

Open Door Series

Nancy Siebel: So, when a coaching relationship is working effectively, we're working together as partners with our coachees, and we experience safety and openness that provides motivation to learn and to try new things. What we experience in one relationship we carry into others. And that's really what's meant by the idea of the parallel process in relationships.

So, the parallel process in relationships tell us that the interactions and the emotional exchanges that happen in one relationship can influence that same exchange in another relationship. If we're in the coaching role, we can deliberately use our relationship to help build the capacity to develop safe, open, and supportive relationships between those we coach and the families that they work with. And when coachees in turn are able to use those skills with the parents and the children they work with, parents and children are developing – getting the experience of nurturing responsive interactions that they can then provide to each other. So, the coaching relationship gives us a template that we can carry forward. We know how it feels. It helps us create those relationships.

To picture how it works, I'm gonna ask you to imagine something. Let's say – you can sort of watch this in your mind as a little video – you arrive at work after a very rushed morning and a really rough commute. A co-worker greets you with a smile, and she offers to get you a cup of coffee while you get settled. So, how do you feel then? Do you feel valued, cared for, able to perhaps let go of some of the stress you brought in the door with you? How do you carry that experience into your next interaction of the day? Hopefully that has given you some reserves of patience and maybe some willingness to offer support to the next person you encounter. Does that make sense? So, you can see how one relationship can influence another relationship in the movie we all just watched together in our minds.

The bottom line is that relationships influence other relationships, and this is the essence of how the coaching relationship influences outcomes. Then there's the "what" of coaching, and the "what" involves the knowledge that's shared, the goals that we're trying to reach, the expectations, and the purpose. The relationship is really the "how" of coaching. It's through the coaching relationship coachees can be open to reflecting, learning, trying out new perspectives, and practicing new skills. And this is how coaching helps build competencies. So, we can think about competencies as having the components of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. And when people get someone to swim in the water with them and work alongside them as they build the skills and gather the knowledge and perhaps reshape or broaden or deepen the needed attitudes, competencies grow. I think that coaching creates the time and the opportunity to do some examining of the attitudes, question their beliefs, think carefully about what they know, and deepen their skills.

Coaching supports reflective tak-- thinking. I started to say "reflective taking," and I have no idea what that would be, but it's an interesting idea. Coaching supports reflective thinking. And one way to think about reflective thinking is that when we are doing that, we're taking the time to look, listen, and learn from our work. I'm gonna talk about three components of reflections that coaching can help us with. So, you see them here, reflecting in, on, and for action. And your first thought might be, "What the heck is she talking about?" So, let's start with the one that I think is the most self-evident, and that one is reflecting for action. We do that when we stop and take time to prepare, to think ahead about what might happen, what might the response be to what we're doing, and get as ready as we can for all the things we can predict could happen.

Okay, so, that's looking ahead. After we do something, we might reflect on that experience, look at what happened in order to learn, and possibly to keep doing what worked well and to make changes if things didn't work as we had hoped. So, that's looking back. Reflecting in action, I used to think when I first heard the idea it meant taking a minute to stop and think when someone asked a question or did something and you weren't sure what to do next. And I learned after reading Donald Schon's book a little more carefully that that's a very brief, in-the-moment, almost, reflection on action when you do that. And that's a perfectly wonderful thing to do. What reflecting in action is, is that when you see people doing it, responding to the unexpected in a very smooth and effective way, making an adjustment almost instantaneously, that's reflecting in action.

When you've done that – let's say, all of a sudden, a child got ready to bite another child, and in that moment you fluidly stepped in and distracted the child that was getting ready to inflict the bite. And someone else would say to you, "How did you know how to do that with him?" And you might say, "I don't know. It just seemed like the right thing." In reality, that response of yours was based on everything you had learned up until that point about that child in particular, about how to redirect a child that's starting to do something wrong – that might have come from something you read or something you were trained in – and about thinking back on those experiences and perhaps discussing them with somebody.

So, coaches can help people get ready for action. And an example like that – they might say, "So, under what conditions does this child tend to bite –" and help you identify those and then help you think through a few steps you could take that might help redirect the child or stop the injury from happening. And can help you reflect on action by giving you someone to talk with about how the different strategies that you tried worked out. The more you reflect for action and on action, the better and better and better you get at reflections in action.

So, coaching really enhances practice by providing plenty of opportunities for reflecting for action and reflecting on action.