



School Provision #105 – Beyond Problem-Centered Coaching

Today's interview with Nancy Harms drives home a key takeaway of the [Evocative Coaching Training Program](#), developed by and offered through the [Center for School Transformation](#): namely, that coaching, at its best, is not primarily about identifying and straightening out messes; it is primarily about identifying and building upon strengths. And how we go about that makes all the difference in the world when it comes to motivating people and engaging them in the development and execution of specific, field-based, and road-tested strategies for success.

It's hard to imagine anyone more enthusiastic than Nancy as to how the [Evocative Coaching Training Program](#) helped her to do just that. She was also quite excited and clear as to how the Program uses 22nd-century adult-learning strategies to get that done. We strive to make that happen for everyone and it certainly happened for Nancy. Let's hear, then, how she describes her experience.

Bob: It's great, Nancy, to be talking with you about your experience with the [Evocative Coaching Training Program](#). I know you learned about the program from some other educators, friends of yours, who had already gone through the program and had had a great experience. That means we had some pretty high expectations to meet. How did we do?

Nancy: The program more than met my expectations. In fact, it changed the entire way I go about coaching the teachers in the schools I work with. Evocative Coaching is just such an empowering and energizing model, for both the coach and the coachee. Something as simple as changing one's orientation from being the expert out front to being a colleague who is taking this journey side-by-side makes a huge difference. People are much more willing to open up, to explore, and to try a variety of new approaches when the person they are talking with approaches them as an equal.

Bob: You have really picked up on an important aspect of Evocative Coaching: it is a peer-to-peer rather than a top-down model of coaching. The coach is not there to advise, teach, or train. The coach is there to evoke a journey of discovery and growth. We assume that people are their own best expert when it comes to figuring how to meet their needs.

Nancy: That's what I like about Evocative Coaching. There's a certain set of core values with which I really resonate – like believing in other people, that other people have expertise, that people are inherently good and worthy of trust and respect, that everyone has gifts and strengths, even when they don't realize it, and that all people can contribute to their own learning. I have found that Evocative Coaching honors those values.

Bob: So people are their own best experts as to how to facilitate and find what they need in order to learn and grow?

Nancy: Absolutely. I think that's the key: putting the person instead of the problem at the center of the work. Doing this is so respectful. It's also surprising. People don't expect a coach to show up and take such a stance. People expect coaches to be expert advisors; it catches them off guard when coaches show up and take the time to listen empathetically. In our busy-busy world, no one seems to have the time to hear anybody else. People just aren't accustomed to such unselfish caring and respect for them.

Bob: You keep identifying important parts of the Evocative Coaching model. Instead of showing up to evaluate and solve problems, evocative coaches show up to appreciate and realize possibilities.

Nancy: And that is what I mean by being so much more respectful. It really trivializes the other person when we show up as the answer person. If the solution was so quick and easy, it makes them think, "What's wrong with me?" So when a coach jumps to solutions too quickly, without eliciting what the other person has experienced, assessing what the other person knows, without establishing trust, it just doesn't work.

Bob: Trust is integral to leadership as well as to coaching. Could you say a little more about how you see this?

Nancy: Trust communicates that the other person has what it takes to understand what they need and to figure out how to meet their needs. No one is perfect. We're all still learning, and learning from each other. When we take the time to listen to someone's story, we communicate that their experience is important and valuable. After a coaching session, people often tell me, "No one has ever taken the time to hear me out like this." It's an amazing thing. People feel so empowered by such listening. And that's when we hear the "golden sigh" that you write about in the book; they just feel good about themselves and, as a result, more ready to move forward.

Bob: That's a great way of putting things. When coaching becomes part of a school's culture, up and down the ladder, it is no longer viewed as remedial. It is viewed as simply "How we do things around here". And the Evocative Coaching model is a perfect model for that because it is so strengths' based. We ask people to reflect on what is going well and to build on that rather than to focus on fixing what is going wrong. This shift can really bolster and transform an organization.

Nancy: I think that may be one of the most significant differences that I have found between Evocative Coaching and other coaching models. Evocative coaches assist people to recognize and mobilize their resources in order to achieve their aspirations. It is a build-on-what's-right model rather than a fix-what's-wrong model. It's the construction of something entirely new out of what we already know rather than patching up holes with a Band-Aid here or a piece of plywood there.

Bob: So how has Evocative Coaching changed your practice? What are you doing differently now than you were doing before?

Nancy: One aspect is the whole notion of designing and conducting experiments. That's such an integral part of Evocative Coaching. There's no way to fail at an experiment. It's not win-lose; it's win-learn. You can always learn something from an experiment. So just taking that stance makes a huge difference in the coaching relationship and in coaching conversations. It opens up the realm of possibility. It makes people curious about what else they may be able to learn.

Bob: Say more about how that works in schools, kind of a “boots on the ground” perspective.

Nancy: What I find, Bob, is that by going through this process of brainstorming and having them be a part of generating ideas, having them really choose the experiments they want to be involved in, it creates a level of commitment on their part that is never created when I start making suggestions as to the solutions I think they should try. It also creates enthusiasm and energy, because they want to go out and test their ideas. And I get excited when they get excited. The whole process is just so much fun. I could share so many stories as to how this has worked, time after time.

Bob: I sure wish we had time and space to capture and tell those stories. I’m glad that Evocative Coaching is helping to make that happen more often and in more powerful ways. That really is our understanding as to the role of the coach. Our job is to evoke new ideas, energies, and strategies for improvements and to explore ways to find the resources to make those improvements happen, not to tell people what we think they should do. An inquiry-based model is the only way out!

Nancy: I see that truth expressing itself in all my relationships, even at home. We have two adult daughters and I think I am less likely to just give them a quick solution when they talk with me about things. I ask a lot more questions. I use a lot more question marks and a lot less periods.

Bob: Can you give me an example as to how the practice of Evocative Coaching has influenced or transformed the results you are seeing as an educator.

Nancy: Sure. I am a retired superintendent for educational services and I now work as a consultant with school superintendents. And I am finding, what I am acutely aware of is, that often we talk about change with teachers or principals or assistant superintendents but we don’t know how to facilitate change. With traditional coaching, people hear us saying, “You’ve put your heart and soul into doing the wrong thing all these years.” With Evocative Coaching people hear us saying, “A lot of what you have been doing is right; now let’s build your heart and soul into making things even better.” With that message they become a lot more willing to change.

Bob: Can you give our readers an example?

Nancy: I’m thinking of one principal who said our work together changed his life. Before we worked together he would go into meetings and say, here’s the agenda, the vision, the values, and the mission, now get on board. He would do it for people and insist on their involvement. That meant there was no commitment, no ownership, on their part. Now, however, by generating those things with an open, caring, and collaborative stance, all that has changed. People have really come together. The barriers between departments have been let down and student learning is more at the center of their work. It really is a great thing.

Bob: That is a great thing, indeed, and I am thankful that you have been so open and willing to share your thoughts and experiences with our readers. I’m sure it will make many of them think about how this program could invigorate their work and the work of their colleagues as well. I will let you know how they respond.