dynamic into a safe and engaging opportunity for give and take in which coaches and teachers alike can explore freely what they want on the way to performance improvement. There is no performance anxiety when it comes to evocative coaching. There is only positive energy, as the conversational space is filled with laughter, humor, delight, and wonder. Whether things work well or not, evocative coaches respond with fascination and joy. No experience is so terrible as to have no redeeming aspects; nor is any experience so perfect as to have no improvable aspects. All experience is cherished for what it has to teach and give us. Creativity frames everything through the lens of appreciation. In a word, evocative coaching is fun.

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## The Dynamic Dance of Evocative Coaching

As we shall see throughout the rest of this book, and as we have alluded to in our introductory remarks, evocative coaching is a dynamic dance that can be choreographed with four steps: Story–Empathy–Inquiry–Design. The first two steps, Story–Empathy, constitute what we call “the No-Fault Turn.” They are designed to help teachers relax, to establish trust, to introduce new perspectives on experience, and to appreciate the intrinsic value of whatever is going on. They set the stage, then, for the second two steps, Inquiry–Design, which represent “the Strengths-Building Turn” of evocative coaching. Instead of trying to identify and fix weaknesses, evocative coaches invite teachers to identify and build on their strengths. Once designs are field tested, the process then loops back for additional iterations. Simply put, evocative coaching uses *empathy* and *inquiry* to appreciate *story* and create *design*. It is a teacher-centered, no-fault, strengths-based coaching model that departs in significant ways from what often goes on under the guise of coaching or supervision. Rather than focusing on how coaches can improve teacher performance, often through constructive criticism and advice giving, we focus on how coaches can improve our relationships with teachers, so that teachers get motivated and empowered to improve their own performance and quality of life. This happens when coaches:

- Give teachers our full, undivided attention
- Accept and meet teachers where they are right now, without making them wrong
- Ask and trust teachers to take charge of their own learning and growth
- Make sure teachers are talking more (ideally much more) than we are
- Enable teachers to appreciate the positive value of their own experiences
- Harness the strengths teachers have to meet challenges and overcome obstacles
- Reframe difficulties and challenges as opportunities to learn and grow
- Invite teachers to discover possibilities and find answers for themselves
- Dialogue with teachers regarding their higher purposes for teaching
- Uncover teachers’ natural impulses to engage with colleagues and students
- Assist teachers to draw up personal blueprints for professional mastery
- Support teachers in brainstorming and trying new ways of doing things
- Maintain an upbeat, energetic, and positive attitude at all times
- Collaborate with teachers to design and conduct appropriate learning experiments
- Enable teachers to build supportive environments and teams
- Use humor to lighten the load, and
- Inspire and challenge teachers to go beyond what they would do alone

**FIGURE 1.1 THE MÖBIUS MODEL OF EVOCATIVE COACHING**

All this constitutes the distinctive elements of evocative coaching. Story–Empathy–Inquiry–Design represents the dance steps that evocative coaches follow. The four steps are portrayed on a Möbius strip, where each loop of the strip represents one of the turns (see Figure 1.1), to reflect the dynamic and expansive interplay of these elements in the service of continual learning and growth. The steps are easy to remember, albeit challenging to practice. Coaches are so accustomed to traditional “tell-and-sell” methods that we find it hard to trust more evocative, teacher-centered approaches. Yet traditional methods have not reliably produced desired results in a desired fashion. They too often lead to power struggles, disillusionment, and declining performance rather than to power sharing, encouragement, and improving performance. To turn that around, it is time for a new vision, model, and framework for improving instruction, one conversation at a time.

We portray the dynamic dance of evocative coaching on a Möbius strip for good reason: Möbius strips are fascinating, expansive, and iterative creations. Although named after the German mathematician and theoretical astronomer August Ferdinand Möbius (1790–1868), who was one of two people to “discover” its unique characteristics in 1858 (the other was Johann Listing, another German

mathematician), variations on the Möbius design can be dated back more than 4,000 years ago to the early alchemists of Alexandria, Egypt. The mysterious qualities of the design, as a two-dimensional object in three-dimensional space, reflect the human quest for continuity and novelty within the bounds of space and time. To see how a Möbius strip works, take a strip of paper, give it a half-twist, and attach the ends. Now trace along the surface with a pencil, and without ever lifting the point you will end up back where you started, having traversed both sides of the paper. Cut along that line and the Möbius strip doubles in size rather than splitting in half. Amazing! It is not unlike how we experience the evocative coaching process: we find ourselves engaged by its intriguing complexity and invited to explore its endless possibility.

## Story

Coaching begins when teachers share their stories. These stories reflect the sense teachers are making of their experiences. Stories are never the experiences themselves (i.e., the map is not the territory); they are rather attempts to understand, value, and shape experiences in ways that fit together and guide future actions.

Because stories—both the stories teachers tell to themselves and those they tell to others—represent the raw materials of coaching, it is possible for everything to change in the twinkling of an eye. Tell a new story (draw a new map), and we get a new experience. That is especially true when we begin to work with the attributions of cause and effect that are explicit and/or implicit in most stories (Loehr, 2007, p. 4). Coaches listen for those attributions because they illuminate a teacher's path of development. For example:

- What is the overarching theme? Does it lie more with danger or opportunity?
- Where is the locus of control? Does it lie more with the teacher or with others?
- How is the problem defined? Does it use more enemy or ally images?
- What is the language of capacity? Does it lie more with skills or resources?
- How is the objective defined? Does it lie more with metrics or morale?
- What is happening with energy? Is it emptying out or filling up?
- What is happening with values? Are they being honored or compromised?
- What is happening with needs? Are they being met, denied, or sacrificed?

There is a multitude of attributions we can listen for, because there is a multitude of stories teachers tell in explaining the way things are. Explanatory style theory makes clear the wide range of differences we may encounter, including optimistic and pessimistic attributions (Seligman, 2006). The secret is to listen mindfully, creating a safe, no-fault zone without a hint of judgment or haste, and then

to ask new questions that invite teachers to explore story variants and takeaways. How else can the story be told? What might have happened if different decisions had been made? How does the experience advance our understandings of and aspirations for professional praxis? Reframing stories in this way, approaching and expanding on teacher stories through curiosity, is a technique we call “imaginative listening.” Developed further in Chapter Three, such listening is an attempt to flesh out the details and enlarge the meanings of stories in the service of teacher learning, growth, and change. It may be tempting for coaches to rush through stories to get to strategies, but that often generates unhappy results. Quick fixes rarely work, and if they work they rarely stick. Unappreciated stories tend to undermine behavioral change efforts. That is why evocative coaching views story listening as an essential first step in the dynamic dance.

## Empathy

The stories teachers tell are filled with attributions as to what is going on, what works and what doesn’t work, who deserves credit or blame, and how things might improve. Most of the time, those attributions include a mix of empirical observations and subjective evaluations, both positive and negative. When things are going well, the story has a more upbeat and happy energy. When things are not going well, the story has a more downbeat and unhappy energy. Either way, teachers need to feel emotionally secure, understood, appreciated, and accepted in order to release their energy and channel it in creative directions. Until and unless this happens, not much will come from coaching. The confusion between observations and evaluations will escalate into a distracting din, making it harder rather than easier for teachers to find a way forward. That is why empathy represents such a critical part of evocative coaching. Empathy, an essential aspect of story listening, clears the palette so that new interpretations and ideas can emerge. It soothes the inner voice and facilitates the inner game.

Although expressing empathy has long been recognized as a critical part of therapy, it is not often talked or written about in the context of coaching. That may be due, in part, to confusion among pity, sympathy, and authentic empathy. Pity is feeling sorry for someone, which does not foster change. Sympathy, also known as “emotional contagion,” is sharing someone’s feelings, which can provide valuable clues as to what is going on but which can also lead to advising, rescuing, and defending behaviors. Authentic empathy is a respectful, no-fault understanding and appreciation of someone’s experience; as such, it is an orientation and practice that fosters radically new change possibilities.

Empathy does this by shifting the focus from particular strategies to universal needs. As we have noted, people tell stories to make meaning of experiences; we

attempt to describe and account for things that happen through our narratives. When good things happen, we celebrate with stories; when bad things happen, we mourn with stories. Human beings are nothing if we are not sense-making and storytelling beings. Often, however, we misattribute our feelings to the particular strategies of who did what to whom when, rather than to what is happening with the underlying needs in a much broader and more life-affirming sense. As a result of this misattribution, people get caught up in self-defeating cycles of interpretations, judgments, criticisms, and diagnoses (Rosenberg, 2005, pp. 52–54). This cycle is counterproductive to both the coaching dynamic and to performance improvement.

*Being ashamed of our mistakes turns them into crimes.*

*Confucius*

Evocative coaches guide teachers to sort out strategies and needs in order to facilitate the movement and flow of both the coaching conversation and the developmental progress of teachers. To do that, as we will see in Chapter Four, coaches can learn to effectively use the Nonviolent Communication model developed by Rosenberg (2005) and others over the past fifty years. Upon hearing a story, coaches can notice and reflect the teacher's feelings and needs in ways that release tension, facilitate calm, and expand awareness. Doing this effectively requires fluency in the language of authentic feelings and universal human needs (d'Ansembourg, 2007). Although expressing empathy and connecting with teachers in this way is choreographed as the second step in the dynamic dance of evocative coaching, it is, in fact, a step coaches return to over and over again. Empathy not only feels good, it expands a teacher's range of options and prepares her or him to move forward in new ways.

## Inquiry

As teachers tell and explore the richness of their stories, receiving empathy for the feelings and needs that are most alive for them, the flow of evocative coaching turns naturally to the steps of Inquiry and Design. Through Story–Empathy, teachers come to understand themselves in new ways and become open to the consideration and observation of new possibilities. As a result, they eagerly want to notice what works and to learn how to make things work better. The first two steps of evocative coaching, “the No-Fault Turn,” are designed to broker that eagerness. Once it is there, the next two steps, “the Strengths-Building Turn,” translate that eagerness into action. And that happens best when coaches inquire into teacher strengths, vitalities, aspirations, and possibilities rather than into weaknesses, deficiencies, requirements, and avoidances.

As we have seen, coaching does not become evocative when coaching conversations revolve around how teachers can fix the problems they are having. This is not to say that teachers have no problems; this is rather to say that it is easier to outgrow problems when teachers focus on their strengths, vitalities, and aspirations. Both adult learning theories and growth-fostering psychologies support this approach. Research indicates that appreciative, strengths-based inquiries are more effective and empowering than analytic, deficits-based inquiries (Buckingham, 2007; Cooperrider, 2000; Fredrickson, 2002, 2003, 2009). They also represent a much more enjoyable way to learn. Building on assets facilitates change. It also represents yet another way to reframe stories and engage in story listening. It is wonderfully re-orienting and empowering to ask open-ended, strengths-based questions such as:

- What is working with your approach? What else is working? What else?
- What talents and abilities are serving you well? What else?
- What's the best thing that's happening now? What else?
- What fills you with energy and hope? What else?
- What enables you to do as well as you are doing? What else?
- What is the positive intent of your actions? What else?
- What resources do you have available? What else?
- What would success look like? What else would it look like?

The point of such inquiries, which can easily be used in all kinds of conversations, is to elevate the focus, self-efficacy, resourcefulness, and wherewithal of teachers. The more aware teachers are of their problems, deficits, and limitations, the less likely they are to imagine and pursue new possibilities. In Chapter Five we explain how appreciative, strengths-based inquiries and observations turn that around (Cooperrider, 2000). They remind teachers that they have what it takes to learn what they want to learn and to go where they want to go.

Asking teachers what and how they want to learn, rather than telling them what to do, enables teachers to discover and design that learning for themselves through observation and exploration. Strengths-based questions also remind teachers that stories of hardship, difficulty, frustration, and failure do not represent the whole story. The point of asking “What else?” on multiple occasions is to raise awareness as to other ways of telling the story. Knowing that in every situation something is always working, no matter how bleak or discouraging things may appear, coaches can be courageous in our inquiries about the high points and life-enriching moments that are worth celebrating.

Along with appreciating teacher strengths and vitalities, evocative coaches inquire into the aspirations teachers carry for themselves, their students, and their schools. Aspirations power change. Where do teachers want to go with their

own best practices? Who would they like to observe and how would they like to learn from the practices of others? Assisting teachers to visualize their answers to and feelings about such questions increases both motivation and self-efficacy. The more concrete and tangible the images, the more teachers anticipate, appropriate, and assimilate their energy. Through focusing exercises and other creative modalities, teachers become engaged with their visions, open to new possibilities, and eager to try new approaches. Coaches can ask both direct questions (“If you could make any three wishes come true, wishes that would infuse you and this situation with energy and life, what would they be?”) and indirect questions (“If a miracle happened tonight such that these problems were gone and everything was wonderful, what would be the first thing you would notice when you got to school in the morning?”) to get the juices flowing. Such questions mount aspirations and invite possibilities that beckon teachers forward.

## Design

When teacher stories are received and reframed properly, through story listening, expressing empathy, and appreciative inquiry, ideas bubble up and teachers become inspired to design ways to turn their aspirations into actions and their possibilities into realities. Little to no instructions or incentives are required to get this going. Instead, once teachers become detached from both the fear of failure and the illusions as to how bad and impossible things are, they become fearless in the self-directed pursuit of that which will enable them to learn and grow.

The key in the design phase of evocative coaching, then, is for coaches to avoid reintroducing judgmental frames as to how things are to be done “right” or even “better.” Coaches are not the experts telling teachers what to do. We are the co-creators with teachers of experimental designs that may or may not work out as expected. Either outcome represents success, as long as the experiments are conducted, the data are collected, and the results are incorporated into future experiments. Skills and performance improvements are continuous, iterative, personalized, and evolutionary. What works for one person, in one place, at one time may not work for another. Coaches and teachers therefore design strategies that teachers find intrinsically interesting, imminently doable, and inherently relevant to the challenges they face. That is why we refer to Inquiry–Design as constituting “the Strengths-Building Turn”: it builds on the best of what is to generate the best of what might be.

Brainstorming, a topic we explore more fully along with field testing in Chapter Six, is an essential part of design thinking that forwards the action. Brainstorming evokes many new ideas about how to do things better without



regard to their value, feasibility, or desirability. Asking teachers “What else?” engages their creativity. Sharing in the process of generating new ideas, taking turns with teachers as one idea cascades and morphs into another, can open up the process even further. Basic protocols for brainstorming include:

- Setting a minimum number of possibilities to generate
- Setting a time limit to keep things moving rapidly
- Withholding judgment or evaluation of possibilities
- Encouraging wild and exaggerated possibilities
- Letting no possibility go unsaid
- Building on the possibilities put forth by others
- Combining and expanding possibilities
- Going for quantity rather than quality

An excellent question for teachers and coaches to brainstorm around is, “What could I pay attention to that most directly impacts on how things are working in this situation?” Another question is, “Where could I go and who could I watch to learn techniques I may not yet have tried or mastered myself?” A third question is, “How could I handle this situation differently than I have ever tried before?” Such questions expand awareness and make learning both self-directed and enjoyable. When teachers are helped to identify and focus their attention on what’s important, without being told what to do, they are nudged to make new choices and to try out new behaviors with a minimum of resistance. The fully engaged mind, freed from judgments and prescriptions, quiets negative self-talk and frees up energy for change.

Whatever gets generated through brainstorming, evocative coaches assist teachers to review the options and field test their ideas through learning experiments that are challenging and yet not overwhelming. There is no way to predict what any particular teacher will come up with, but we can dance with teachers to play with different possibilities, to pick the ones that appear intrinsically interesting and valuable, to design experiments to see what they have to offer, and to align environments so as to make those experiments more fruitful. By assisting teachers to become confident and optimistic about their ability to conduct learning experiments, coaches become catalysts for growth and change. The old maxim, “Where there is a will there is a way,” holds even more power the other way around: “Where there is a way there is a will.” As teachers see a way forward for improving their skills and performance in the classroom, motivation and movement are sure to follow—at which point the dynamic dance of evocative coaching starts all over again.

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## Summary

Evocative coaching is a dynamic dance between story and design set to the music of empathy and inquiry. Although the dance always contains elements of improvisation, the flow of Story–Empathy–Inquiry–Design serves as an excellent starting point for new coaches as well as a challenging counterpoint for veteran coaches who may be used to more traditional “tell-and-sell” approaches. Given its foundation in adult-learning theory and growth-fostering psychologies, as well as its demonstrated success in skills and performance improvement, evocative coaching holds great promise as it becomes an integral part of professional learning communities.

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## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What did Galileo mean when he said, “You cannot teach a person anything. You can only help him find it within himself”?
2. How does evocative coaching differ from your experience of traditional supervision and mentoring?
3. What is the best learning experience you have ever had as an adult? What made that experience so wonderful? How has that affected the ways you work with others?
4. What principles of adult learning theory are most relevant to your own experience of learning as an adult? How are those principles different, if at all, from the pedagogy of children?
5. What makes learning enjoyable for you? Why is it valuable to incorporate fun into the coaching process?
6. How can you suspend judgment in coaching when you disagree with something someone has said or done? Why is this important to the coaching process?
7. What happens to the coaching conversation when coaches get attached to an outcome? How can you release attachment and engage curiosity?
8. Call to mind a particular teacher you know or have worked with. How might evocative coaching enable that teacher to achieve instructional improvement in ways that other approaches have not?