



School Provision #104 – Take Your School Performance to Higher Levels

I love to interview graduates of the [Evocative Coaching Training Program](#) developed by and offered through the [Center for School Transformation](#). When I talk with them, I get a real sense of how this Program improves the quality of work and expands the range of skills for those who go through the Program. It truly makes me realize just how deeply and profoundly it can change the way people go about their work in schools. That is what we hope for, of course, but talking with our graduates really drives home the point: this Program works.

Let me introduce you, then, to Ashley, a Professional Development Specialist for Title One High School Literacy in a large urban school District in the USA. She certainly represents the circle of people that the Center’s philosophy, approach, and [Training Program](#) are designed to influence and reach. When we describe Evocative Coaching as “Transforming Schools One Conversation at a Time”, Ashley’s experience is a wonderful example of how that works. I hope you will enjoy and learn from the conversation I had with her as to what the Center’s [Training Program](#) meant to her personally, as well as the specific applications she is making of the things she learned through the program. Let’s hear what Ashley has to say:

Bob: It’s great, Ashley, to be talking with you about your experience with our [Training Program](#) and how it has influenced your work in the field. I believe that you were part of an entire group of people from your school District that went through the [Training Program](#) together. Is that correct?

Ashley: Yes, that’s correct. Our school system decided, on an administrative level, to improve the quality of supervision and instruction in the District by taking a group of us through the [Training Program](#) together. I think that has been very helpful because we have ended up with a common approach and language for our work as instructional coaches. That means we can better support and work with each other.

Bob: So how has going through the [Training Program](#) influenced your work, both individually and as a team?

Ashley: I think it has bolstered our repertoire of skills. We have always trained our coaches, using various methodologies. But having everyone go through the same [Training Program](#), so that we all talk the same language and take the same approach – that has been very powerful. We still use some of the language and approaches that we used before, only now we have all integrated Evocative Coaching into that skillset. This has been very helpful and is really making a difference. We are really honing our skills and taking them to new levels of proficiency.

Bob: Can you give me an example from your own experience?

Ashley: I think one example would be the way you describe and work with needs. The Wheel of Needs is very powerful because I never before understood some of the inherent tensions in meeting our various needs. The Wheel of Needs makes that very clear. A person can't meet all their needs at the same time. So developing the right rhythm is the key to both happiness and success. This was very helpful to me. It has created a new framework both for me personally and in my work as an instructional coach.

Bob: Thanks for that recognition. I do think that was a real insight that emerged as Megan and I worked on the book. What else stands out for you in Evocative Coaching? What are your other takeaways?

Ashley: One is the strengths-based approach: not focusing on solving problems but on amplifying strengths – that's huge. It is so much more engaging and even liberating. People no longer see me as the "answer person" to whom they come with their problems; people see me as a partner who facilitates their own, self-directed learning. I ask questions so that they come up with their own possibilities and discover their own solutions. When that happens, things really move forward fast. When it's that kind of self-discovery, that curiosity, there's more ownership and things really begin to change. I think it is really very powerful.

Bob: I like the notion that it works better to get people to discover and build on their strengths, in order to move forward, rather than to focus on the problems all the time. How has that worked out for you?

Ashley: It's been great. People really make profound changes and notice the difference in the approach we are taking. It has also transformed the whole notion of "coaching" within our District. Having a coach used to mean that you had a problem; now it means that you have a partner in the process of continuous improvement. That's a huge shift and I think everyone has really enjoyed and benefited from it.

Bob: Tell me more about this. How has this played out in your work?

Ashley: First of all, I tell people that I want to focus on what they are doing well in order to build on those things so as to develop even better approaches and to get even better results. Second, I tell people that I am not showing up as the "answer person". I am there to assist them to figure out for themselves how they can grow best as both an educator and as a person.

This is truly complex. We have to increase their motivation as well as improve their abilities. That's what it takes to assist people to develop better approaches and strategies for doing what they love to do. By taking a curious stance, rather than an expert stance, coaches can really assist people to move forward much more quickly and fully. At one point in the book you write something like, "The most important moment in any coaching conversation is the moment right before it starts." I love that. I have really taken that to heart. That's the moment when I remind myself to be a curious partner on the road to discovery, growth, and change. That's the moment when I get myself out of the "expert advisor" mindset and into the "evocative coach" mindset.

Bob: Wow! That's amazing. We write and teach people about that moment, and we really hope they take it seriously, but you seem to have internalized it completely. I really appreciate your grasp of that concept.

Ashley: Thanks. I also use the Wheel of Needs a lot with people. It is so helpful to not think in terms of balancing our needs but to think in terms of creating a rhythm. As you write about in the book, people can't balance the meeting of our various needs all that same time. Balance is impossible to hold forever. But we can develop healthy rhythms. My colleagues and I have talked a lot about this concept and we have really brought it into the conversations we have with our coachees. I think everyone is benefiting from this.

Bob: So how do you do that with people? How do you assist them to develop those healthy rhythms for the meeting of their needs in today's high-pressure, academic environments?

Ashley: One way I do that is through paraphrasing. I tell people, "What I am hearing you say is..." and then I frame what they are saying with new language. When this happens, when people hear what they are saying from a slightly different viewpoint, powerful shifts can happen. Another way I do that is by chunking things down into bite-size pieces. We can compare it to a grapefruit: it's impossible to eat the whole grapefruit in one bite. But slice by slice, we can get the whole grapefruit eaten. That's what we have to do when it comes to our coaching of teachers and school leaders. We have to break things down into small chunks until their challenges become manageable and their goals become doable. That's when they really gain self-efficacy so as to move themselves forward as educators.

Bob: Is there anything else you would like our readers to know?

Ashley: Just that Evocative Coaching works best when it is a team effort throughout a school building or even an entire school District. No one can buck the system and change the culture all by themselves. But when everyone gets on board, when enough people get trained in Evocative Coaching so that it becomes embedded deeply into the ways that people work together and improve their performance, that's when things really start to change. That's when everyone starts to look for and to build on strengths, rather than to look for and solve problems, a process that leads inevitably to a search for causes and culprits to blame.

Bob: I think you have really described the essence of Evocative Coaching. We want instructional coaches, school leaders, and other school-based coaches to evoke the best from people without telling them what to do. We want people to learn better approaches in order to get better results.

Ashley: That has certainly been happening with me. I have seen, first hand, what a difference this training and this approach has made in our work as school leaders and instructional coaches. It's impossible to overstate its potential for deep and profound changes. The people we coach become highly invested in the solutions that they generate and that we refine together. Through the use of questions, rather than of telling people what to do, we change the whole dynamic. People come to trust us more as they experiment with new techniques. And trust matters, to borrow Megan's book title, if we ever hope to be successful as coaches.

Bob: Doing that reminds me of the STOP acronym: Step back, Think, Organize, and Proceed. Unless we have the ability to do the first three we will never successfully be able to Proceed.

Ashley: STOP also puts us directly into the role of facilitating growth rather than of directing or telling people what we think they should do. That is the hallmark of Evocative Coaching and it is one that I aspire to embody each and every day.

Bob: I think it remains an aspiration for us all. No one ever masters the process completely and there is always room for growth. That is the orientation of our book and of our [Training Programs](#) and that is exactly what I hope will be one of the takeaways for the readers of this School Provision: learning the process by going through the [Training Program](#) is just the beginning. From there, it becomes an on-going process of personal and professional development.

Bob: I know that the [Program](#) took place on-site in your District, with follow-up sessions in our interactive virtual classroom. But we also offer the [Program](#) totally in the virtual classroom. Did you find the use of the virtual classroom to be effective?

Ashley: Absolutely. I am really impressed that you are maximizing the technology piece, the virtual connectivity, because such integration is becoming increasingly important to and utilized by the field of education. Advanced technology such as the one the Center for School Transformation uses for its [Training Program](#) is not only impressive, it's a model for us to follow. We have to use such tools, with a seamless, purposeful integration, if we hope to stay abreast of what's happening in the world today.

Bob: Is there anything else you like our readers to know?

Ashley: Just that Evocative Coaching really works when it comes to the bottom line: it improves people's performance all the way around. I wish every educator would be able to find the resources and the time to get this training. It really makes a difference. It really changes one's approach to coaching. It really does transform schools, as you say, "one conversation at a time".