

# Reflecting on Coach and Coaching

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It was at an NSRF meeting in Chicago in 2005 that some of us were talking about our use of the terms “Coach” and “coaching” to describe what NSRF Facilitators do with their Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). I began to look for parallels, for connections with “coaching” in athletics as I had been a basketball and baseball Coach in my early days of high school teaching.

Actually it was early in the ‘80s that I first heard the use of “Coach” applied to teaching outside of athletics, specifically in the use of the phrase “Student-as-Worker, Teacher-as-Coach” in the Fifth Principle of the Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. As I began trying to use that pedagogical concept in my own teaching, more actively engaging my students, some of them objected to “student-as-worker” as they were not used to doing as much of the “work” of learning themselves, depending more on me, as their teacher-as-provider-of-information, rather than their “Coach.” Perhaps that Fifth Principle should read “Student-as-Player, Teacher-as-Coach!” And I remember Grant Wiggins referencing his experiences as a secondary school soccer Coach in his seminal Assessing Student Performances: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing (Jossey-Bass, 1993). Here was a clear connection, and a challenge, to what I believe we’re trying to do as “Coaches” with our CFGs:

*“In my third year of teaching, I also coached junior-varsity boy’s soccer.... By mid October we were 0 and 6. As any coach would do, I had to fundamentally alter those initial plans (no matter that the lessons were ‘essential’ and had been planned as part of a logical and thorough soccer ‘syllabus’); I had to carefully analyze performance weakness, make basic adjustments, and work on the major causes of the current failure. But when did a faculty ever think or act this way... When did a group of reading or science teachers ever say, in ‘midseason,’ ‘We’re 0 and 6 and we’d better make fundamental changes in our program, our use of time, and our use of personnel?’”(pg. 277)*

Although Wiggins is talking about his experiences with secondary school students, isn’t this what we Coaches try to do with our adult CFGs? To have teachers use the Consultancy protocol to take an honest look at their students’ achievement? To have teachers use a Looking-at/Learning-From-Student-Work protocol to Coach them in analyzing how to make needed changes in their teaching practice? Wiggins goes on to point out, still drawing on his experiences as a soccer Coach, “As all good athletes and coaches know, judgment and ‘anticipation’ (perception of the unfolding situation) are essential elements of competence...” And as all effective CFG Coaches come to know

- reading their teacher/participants and making on-the-spot, in-the-moment, in-flight corrections is an essential element of effective CFG coaching.

Many of us know students who stay in high school basically just to play sports - that certainly was a key factor for me - and they come to count on their Coaches to teach them how to play basketball or baseball or any sport, and for that matter, theater or music. What is it about playing a sport, and Coaching a sport that is so powerful, not only for our young people, but for the adults involved, and that is all too often missing in the classroom? Herb Childress wrote an article in the April 1998 issue of Phi Delta Kappan entitled, Seventeen Reasons Why Football Is Better Than High School, (thanks to one of our NSRF Facilitators, David Leo-Nyquest for this reference). Here, paraphrased, are some of Childress's key points - in football (the author, who dislikes football, says even football), teenagers are considered important contributors, are encouraged to excel, and are honored - as we do with adults in their CFGs. In baseball, players can choose their own role (the position they want to work on perfecting), and the more-skilled players teach the less-skilled - and our "players" learn to collaborate, coming to de-privatize their teaching, making it public in their CFGs. In basketball, there is a great deal of individual instruction and encouragement from the adults, from the Coaches, and the numbers support this kind of individualization, this personalization - typically a ratio of 15 or fewer players per Coach! - the size of our CFGs (and why not the number of students in school classrooms?). Granted there is a key difference in that students voluntarily try out for a sports team, for the drama production, or to be in the school orchestra - but students will tell you that it is the teacher who cares about what he or she is teaching, and who cares about them, who knows them, that can make all the difference in the world even in a required course, just like a Coach.

As CFG Coaches we experience similar dynamics and have felt the difference when teachers are required to attend a CFG, or volunteer, and know the difference that they come to feel, to experience when they "do the work," and are not lectured-to about how to be better teachers. It is often our personalization, our individual attention in Coaching our participants that lead them to say, "This is the best professional development I've ever experienced!" This, too, is what Nancy Mohr wrote about in an earlier Connections article ("Golf Progress Report," Fall 2002), describing her own experience striving to learn how to play golf, "Golf coaches generally teach through feedback. I quickly learned that the proportion was about 90% 'warm' feedback and 10% 'cool.'" I'll never forget the time a teacher in a CFG I was Coaching said it didn't matter about which came first, the warm or the cool feedback; just tell her what we think. The group proceeded to jump right into cool feedback and the teacher was shortly in tears. Ever since I insist on starting with lots of warm feedback.

Nancy went on to talk about her difficulties with change, in learning to do things differently in swinging the golf club - specifically, to follow-through (in itself not a bad idea for teachers in CFGs):

*"The big surprise for me was how I dealt with change.... I found that I was not so eager to do it myself even when the change was my own idea. Learning a different way of hitting a ball meant*

*unlearning what I was use to. It meant getting worse before getting better. It meant feeling annoyed, stupid and wanting to go back to what I was comfortable with, never mind if it worked. Changing meant practicing a lot. Making up my mind to change did not make any difference. Doing it was hard and awkward and I had to do it over and over and even then what I decided to do was frequently not the same as how it came out. And raising the stakes – putting on pressure, comparing myself with others, trying to achieve a standard? That only made things worse. I became painfully aware of the role of self-esteem in learning.”*


How familiar this all sounds when we think of the struggles the teachers in our CFGs go through in trying to change their classroom teaching practice – the unlearning, feeling inadequate for not being able to do it easily, not wanting to, or forgetting to, practice a new way of teaching. And perhaps as Coaches, a little less pressure to attain a particular teaching standard with more self-esteem building in our CFGs is the lesson from Nancy’s Golf Coach.

In his book, written primarily for business professionals, The Heart of Coaching: Using Transformational Coaching to Create a High-Performance Culture the author, Thomas Crane, dedicates the book to his seventh-grade basketball Coach who served as a role model, and from whom Crane learned the following life principles:

- \* Be a good sport, play by the rules
- \* Practice the fundamentals, how you practice is how you play
- \* Give it your best effort, never hold back
- \* Commit to winning, but lose gracefully
- \* Work hard at getting better, you can always improve
- \* Cheer and support your teammates on and off the court
- \* Live life in a spiritual context with a purpose
- \* Be a role model, other people are watching you

Not a bad set of guidelines for classroom teachers and their students, and I see several parallels with what we strive to do as CFG Coaches. There in Crane’s second “principle” is the “practice, practice, practice” of which Nancy spoke in struggling to hit a golf ball. And here I’d like to make a connection particularly to the seventh of these “principles” – Live life in a spiritual context with a purpose – by referring to the writing of professional basketball Coach Phil Jackson in his book Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior (Hyperion, 1995):

*“The day I took over the Bulls [Chicago’s professional basketball team], I vowed to create an environment based on the principles of selflessness and compassion.... Working with the Bulls I’ve learned that the most effective way to forge a winning team is to call on the players’ need to connect with something larger than themselves. Even for those who don’t consider themselves ‘spiritual’ in a conventional sense, creating a successful team – whether it’s an NBA [National Basketball Association] champion or a record-setting sales force [or a successful, collaborative Critical Friends Group] – is essentially a spiritual act. It requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts.” (pg. 4)*



And I would suggest that this is what really can happen in a CFG when our Coaching facilitates teachers connecting deeply, even “spiritually,” building a truly collaborative learning community. Phil Jackson goes on to point out something else that’s essential to CFG Coaches, “Another important aspect of what we do is to create a supportive environment for the players where they feel secure and free from constant scrutiny.” (pg. 123) Don’t we try to create a trusting environment where it’s safe for our CFG participants to take risks, to work on areas of genuine concern, to try to get unstuck? Lastly, in describing his first championship team, Jackson notes another essential element of CFG Coaching at its best, “What they [the Chicago Bulls] liked most about the system was that it was democratic: it created shots for everyone, not just the superstars.” (pg. 126) When we are at our best as CFG Coaches, doesn’t everyone “get a shot”? Isn’t everyone’s contribution needed and valued?

Then, too, there are the times when we as CFG Coaches work with a second Co-Facilitator or Co-Coach. Here, once again, Nancy Mohr helps us with a connection to sports, this time to playing doubles in tennis. In her article in the Fall 2003 issue of Connections (published just after her untimely death in September), “Playing Doubles – Moving Beyond the Tag-Team Facilitation,” she reminds us that this is about more than simply taking turns and sharing leadership of a CFG, more than simply dividing up the role of Facilitator:

*“[Just like in tennis doubles!].... it means paying attention to one another – why are they doing what they’re doing – and where are they on the court? [in the room!]. Another important aspect of working with a partner is that there is more than one person to keep an eye on what is going on within the [CFG] group.... While it is helpful to know that one member of the team is perhaps the ‘lead’ in an activity, a highly developed partnership would not just tolerate, but would require that either partner could speak up and say, out loud - ‘Let’s take a moment here to take stock of the group/go around/take a break’ – something that will allow for course corrections without fear of upstaging/being out of turn/being rude/embarrassing one another.”*

Thus, I believe being an effective CFG Coach has a strong connection to being an effective Coach of a sports team (theatre troupe, orchestra or band). Effective CFG coaching, like other coaching, involves helping teachers to “read” their students, their classroom situations, and modify their teaching on-the-spot – just like an effective sports Coach “reads” his/her players and makes on-the-field adjustments. And, I believe CFG coaching involves the spiritual dimensions of selflessness and compassion, where we strive to create a safe and supportive, democratic climate, enabling all voices in our CFGs to be respected and heard. So I encourage us to continue to learn about our CFG coaching by learning more from other kinds of “Coaches” and their “coaching.”