

Tool: Verbal Strategies

Timing:

Purpose:

From: Costa, A.L. & Garmston, R. J. (1994). *Cognitive Coaching*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Following are examples of language patterns that can lead teachers to states of efficacy, precision, consciousness, and interdependence.

Efficacy

When someone is stuck and feeling powerless,

Try *Selfprescribing*, a verbal strategy that shifts misplaced responsibility from others to self and pre-supposes that personal action produces outcomes. Through self-prescribing, a person works to intentionally influence the outcomes of a problematic situation.

For example, when a teacher says, “If the parents can’t motivate them to learn, how do you expect me to teach them?” the coach can ask: “What might you do within your own classroom to motivate them?”

Another approach is *Choice Making*, a verbal strategy that initiates an invitation to brainstorm possible approaches for a problematic situation. This strategy acknowledges the state of not knowing alternatives and supports the person in generating alternatives from which he/she can make practical choices appropriate to the situation. Coaches use this lead only when a friend, colleague, or student has reached a dead end in his or her own thinking.

For example, someone says, “I have just run out of ideas! I can’t seem to get students to come in, sit down, and get to work.” The coach answers, “Would you like to hear about a few things that I have seen other teachers do? I saw one teacher write an exercise on the board at the beginning of the class. Another teacher immediately began class with a group response to three oral questions. Another teacher tells the assignment to kids when they are lined up outside the door before reentering the classrooms. Which one seems most appropriate to you?”

The coach can also use *Correcting Fate Control*, a strategy that attributes success to specific efforts rather than to fate or luck. This strategy elicits awareness of the personal resources that contributed to the teacher’s success.

If the teacher exclaims, “It was my lucky day,” the coach can probe, “What did *you* do to cause the day to go so well?”

Another technique is *Drawing from Past Experience*, which encourages the teacher to access and apply his or her resources from past settings to the current situation.

“I want him out of here!” exclaims the teacher. “He constantly disrupts the class. He leaves without permission.” The coach can answer, “Think back to a time when you were successful with him. What were you doing at that time that you can apply in this situation?”

Craftsmanship

When someone's comments seem vague,

Try *Communicating with Specificity*, a verbal strategy that invites a person to elaborate what he or she means.

For example, a teacher might say, "Wow! We really had a great faculty meeting!" The coach can probe, "How, specifically, was it great?" or, "When you say great, what are you thinking about?"

Or if a teacher says, "I really want to learn the new stuff in education," the coach can probe, "When you say 'new stuff,' what do you have in mind?"

Eliciting Specific Criteria is a verbal strategy for judging events.

A teacher may vaguely ask, "Just tell me if I'm doing a good job with restructuring my math program." The coach can probe, "What criteria would you use to determine that it was a good job?"

Or if the teacher says, "I care deeply that students learn," the coach can answer, "What would be some indicators that would verify that they are learning?"

Sometimes it's necessary to deal with temporal vagueness.

Certain verbal strategies will assist with *Managing Time*.

If the teacher says, "This lesson will be a review," the coach can ask, "What events led up to the review? (**sequencing**) How long do you plan to spend on each of the major concepts? (**duration**) During the review, what will those students be doing who have already mastered the content? (**simultaneity**)"

Consciousness

Metacognition leads people to consider the relation between internal values, goals, thoughts, and feelings and decisions about external events.

In the Planning Conference, the coach might ask: What will be your important decisions during this lesson?

You value debate. Why is this so important to you?

How will you know what types of responses to give?

What will you be monitoring in your questions?

In the Reflecting Conference, the coach might ask:

What led to your decision to modify your teaching plan?

What went on in your head when the students responded like that?

What was your intention when you said...?

Mental Rehearsal is a strategy that leads someone to envision and mentally enact a planned activity.

For example, the coach asks, "How will you know the lesson is successful?" The teacher responds, "By student responses." The coach then asks, "What criteria will you use to determine a satisfactory student response?" and may also ask, "What data can I gather for you?" This teacher suggested, "Collect examples of the questions I ask." The coach replies, "How will you know when to ask different types of questions?"

Flexibility

Considering Intention is a strategy that leads one to examine the positive intentions of someone else's behavior by considering data from other perspectives and generating new linkages.

For example, a teacher might say, "This administration doesn't care what happens to students. All schools are forced to use the same math text." The coach answers: "What benefit do you think that has for students transferring from other district schools?"

Style Check is a strategy that leads to awareness of our own and others' styles, modalities, beliefs, values, and behaviors in the moment.

For example, questions that promote this awareness include: What learning styles are used most in your class? How do you compare your own learning preferences with hers? What philosophic position might cause Mrs. Sanchez to say that?

Interdependence

Values Search focuses on the potential value of different points of view and conflict.

When a teacher says, "Their disagreements with this project are slowing us down," the coach can answer, "In the long run, if there were any value to getting these disagreements out now, what might that be?"

A **Talent Search** leads to envisioning potential capacities of the group and its members.

When the teacher says, "This group seems unable to complete its tasks," the coach can answer, "What would you see or hear from them if they were completing them?" or "What skills are needed to complete the task?" or "What are the existing strengths within the group that could be built upon?"

Resource Banking moves people from positions of isolation to seeking and giving help.

When someone admits, "I'm stuck," the coach can answer, "What help do you need? Who do you know here who has experience with that?" Or, "If this were Sally's problem, how might she approach it? What else might she do? Want to ask her?" Or "How could the group working together help resolve this?"

The strategy of **Group Support** raises a problem to a level of team awareness and solution.

When a teacher says, "I teach the kids to think, they go to the next grade and there's no follow through," the coach can ask, "What would it take to build staff commitment to critical thinking? Would you raise this issue at our next department meeting?"