

Instructional Coaching in Practice: Cycles, Data, and Feedback That Improve Instruction



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Topics Covered

1. What is the Instructional Coach Role?
2. What Coaching is NOT!
3. Data-Driven Coaching Focus
4. Identifying Your Priority Coaching Points
5. Instructional Coaching Cycle
6. Using the Marzano Focused Teacher Evaluation Model
7. Developing Actionable Feedback
 - Essential Elements of Actionable Feedback
8. Coaching Conversations
 - Questions for Coaches to Ask Teachers
9. How the Marzano Evaluation Center Supports Instructional Coaching

What is the Instructional Coach Role?

Instructional coaches play a pivotal role in strengthening teaching and learning across schools. As highly skilled professionals with deep expertise in pedagogy and instructional practice, they understand what effective instruction looks like—and how to support teachers in applying those strategies in authentic, sustainable ways.

By working one-on-one with teachers, asking thoughtful questions, and listening with empathy, coaches create the trust and partnership needed to navigate the complex challenges of classroom instruction and ultimately improve student learning.

This article explores the core practices that make instructional coaching effective. We'll examine:

- How coaches use a **structured coaching cycle** to help teachers set meaningful goals and take actionable steps toward achieving them.

- The types of **data and evidence**—such as student achievement results and classroom observation notes—that inform a coach’s work and support growth
- How to conduct **powerful coaching conversations**, communicating strategies with clarity while ensuring teachers remain equal partners in the learning process.

Whether you are a school leader, an experienced coach, or an aspiring teacher interested in the coaching role, this overview will offer insight into what effective instructional coaching looks like in practice.

What Coaching is NOT!

Instructional coaching is rooted in partnership and growth—but several common misconceptions can undermine its purpose. Clarifying what coaching is **not** helps ensure the work remains meaningful and focused on improving student learning.

Coaching is not surface-level collaboration. Collaboration is essential, but in coaching, it cannot stop at polite cooperation or the simple exchange of ideas—especially when a teacher is new, hesitant, or unsure. Limiting coaching to task-sharing or agreeable conversation prevents deeper learning. Instead, coaches must intentionally build trust, connect the coaching cycle to student needs, and actively bring the teacher’s voice into the process. This balance of partnership and ownership is what produces sustained growth.

Coaching is not about the coach being the sole expert. *“If anyone should have more power in a conversation between a coach and teacher, it should be the teacher.” - Jim Knight.* This powerful reminder should shape how to approach every coaching conversation. Coaches may bring expertise, tools, and models of effective practice, but strong coaching relies on a shared point of reference—such as student work, classroom observation evidence, or an instructional framework—to guide the conversation. When both the coach and teacher look together at the same evidence, ~~the~~ this shifts away from personal opinions and toward instructional

improvement. This keeps the conversation neutral, objective, and grounded in evidence-based practice.

Coaching is not evaluation or compliance monitoring. Data and reflection are powerful when used for development—but when used as tools for compliance, they create fear rather than growth. Treating data as evaluative distances teachers from the courage required to try new strategies, take risks, and learn. Effective coaches keep data rooted in growth, not judgment, ensuring coaching remains distinct from evaluation and aligned to genuine professional learning.

Coaching is not a space where confidentiality can be compromised. When teachers record lessons, test new strategies, or share classroom challenges with a coach, they are engaging in vulnerable learning. Their willingness to be vulnerable depends on one essential condition: confidentiality. Confidentiality is not a courtesy; it is the foundation of trust. Without it, coaching starts to feel like surveillance; with it, coaching becomes a safe space for honest reflection and authentic growth.

Data-Driven Coaching Focus

Data in coaching serves to identify root causes, guide continuous school improvement, and highlight areas for teacher growth. Using short-, mid-, and long-cycle data provides timely insights at different levels:

Short-cycle data: Formative assessments conducted during instruction to provide immediate feedback and inform coaching impact.

Mid-cycle data: Measures progress toward end-of-year standards and supports adjustments to teaching, learning, and school initiatives.

Long-cycle data: Summative assessments at the end of a unit or course that inform overall achievement and broader school or district improvement efforts.

Identifying Your Priority Coaching Points

Before you can craft effective actionable feedback, you need clarity on what that feedback will address. This is where identifying a priority coaching point becomes key—it's the foundation of focused, impactful coaching.

A priority coaching point is the specific, high-impact instructional focus that when strengthened will make the greatest difference in student learning and become the central focus of the coaching cycle. A priority coaching point answers a crucial question: **What single practice (area of growth) will make the most significant difference for this teacher and their students right now?**

Strong coaching points share several characteristics:

- ✓ Specific and observable
- ✓ Tied to student learning
- ✓ Clear about what students will achieve and how they will achieve it
- ✓ Focused on what the teacher can directly control
- ✓ Aligned with school or district goals

A priority coaching point guides what evidence the coach collects, what feedback is given, and what next steps are defined collaboratively with the teacher.

Strong coaching points are focused and concise. Multiple priorities can blur your focus and slow progress; **pinpoint one or two high-impact changes**. A long list dilutes your message and prevents action.

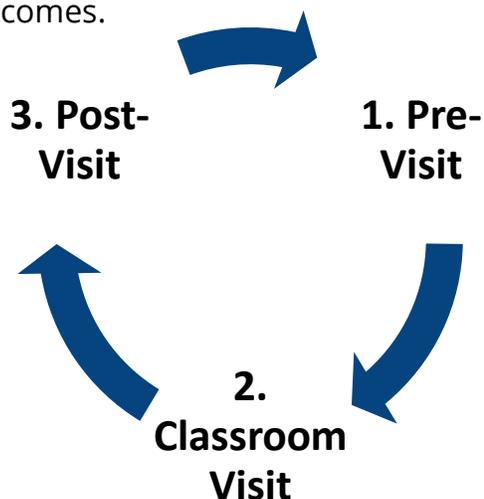
Instructional Coaching Cycle

Coaching cycles revolve around clearly defined coaching points. Coaching points should be grounded in student data and mutually agreed upon by both the coach and the teacher.

During the **pre-visit phase**, the coach and teacher work together to identify or refine the coaching point by examining goals, prior evidence, and upcoming lesson plans. This conversation centers on reviewing the standard(s), clarifying instructional intentions, and determining what success will look like through specific evidence indicators.

In the **classroom visit phase**, the coach collects targeted evidence directly tied to the coaching point—such as student actions, teacher moves, artifacts, and indicators of learning.

In the **post-visit phase**, the coach shares this evidence and facilitates a reflective, constructive conversation. Through thoughtful questioning and analysis, the coach and teacher co-construct next steps and determine the type of support needed, such as modeling, co-planning, co-teaching, or identifying targeted resources. This cyclical process keeps coaching focused, collaborative, and intentionally connected to student learning outcomes.



| Coaching Cycle Phase | Purpose |
|------------------------|---|
| Pre-visit | Plan, reflect on student performance data, identify patterns and trends, identify coaching point |
| Classroom visit | Monitor for fidelity, look/listen for teacher/student evidence, record classroom visit data |
| Post-visit | Reflect on student performance, identify patterns/trends, celebrate positive data points, determine areas of improvement, review plans for future support |

Using the Marzano Focused Teacher Evaluation Model to Guide Instructional Coaching

Coaching points should be grounded in the school or district's core instructional priorities/framework. This helps coaches consistently identify and connect the coaching points to support teacher growth and improvement.

Marzano's [Focused Teacher Evaluation Model](#) (FTEM) provides a clear framework from which to pull powerful coaching points. FTEM works effectively as an instructional model, offering coaches a common language to ground their feedback in research-based practices to support and drive meaningful teacher development.

The FTEM Model has four domains:

1. Standards-Based Planning
2. Standards-Based Instruction
3. Conditions for Learning
4. Professional Responsibilities

While coaches may work across all domains, the first three directly shape classroom practice and student learning experiences. Grounding coaching points in these domains creates a shared framework that turns teaching concepts into concrete, actionable steps.

The FTEM protocols provide specific, observable elements to target, with guidance on how to share feedback that makes growth systematic and effective.

For example:

Many instructional frameworks have broad focus areas, resulting in vague feedback about "classroom management"

Using the FTEM's concrete and specific elements, a coach might instead identify a coaching point around *the "Using Questions to Help Students Elaborate on Content"* element in the Standards-Based Instruction domain.

Developing Actionable Feedback

Part of an instructional coach's role is to collect targeted data and evidence from walkthroughs, observations, lesson plans, tasks and assessments. This data should show evidence of alignment and rigor, with student work and behaviors demonstrating the impact of instruction and teacher-student interactions.

Strong instructional coaches don't just collect data and evidence; as Carly Fiorina, former CEO of HP, says, "The goal is to transform data into information and information into insight." This concept is at the center of effective instructional coaching.

Data is what is collected, **information** is what we learn when we analyze patterns and trends in the data, and **insight** emerges when connecting those patterns and trends to specific, actionable next steps for teacher growth. Actionable feedback lives in the "insight" zone.

Grant Wiggins (2012) defines effective feedback as "concrete, specific, and useful; it provides actionable information." He emphasizes that feedback requires a clear goal, action toward that goal, and information about those actions.

Essential Elements of Actionable Feedback

- **Goal referenced:** Connected directly to a coaching point.
- **Concise:** Anchored to the priority coaching point(s).
- **Actionable:** Provides clear steps the teacher can implement immediately.
- **Timely:** Delivered while the lesson is fresh, maximizing the teacher's ability to process and apply the learning.
- **Focused on Student Impact:** Teacher actions are connected to student outcomes.
- **Relationship-Preserving:** Maintain a collaborative tone through your words, body language, and approach.

Coaching Conversations

Having a clear coaching point and well-crafted feedback based on your classroom visit means nothing if you can't deliver it effectively during the post-visit.

Delivering feedback should feel like a partnership, not judgment. The coaching conversation should be focused around enhancing student performance and promoting the teacher's professional growth. It affirms strengths using specific evidence and presents clear feedback with connections to the Focused Teacher Evaluation Model.

The coach begins by transforming data into information: "Only eight of twenty students (40%) answered most questions." Next, this information generates insight: "Students need structured opportunities and sufficient wait time to formulate responses."

Strong coaching questions prompt reflection, encourage teacher ownership, and uncover insights you might have missed. The questions you ask during a coaching conversation can be just as powerful as the feedback you provide.

For example, instead of asking, "how can you work on questioning?" you might ask, "During questioning, you directed questions to eight students, limiting responses from others. What strategies can be utilized to increase responses from more students during tomorrow's discussion?"

Questions for Coaches to Ask Teachers:

- "When you think about our priority coaching point, what's working well?"
- Which instructional decisions most influenced student learning?
- "Where did students struggle, and why?"
- "If you were to teach this lesson again tomorrow, what would you change?"
- "What support or resources would help you implement this strategy?"
- "How will you know if students are responding differently to this approach?"

Before wrapping up the post-visit conversation, the coach should outline clear, specific next steps that are measurable and time-bound:

- What will the teacher try—and by when?
- How will both of you know it's working?
- What evidence will you look for during the next observation?

This ensures the teacher leaves with a clear picture of what success looks like. Finally, schedule the next coaching cycle before ending the conversation. This reinforces ongoing support and signals that growth will be revisited and assessed collaboratively in future cycles.

“For me, as an instructional leader, when I'm looking for that talking point or that piece of feedback—sometimes it's hard, when I'm going into a whole classroom and trying to articulate exactly what feedback I want to give to a teacher—the Marzano model gives me a launching point for what I want to say, and we can have a conversation together without it just being totally my idea or my opinion. It's really helpful in that way, as an instructional leader, to be a coach of my teachers.”

– Klint Lay, Principal, Central School, Santa Rosa County School District, Florida

How the Marzano Evaluation Center Supports Instructional Coaching

Are you looking to strengthen your coaches' ability to implement an effective coaching cycle and deliver targeted, actionable feedback? Do you need a school-specific coaching plan informed by mid- and short-cycle data to elevate core instruction?

The Marzano Evaluation Center is ready to support your next phase of improvement. Our services scale to initiatives of any size and provide proven frameworks, expert guidance, and practical strategies to help you achieve your instructional goals.

We offer sessions for both Instructional Coaches and School Leaders focused on the essential components of effective coaching—from identifying a coaching focus using data, to delivering high-quality feedback, to designing a customized coaching plan aligned to your school’s needs.

[Connect with us](#) to bring clarity, consistency, and impact to your coaching systems.

[Talk to an Expert About FTEM and Instructional Coaching](#)

About the Authors

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Dr. Martha Hightower serves as the Product Development Specialist for Marzano Evaluation Center. In addition, she delivers professional development to both teachers and school leaders in various schools to improve planning, instruction, and evaluation.

She has extensive experience in education ranging from special education to general education in primary and secondary schools. She also was a school leader for over ten years in Orlando, Florida where she resides. She received a doctorate degree in Organizational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University.

Dr. Hightower is affiliated with several local non-profit organizations and is committed to leading change and helping others develop systems and plans to sustain better living after trauma.

Eva Tucker-Nevels, Ed.D.

Dr. Eva Tucker-Nevels is a dedicated and accomplished educator with experience as a teacher, instructional coach, principal, executive director, district school improvement director, national trainer, and consultant. She has provided coaching and professional learning to educators, administrators, and community partners across early childhood through secondary education. Her work includes leading community-wide kindergarten readiness initiatives, building leadership capacity, and designing high-quality professional learning systems.

Currently, she is an Educational and Leadership Development Consultant, who thoroughly enjoys coaching schools and districts nationwide across public, private, and nonprofit sectors. With deep expertise in strategic planning, organizational development, and instructional leadership, she has led large-scale initiatives that strengthen school systems, elevate professional practice, and improve student outcomes.

Known for her collaborative leadership style and ability to build strong relationships, she brings exceptional skills in coaching, program management, communication, and organizational growth. A certified trainer and experienced facilitator, her trainings are impactful - connecting research to practice, creating learning experiences that are practical, interactive, and results-driven.

Beyond her professional roles, Dr. Tucker-Nevels is deeply committed to community engagement, serving as board president for multiple organizations and as a pianist, music director and educator in her church community.

Dr. Tucker-Nevels holds an Education Doctorate from the University of Kansas, leadership certification from the University of Missouri–Kansas City, and a Bachelor of Science in Elementary and Early Childhood Education from Emporia State University.

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