



Supporting Staff Using Coaching Model

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Students with autism spectrum disorder are placed in classrooms (i.e. regular and special education) with teachers who are educated in varying degrees of knowledge of this disability. A teacher may have attended one or several days of training, individual conferences related to a methodology, or read an article or book. After preparing for having a student on the autism spectrum join their class, the teacher may still feel inadequate to implement necessary strategies to help the student. They put great effort, time and energy into helping individual students, but are frustrated when those efforts seem to produce little improvement. The teacher becomes "burned out," changes positions or moves out of the district in search for another teaching job with more support and the hope of a positive experience.

Part of the teacher's struggle may be in understanding the student on the autism spectrum and their challenges. Individuals on the autism spectrum have their own language barriers to work through. Receptively, they may have difficulty understanding what others say through idioms, slang, and elaboration of a topic. Sometimes individuals think people talk too fast or give more information making it difficult to process. Expressively, individuals on the autism spectrum may speak in short phrases, mumble, and only say the last word they hear or even create their own language. Many struggle with over or under sensitivities to an environment (e.g., noises, smells). Another area of difficulty includes understanding the many social skills presented to them every minute of every hour of every day. Learning about individuals on the autism spectrum can be complex and challenging depending on their multifaceted needs.

One model to help coordinate an intricate program for an individual on the autism spectrum who is struggling to be successful in the classroom and to guide the teacher on specific strategies that are effective while providing hands-on training to the staff in the natural classroom setting is called coaching. In the business world, there are many books written about using coaching to improve work performance (Fullan, 2001; Fournies, 2000). Coaching provides an opportunity for one-on-one training, guiding, instructing, observing, modeling, evaluating performance, and providing feedback.

A coaching model pre-planning and great commitment in wanting to make changes in the way instruction is presented by willing to learn new methodologies, and being open to constructive criticism to make the necessary changes. The teacher must also be willing to let others come into their room to give suggestions during class time.

The person who may be best as a coach probably is a member from the school, district, or cooperatives autism team. This team may include behavior consultants, occupational therapists, speech and language clinicians, teachers, coordinators, or school psychologists. The person acting as the autism coach should be well trained and have experience in many effective methodologies (e.g., structured teaching, errorless teaching, data collection, communication programs, social skills training, sensory integration) for individuals on the autism spectrum. The autism coach also needs to be someone who is a good listener, supportive, and non-threatening. The goal of autism coaching is to be helpful to the teacher and staff in the classroom so changes will occur. Coaching and being coached requires an intense time commitment of approximately four days including time before or after school for all involved. During the concentrated time, the coach may be observing, interacting, modeling, and implementing strategies with the individual on the autism spectrum and with the staff involved.

Let's Get Started

Prior to starting the coaching process, the autism coach needs to take time to review important documents from the student's special education file. The current individualized education program (IEP), case conference notes with pertinent information, the functional behavior assessment, behavior intervention plans, and the psychological testing which gives explicit information about the individual's characteristics (e.g., language and social deficits, repetitive behavior, sensory needs) should all be reviewed. The autism coach should talk individually with the parents, teacher, administrator, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, and paraprofessional about their concerns for the student. Ask:

- What does each person understand about the student's characteristics of autism?
- Can individual's strengths and interests be identified?
- How are the individual's sensory needs being met?
- How does the student socialize?
- What form of communication does the student use?
- What is the hoped outcome?

All of these questions will help the autism coach build a background about the individual with autism and a better understanding of what the staff understands about the disability of autism and the individual about to be coached.

Prior to starting, an informal short meeting with everyone involved in the coaching experience needs to occur. The autism coach leads the meeting to discuss pertinent information gathered from the review of the student's records and the targeted behaviors which will be addressed. The coach will provide a framework of the coaching process.

- Coach starts assisting in the class in order to get to know the student while starting to try new strategies. Teacher watches coach as teaching.
- Teacher tries strategies with the support of the coach.
- Coach, teacher, and related service persons stay after school to teach and learn new skills and create supports.
- Data collection established to gather continual information to show progress over time.
- Coach sits away from the class providing feedback from afar to watch the teacher try the strategies on own.
- Written plan is put into place to continue strategies.
- Coach visits weekly for some time and gradually extends time to monthly.

An estimated timeline will be established and an agreed upon commitment from everyone is essential. The support from each member will look differently but all are there to support the teacher, paraprofessionals, and student in order to build capacity after the autism coach leaves the situation. The meeting ends with a specific date to reconvene at the end of the coaching experience to discuss a plan with everyone.

Possible Schedule:

Day 1: Autism coach arrives to the classroom with ideas (e.g., visuals, sensory, and communication ideas) of what strategies to try. The coach plans on staying for the entire day. As strategies are tried, the coach will give a short description of why each is being implemented. If not, they will be explained during the lesson at a break in the day or after school.

After School of Day 1 (Focus on communication strategies): Autism coach stays after school with the teacher and speech and language therapist (SLP) to plan what strategies need to be in place for the student to communicate and for the staff to know how to communicate with the student. This time should involve creating

supports for a communication system to implement the next day. The discussion from the beginning needs to be practical and the details need to be worked through to allow the teacher to implement the ideas immediately.

Day 2: The SLP will make time within the school day to model the strategies with the teacher and autism coach within the classroom setting. The autism coach will also model the communication strategies talked about after school on day one. The teacher then tries the strategy. The autism coach should be trying a second strategy involving sensory integration to be sure the student's needs are being met.

After School Day 2 (Focus on sensory integration strategies): Autism coach points out the successes of the day and asks the teacher for his/her insights about progress seen for the student. Time needs to be allowed for questions. Then the occupational therapist (OT) gets involved to teach strategies related to sensory integration which meets the students sensory input needs (e.g., arousal or calming). Specific materials (e.g., Wilbarger brushing program) are demonstrated, matched with an explanation of the benefits of sensory integration for the student. Scheduling sensory integration is essential throughout the day (e.g., before a difficult task), this may take creative problem solving and scheduling to implement sensory programming for the student.

Day 3: The OT visits the classroom during the day to model sensory integration strategies for the autism coach, teacher, and paraprofessionals. All staff involved try the strategy with the student while the OT is present so guidance can be provided as needed. After the OT leaves the room, the autism coach and the staff continue to teach using both communication and sensory supports. The coach should also be focusing on academic supports that need to be implemented. Using task analysis, try to figure out where the breakdown of learning is occurring in order to make adjustments. It will be helpful to know the students strengths, interests, and preferences this day.

After School on Day 3 (Focus on academic strategies): Celebrate the student's successes for the day and discuss what strategies went well and what needs to be tweaked. The autism coach may need the support of a regular or special education teacher to provide assistance for curriculum information (e.g., objectives necessary for state standards) or accommodations. After school, spend time looking at specific areas of the curriculum with a discussion on how materials can be modified or adapted. Create new materials as needed. It may be essential to discuss the structure, schedules, and work systems (e.g., TEACCH methodology) needed to support the student. Take time to rearrange the room or create individual tasks the student can do independently. Coordinate the schedule with this time to structure the teaching.

Day 4: Teacher should be feeling comfortable about the communication and sensory intergration strategies and using them independently. Today, the autism coach should be modeling the academic strategies discussed on day three after school. Additional materials may need to be created during the day to make necessary adjustments. The autism coach will explore what strategies need to be implemented in the area of social deficits for the student. This is the last skill to teach.

Day 4 After School (Focus on social skill strategies): Celebrate the successes of the day and praise the teacher for all that has been accomplished. Together define areas where social skills seem imperative to teach the student. Using current curriculum or lessons, decide who will teach the individual with autism the necessary social skills. The lesson may involve other people within the building like the SLP, the school counselor, behavior consultant, or the school psychologist. Teaching social skills requires the support of multiple personnel to help with different skills. Discuss what works best in your building to support the individual on the autism spectrum. Develop specific lesson plans to implement the next day.

Day 5 (Focus on building capacity): The designated social skills instructor and autism coach can model a social skill lesson. Today an administrator should spend time in the classroom so the autism coach can be pointing out the positive strategies that are being implemented. This is a time to build the capacity for supporting the teacher. The day should allow time for feedback to the staff on the strategies taught throughout the coaching experience.

After School on Day 5: The entire team should meet to share the student's successes. The autism coach should have a written plan of all of the strategies that are being implemented to inform everyone. Time should be allotted for each member to share their part of the coaching experience and how they can continue to support the staff working with the individual on the autism spectrum. A date should be scheduled for the autism coach to meet with the staff in a week. Ask the teacher if she will want support in the classroom or time out of the classroom. Time can be scheduled during the teachers break time or after school if need be.

This five day schedule is only a suggestion. Individual OT, SLP, or other related staff may be available on different days depending on their time scheduled to be in the building. These days can be arranged to meet their needs. As a result, day two may involve the OT where day four may involve the SLP. Adjust the days as needed. Also, five days may not be necessary if the staff has a good handle on modifications to the academic curriculum. Only use this thorough outline if all skills need to be taught.

During the coaching process, behavior issues may need to be addressed. The staff may start to notice positive changes on day two due to implementing new strategies specifically addressing the needs of the student. It is best to start collecting data right away to see the progress of the student. Other problematic actions may need specific data collection (e.g., antecedent/behavior/consequence, time or frequency sample) in order to discover the function of the behavior. Relate the function to either a student needing to learn a new skill or learning how to implement a skill differently within the areas of communication, academics, social skills, and structuring the environment. The focal point during the process can be specific to a day of coaching (e.g., daily schedule ineffective then address on communication day with SLP). As strategies are created for the positive behavior support plan, continue to document the student's progress. On-going positive behavior supports and data collection is critical.

Another aspect of this model includes having this teacher and paraprofessional team be part of another autism coaching experience with a second student. Use staff to teach strategies and share their experiences with another teacher (e.g., train the trainer model).

The coaching model supports staff in becoming proficient at new skills when working with students with autism spectrum disorder. The coach will provide support, optimism, and clarify specific strategies to use with the individual student. Working collaboratively provides support for the student to become successful.

References

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