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## WHERE COACHING AND MENTORING MEET

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### Where Coaching and Mentoring Meet

*They are key to APs' career development, but they play different roles.*

—D Finkel

School districts practicing distributed leadership—a management style that combines delegation, collaboration, and teamwork—newly minted assistant principals benefit from interpersonal relationships that help them acclimate to the role. Mentors and coaches are key partners in this goal.

While definitions of mentoring and coaching vary, says Alice Shull, a NAESP-certified mentor and coach who works with new principals and assistant principals. But a key difference is that mentoring involves more open-ended, Socratic questioning that promotes self-discovery, while coaching is more directive and skills-based.

“A mentor does a lot of active listening and effective questioning, although that’s common to both,” Shull says. “But the kind of questioning and the kind of feedback a mentor offers pushes [the] mentee toward a point where they reflect on [questions such as], ‘What is my leadership style? What is my vision?’”

Mentors don’t tell protégés exactly how they should approach leadership, she notes. Instead, they ask: “What do you think about how you would do this at your school? How would you move forward in terms of being able to encourage your team to take on various responsibilities?” Shull adds, “It’s more of a questioning. It’s not a quick fix. The idea of mentoring is not to create a mini-me.”

She quotes former British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, who once said: “The greatest thing you can do for another man is not just share your riches, but reveal to him his own.” That means working from a strengths-based standpoint, discovering one’s assets and building off them to develop leadership skills and philosophies, Shull says.

“The bottom line with mentoring is developing a bond. It has to be a confidential, trusting relationship,” she says. “It’s not evaluative. The mentee needs to feel they can truly say what they need to.” If an assistant principal and principal clash, a mentor would ask questions about how to best resolve the issue, not tell the mentee what to do, she adds.

## Coaching Targets Specifics

Coaches focus more on learning and perfecting specific skills, Shull says. “A coach would help a teacher look at their practice and uncover the reality of a particular lesson,” she says. “A coach is going to do some effective questioning, as well: ‘How did you feel about your lesson?’ ‘What would you do differently if you were going to make the lesson more effective?’”

Using a sports analogy appropriate for someone based in Massachusetts, Shull notes that some would say that coaching is more directive. “Bill Belichick probably told Tom Brady what to do,” she says. “And there are practices within mentoring; it’s not a loose process, but it isn’t as prescriptive. A mentor can encourage something to happen, but the mentee sets the agenda.”

Shull also coaches mentors-in-training, which she notes is kind of a middle ground. “My cohort could be focused on six mentor competencies we want to make sure they accomplish. That coaching piece is more specific,” she says. “But on the other hand, sometimes I will be in a one-to-one conversation with a principal or upper-level administrator, and it shifts to mentoring because I need to be ... able to help them self-discover.”

For mentoring or coaching to be effective, assistant principals need to take the initiative—and especially if school budgets are tight.

“If the program is not automatically available, they need to go to their superintendent or principal and say, ‘I really want to work with a coach,’ or ‘I really want to work with a mentor,’” she says, while defining what they hope to accomplish. Principals can be helpful with certain aspects of coaching, but beyond the basics, the “AP might need to say, ‘I want somebody outside this realm,’ whether it’s outside the school system, or somebody at another school.”

The best thing a superintendent or principal can do for a new assistant principal is to encourage them to find their own mentor—somebody they are comfortable working with, Shull says. “Many school systems take a lot of pride in their pipelines—their aspiring principal programs,” she says. “Some APs are in situations where that’s not the case. That doesn’t mean it’s not a good school system, it just doesn’t have that vision.”

Right now, new leaders are suffering because superintendents are cutting back budgets,” Shull adds. “They aren’t hiring experts who are trained and have the body of knowledge around mentoring or coaching. It has to be a really solid, structured plan to develop this person—for them to grow themselves.”

**Ed Finkel** is a full-time freelance writer who covers K–12 education and other topics.

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