

GUIDE

EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS



Project I⁴

East Carolina University
and the Institute for Educational Leadership

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"We come to praise; we come to learn; we come to have conversations about practice"

Frank Lyman

The guide is a work in progress and based on research and tools from:

- [Glickman](#), C. (2003). *Leadership for learning*. Alexandria VA: ASCD
- [Bloom](#), G.S., Castagna, C. L. , Moir, E., & Warren, B. (2005) *Blended coaching: Skills and strategies to support principals*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press.
- Saphier, J. (1993). *How to make supervision and evaluation really work*. Research for Better Teaching

Special thanks to Jim Warnock of Research for Better Teaching for input. Note on pronouns: We have not fully converted to pronoun use for persons who identify they and their as pronouns of choice.

NOTE: See hyperlinks in the text for deeper explanations.

OVERVIEW

A conversation (formal or informal) that follows an observation (also formal or informal) has several components: preparation for observation, using an observation with tool that collects objective and usable evidence, data analysis and preparation for post-observation conversation, the conversation, and then follow-up observations/conversations.

Think about the parts of the conversation as we think about parts of a lesson and “task analyze” the approach. Obviously, the conversation following an observation is premised on **establishing trust between the teacher and the observer**. Trust is enhanced by the observer’s ability to have a substantive reflective conversation about practice and provide useful **data and coaching questions** that support the teacher’s reflection.

The conversation following a relatively short observation (10-20 minutes) may be different than the actual formal post-conference for evaluation purposes. Because the formal process of evaluation in a state or district process requires written evaluation using a prescribed format, that conversation may require a different process than a conversation following an informal observation. However, an administrator can use the informal observations to build a set of evidence that can serve both the teacher and the administrator for the formal evaluation process.

Through observations and conversations that occur throughout a school year, sustaining trust in the total process can deepen through frequent observations and conversations about practice. A key guideline: There should be a **quick turnaround** on the evidence, the analysis, and the conversation. Follow-up conversations should be held as close as possible to the date of the observation. That means that the observer needs to analyze the evidence from the conversation, send the analysis to the teacher, and schedule a conversation of approximately 15 minutes within 2-3 days.

There is no one right way to have a conversation. However, the formats we introduce are useful for **most** conversations. Some conversations require **coaching moves**, as the teacher may have not made changes in practice after several attempts to observe and provide feedback. Or, in some cases, a teacher has done something that is egregious which requires administrator intervention. As one administrator said: *Every principal has to analyze the staff and decide how you can have a coach role and when you have to be clear about your administrator-evaluator role and have someone else on staff take on the coaching role.*

The suggestions offer guidance, but not “rules”. Every teacher is different, and knowing how each teacher learns/thinks is vital to setting up the trusting relationship necessary for any conversation.

GENERAL PREPARATION FOR CONVERSATION AFTER OBSERVATION

The primary objective of the conversation is to **support the teacher to (1) analyze the data from the observation; (2) make decisions about what s/he proposes to change; and (3) make a clear plan to improve instructional practice.** We, as administrators and coaches, have been schooled to give “feedback”, and teachers often say they want feedback. However, Project I⁴ posits that what teachers want is more consistent and deeper attention to their teaching so that the conversation uses the evidence from the observation to provide a “tailor-made” observation and conversation process (Paryani, 2019).

Thus, the administrator’s objective is not to give feedback about what the administrator thinks should change. In having the conversation, the principal should be **transparent about how the analysis of the evidence and the conversation are different.** The main objective is to support the teacher to talk about his/her practice so that s/he can make decisions about what to change. Typically, with veteran teachers, the observer can proceed with a **collaborative coaching stance** and engage in cognitive coaching, supporting the veteran to draw on his/her knowledge and skill base to make decisions. For novice teachers that may be different; they are new to instructional practices. Thus, supporting their analyses and decisions about changing practice(s) is often necessary as they do not yet have a repertoire of knowledge and skills to fully make decisions. That may require what [Glickman](#) calls a **direct informational coaching stance.** In any case, the observer needs to make decisions about the coaching stance before entering the conversation.

If the observation and conversation are used for the formal observation required for the evaluation process, there is considerable value in a substantive pre-observation or planning conference. A fruitful planning conference supports the teacher to have a more thoughtful, well-planned lesson and a more productive post observation conversation.

The following are steps **after the observation:**

STEP ONE: Analyze the data/evidence and use it to guide the conversation; depending on the situation, **give data to teacher ahead of the conversation.**

STEP TWO: Decide on an **approach/coaching stance** and a location for post-observation conversation

STEP THREE: Prepare an **opening question** that relates to the evidence

STEP FOUR: Ask **coaching questions** (acknowledging, paraphrasing, clarifying, shifting, restating); summarize throughout the conversation as you move through the evidence and conversation

STEP FIVE: **Summarize next steps** that teacher has chosen and set date for another observation

Step One: ANALYZE THE DATA/EVIDENCE from observation

Any analysis is premised on an observer collecting observable, **objective**, non-judgmental data to analyze in preparation for the conversation. Analyzing the data helps the observer decide on an objective/purpose for the conversation. Even if the district evaluation tool does not require evidence, effective administrators should use evidence-based observation tools (and not checklists or other judgmental tools).

To prepare for the conversation with the teacher, the administrator can make choices about analyzing the data: send teacher the data before the conversation, analyze for the first time when you meet together, or share what you, as observer, have analyzed. There is no one right way to present the data, but this question is critical: What factual evidence does the observation yield?. The important part is that you **use objective data** and **share that data/evidence with the teacher**. The data should not include any notes to yourself or questions that may indicate pre-judgment.

Step Two: Think about the **APPROACH** (also termed a **coaching stance**) for the conversation based on [Glickman](#). The approach informs the kinds of questions you ask and how you ensure that the teacher makes decisions about what to do. Two of the four approaches apply to most teachers.

- **Direct-informational:** Teacher who needs more information in order to make decisions about an improvement choice. In other words, the knowledge base of the teacher may not include what s/he needs to know to make improvement. Typically, a novice teacher or a veteran who does not know current thinking can benefit from coaching. If the conversation requires that you provide specific instructional direction, ask permission to be instructional -- *Is it all right if I provide instructional options?*
- **Collaborative:** Teacher who is knowledgeable about practice and for whom the evidence is supportive. The conversation is **two-way with an emphasis on teacher talk**. The **ratio** of teacher talk: observer talk is important. The responsibility of the observer (now coach) is to ask the kinds of coaching questions that elicit teacher talk and teacher decisions. The collaborative approach includes attention to **non-verbal behaviors** like nodding, smiling, and looking at the teacher.

Think about the range of coaching stances from [instructional to facilitative coaching](#), remembering that **transfer to teacher practice** is the objective. As you discuss what might be helpful and the teacher decides next steps, keep a list as you talk and summarize the materials you can provide to the teacher.

Secondly, think about **where and how this post-observation conversation occurs**. If this is in your office, do not sit behind your desk; move to a table a **sit side by side or face to face**. Perhaps meet the teacher in a classroom or a conference room in the school (neutral space). In any case, set the tone as supportive, collegial, and welcoming. You want a **nonthreatening, safe, and positive** environment that continues to nurture relational trust between you and the teacher.

**Step Three: □□□□ PREPARE AN OPENING QUESTION FOR CONVERSATION:
BEYOND ASKING “HOW DO YOU THINK THE LESSON WENT?”**

Preparing a **thoughtful opening question** for the conversations can alleviate the tension that an administrator sometimes feels at the beginning of the post-observation conversation. The question depends on the type of post-conference approach that you use: (1) direct-control (2) directive-informational (3) collaborative or (4) nondirective (Glickman, 2002). Most conversations fall in category 2 or 3 of Glickman and correspond to the [instructional to facilitative range of coaching](#) in the *Blended Coaching* (Bloom et al., 2005).

Depending upon the type of approach you use (See [Glickman chart](#)), start with a **warm greeting, introduction to the process, and a focus on the use of evidence to guide the conversations:**

“Welcome. Thanks We had decided before the observation that I would look at _____ (or use _____ tool to observe your class). What I would like to do is look at the data together and see what we observe.”

Reiterate the importance of the use of the tool to gather factual information.

Note: Feel free to say (especially in early conversations while you are getting used to the format) the following: *This is a new process for me and I will want your response to the process when we finish. We want to use the evidence to guide our conversation, and I want to listen better to your ideas.*

Step Four: Ask **follow-up coaching questions** during conversation. As much as possible, do not put your 2 cents worth in the conversation (aka feedback); rely on coaching through paraphrasing moves/questions.

In this section, you are listening with great care, summarizing as you go. **Focus on assets** the teacher can bring to addressing any changes. As you move through the conversation, **redirect** as necessary to ensure that (a) the **focus is on the evidence to guide discussion**, (b) the **teacher is then making decisions** about what to do next, and (c) insert any instructional ideas only as a part of talking about the evidence. In this kind of conversation, do not switch into “feedback” or telling mode (which is only necessary for direct control approach): **See coaching questions below in [Coaching for Equity: Paraphrasing](#)**

Step Five: Summarize and Debrief (optional)

Summarize

End the conversation with a decision about what is next in terms of teacher practice and a possible follow-up observation. Often, the observer can use the summarizing and organizing function to summarize what has been said (see [Coaching for Equity: Paraphrasing](#)). If the conversation is a part of a formal evaluation process, the administrator must translate the objective observation and conversation to the district or state forms.

Discretion is advised at this step of the process as the collaborative process in which you have engaged has the potential to drift toward hierarchical (because of bureaucratic requirements or because you may revert to feedback and telling). Depending on the teacher need and assessment of Glickman types, you may have to engage in a direct-control conversation with a teacher who needs improvement.

Use summarizing statements/questions:

- Let's review the key points of the discussion.
- What next steps are you taking? OR The steps I heard you talk about are _____
- What evidence will you look at to ascertain if those next steps are working? OR The evidence I need to collect next time I come is _____
- How does this connect to student learning/equity? I heard you say ___ and that clearly connects to student learning/equity in these ways: _____

DEBRIEF

Debriefing may or may not feel like the right thing to do. As an administrator, you are model reflection. Thus, depending on the situation, ask for feedback on the structure, tone, and usefulness of conference, using the + and Δ (delta=change) format or use a written feedback form for the teacher to reflect on and complete if s/he wishes. However, In some cases, debriefing would not be an appropriate choice.

CONSIDERATIONS and FINAL "TIPS"

While we might have mentioned these previously, we are reiterating.

- **Set the tone:** Of course, you want the conversation to go as well as possible, so make the teacher feel comfortable. Many administrators recommend having the conference in the teacher's room, or, if it is your office, then probably the administrator sits by the teacher or sits around a table with the teacher. Unless it is a direct control conversation (Glickman) in which you have to set a distinct hierarchical tone with teacher, do not sit behind your desk. Assume best intentions and assume that if the teacher knew to do anything else, s/he would do it. Refrain from making judgments; instead seek reasons behind problems or stated explanations. Probe, but do not prejudge. Use coaching questions. Indeed, if you are practicing having a different type of conversation for the first time, then be transparent and share that with the teacher.

For example, I am practicing having a different kind of conversation with you about the observation, one that relies on the evidence I collected and analyzed and one in which you decide what your next steps are. I have ideas, of course, but what I am most interested in is your decisions about what you want to do next as a result of analyzing the evidence from the

observation. As always, I only observed a slice of your teaching practice, so, if there are particular classroom circumstances with students or lesson, please tell me as we proceed.

- **General rule of thumb: Teacher should do most of the talking.** Acknowledge ideas, even if you do not totally agree. Typically, do not start conversations with WHY questions. Think time or silence is OK as it allows time for collecting thoughts and thinking about what happened. Use paraphrasing to encourage teacher talk. Use an opening question based on evidence.
- **Language.** In general, avoid “you” statements. Convert to “we” or “I” statements. Use open-ended questions that produce explanations and ideas, not short answers. See advice on question stems that can help to clarify, paraphrase or probe.
- **Body Language:** The process should be viewed in general as a **conversation between professionals.** Be aware of the ways you position yourself as the administrator. Again, for the “hard” conversations, you have to think carefully about what you want to communicate and that may require a different stance, format (directive-control) or positioning (behind your desk).
- **Procedural Advance Organizer (AO):** Explain the **purpose and the parts of the post conference and ask for concurrence.** You want to be open, but purposeful. Think carefully about the objective of the conversation. You are creating a mini-lesson plan for conducting the conference. Be open, as you are in a classroom, to the student input and changing direction, but don’t just drift from one question to another, getting surface responses. Note: *This seems like a lot of planning at first, but as you gain experience, the planning lessens and parts of this become more automatic.*
- Use **teaching and learning language** – naming practices specifically as much as possible. That helps the teacher build structures and you develop a common language for teaching and learning in your school.
- **Acknowledge tensions:** This means that you, as the observer (administrator) recognize that teaching is a complex task and each teacher is thinking of many things at once: management, lesson outcomes, time, next question, lesson flow and pacing.
- **Remember to put equity at the forefront of the conversation and push the teacher to think about equitable access and even if the observation was not specifically about this.** How does the evidence demonstrate equitable or inequitable practice? How can you direct every part of the conversation toward equity?

Glickman Coaching Stances

You need to consider the teacher with whom you are conferring. Most teachers fall into the direct informational or collaborative approach.

Conversation Approach	Conversation Opening Question Stems
<p>Direct Control (Glickman)</p> <p>Very clear data and presentation of what to do. Highly instructional and direct. This type of conversation is to deliver a message. This is not used in most conversations, but is necessary at times.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Based on the analysis of the data, there are some clear patterns in the classroom that require immediate attention if we are to support you to teach this year. In terms of classroom management, I want you to try _____</i> ● <i>Based on the analysis of the evidence, I am concerned about _____, and I need to sit with you and plan a lesson so that we can perhaps assist you more in _____.</i> ● <i>I observed that 15 of 20 students were off task each time I did the at task data collection in the 45 minute period. Therefore, I want to work with you on engagement strategies and checking or understanding.</i>
<p>Directive Informational (Glickman) Instructional (Bloom)</p> <p>When choosing an instructional approach, Bloom says it is a good idea to get permission. It is often useful for new teachers, who often do not have a way to think through the options. This is often an effective approach with novice teachers or veteran teachers who need particular attention</p>	<p>To start any conversation of this type, use some version of this start: <i>"I observed _____. I would like to give you some options for what I think might be helpful. Is that all right?"</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Three students on the left back and two students on right rear were talking or off task the entire period. These are three options I can think of to try: (1)____ (2)____ (3) ____ Do you have another option you think might work better</i> ● <i>I observed that you primarily used hand-raising to call on students. You asked __ questions; typically in those questions you did not use think time, and you called on ____ students. One way I think we agreed to in our professional learning was to use equity sticks. In this particular lesson, when could you have used those?</i> ● <i>What are some other ways you know to call on students so we have more equitable access to the classroom discourse?</i>

<p>Collaborative (Glickman) Aka Facilitative (Bloom) Cognitive Coaching (Garmstrom et al.)</p> <p>Teacher who is knowledgeable about practice and for whom the evidence will be supportive.</p>	<p>The purpose of this CONVERSATION is to get the teacher to talk about practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I observed that _____ occurred. Can we talk about that or does something else in the data stand out as important to talk about?” • The data indicate that _____. Do they correspond to your perception of _____? • What was happening when _____? • I’m curious about this part of the observation (state factual evidence). What were you thinking about when you _____? • I noticed these two things about student responses: _____ and _____. What can you tell me about those students and their learning? • I noticed that you spent most of your time with _____ and _____. I am wondering about that choice...was it purposeful or did it just happen?
<p>Nondirective (Glickman) Collaborative (Bloom) Cognitive coaching Works at all times toward teacher’s self-plan for improvement and relies on teacher input to have conference.</p>	<p>The most important part of this type of conversation is not in the opening question, but in the paraphrasing and mediational questioning that occurs in the conversation to help the teacher develop a self-plan for improvement, relying almost totally on the teacher as lead. This is usually done with sophisticated, strong and often veteran teachers who know teaching practice and language.</p> <p>This relies on listening empathetically and effectively and requires an observer/evaluator who has acquired strength in tools of constructivist listening.</p>

FACILITATIONAL OR INSTRUCTIONAL QUESTIONS

See [Coaching for Equity Paraphrasing](#) at end of this document.

Blended coaching requires a dance between three positions to take as a coach:

Consultative, Collaborative and Transformational using two types of coaching questions: **instructional and facilitative.**

You will need to make a decision about whether the conference needs to be instructional (probably Glickman direct control or direct informational) or facilitative (collaborative or nondirective). In all cases, we do hope that the teachers can come to their own ideas and decisions about changing practice – mainly by the use of facilitative coaching moves of **paraphrasing, clarifying, and mediational questions + summarizing statements.** In general, new teachers need more instruction, but even then, get them to talk about practice. Even when they ask (or nearly plead), be very careful about lots of advice and direction. Remember that, even when something in the classroom has made you upset –most of the time, the teacher is

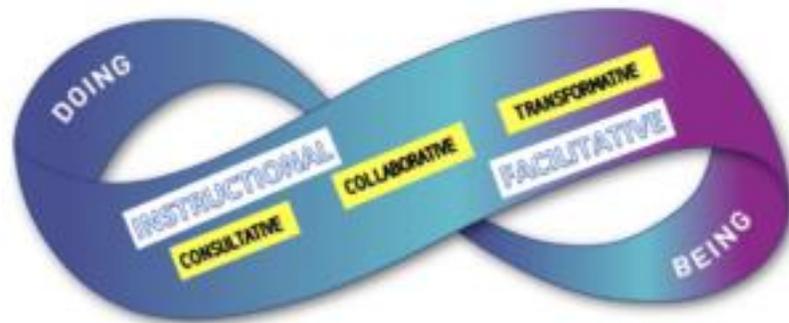
alone in the classroom and has to solve his/her own problems. Thus, it is important, if possible, that the teacher solve his or her own problems by thinking through them with you. If this requires more instruction on your part because the teacher does not really know what to do, get permission to be instructional. As much as possible navigate the conversation back to facilitating the thinking of the teacher.

Instructional to Facilitative Coaching

Bloom, G., Castagna, C.L., Moir, E., & Warren, B. (2005). *Blended coaching: Skills and strategies to support principal development*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press

Although the book is useful for those coaching principals, the coaching philosophy applies to coaching any adult.

The image is a mobius strip chosen to exemplify the ways that effective conversations rely on the coach's ability to move easily among the approaches to support the person who is coached. At times, like Glickman, the principal has to be more instructional and less facilitative (or using cognitive coaching). The goal is always to ensure the coachee starts to think for herself or himself about how to transform his or her practice.



Adapted from *Blended Coaching*

PROJECT I⁴ COACHING FOR EQUITY

USING PARAPHRASING IN MULTIPLE WAYS Adapted from Lipton, Wellman
Humbard, 2003 and Principal Leadership Institute, UC Berkeley

CRITERIA FOR STRONG PARAPHRASING

- Focuses on **current level of assets of the teacher.** While the teacher may need to improve some aspect of practice, the teacher needs to choose a next step based on current level of practice from which she/he/they can improve.
- Captures the essence of the message from coachee – that means that the coach listens carefully and relies on using what you hear from the coachee to form the next question or statement. Reflects the speaker’s thinking back to the speaker for further consideration. **The coach responds to ideas from the teacher to guide coaching choices.**
- Reflects the essence of conversation in voice tone and gestures
- Names the speaker’s content, context, emotions, and frames a logical level for addressing the topic

TYPES OF PARAPHRASING

ACKNOWLEDGING & CLARIFYING	SUMMARIZING & ORGANIZING	SHIFTING LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION
By restating the essence of a statement, the coach paraphrases in order to identify and calibrate content and emotions.	By summarizing and organizing, the coach's paraphrases the coachee's responses to reshape thinking and separate jumbled issues.	By shifting the level of abstraction "up", the coach illuminates other ideas and supports the coachee to think at a deeper level. When shifting "down", the coach supports coachee to be more precise.

COACHING QUESTION STEMS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● So, you're feeling _____. ● You seem to noticing that _____. ● In other words, you are saying that _____. ● Hmm, you're suggesting that _____. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There seem to be two issues here: _____ and _____ ● On the one hand, it seems you are saying that _____. On the other hand, there might be _____ to think about. ● For you then, several themes are emerging: _____, _____ and _____ ● It seems you are considering this sequence or hierarchy: _____ 	<p>So, a(n) _____ for you might be _____.</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p><i>Shifting up</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> category belief assumption goal intention </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p><i>Shifting down</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> example non-example strategy choice action option </td> </tr> </table>	<p><i>Shifting up</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> category belief assumption goal intention 	<p><i>Shifting down</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> example non-example strategy choice action option
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