

Coaching (Teaching) for Excellence

BY RICK CONLOW AND DOUG WATSABAUGH

Effective coaches (teachers) engage with their players (students). Teaching (leadership) is a high contact sport.

A study which compared training alone to 'coaching' and training found that *training alone* increased productivity by 22.4% & *training plus coaching* increased productivity by 88%. Just as 'training' suggests a more active role than simply 'teaching', coaching infers a degree of personal involvement in the success of students that may not be present when focusing on delivery of content (teaching). Coaching encompasses every facet of the affective domain, realizing that maximum success is only possible by addressing both the emotional and logical aspects of student performance. It also conveys a sense of personal responsibility for the results of that training by the 'coach'.

Students need teachers who can instill a desire for them to excel, not destructive critics. A one-on-one conference or conversation is specifically about effective communication. You talk about goals, expectations, problems, and solutions to those problems. You give students positive feedback about their efforts while identifying performance issues clearly and directly. In one on ones you train students to think proactively when faced with challenges, obstacles, and problems. Over the course of time, the process teaches them problem-solving skills they can implement on their own. They become innovative and learn to take initiative to go the extra mile. The one-on-one process helps students explore ways to creatively improve performance, not merely get the job done or complete the task.

Coaching works! Like anything you will need practice to get better. Give yourself time. Get feedback from those you coach (teach). Keep learning and remember the following principles:

- **Keep it positive.** While you may need to give negative feedback at times, it's how you phrase it that matters. Give plenty of positive praise and recognition for effort.
- **Believe in the students you work with!** People have incredible potential. Your role is to help them realize that.
- **Coaching requires a trusting partnership.** Keep your conferences private and follow-through on your commitments.
- **The Coach is responsible for providing the motivation needed for the students to move beyond their own self-perceived limitations.**

Pat Riley, President of Miami Heat, said:

"A coach must keep everyone on the team in touch with present-moment realities - knowing where they stand, knowing where they're falling short of their potential, and knowing it openly and fairly."

Making Student Retention a Priority

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In December, American College Testing (ACT) quietly released its annual student retention report. The results are far from encouraging. The national retention rate for two-year public community colleges hit its lowest point in 20 years (51.3%). The report not only revealed the historic low for fall-to-fall retention, but also the same situation for persistence to degree: 29% for two-year colleges and 40.4% for public four-year colleges.

ACT's December 13, 2004 press release entitled, U.S. Colleges Falling Short on Helping Students Stay in School, points out several disturbing findings. The study concluded that "fewer than half (47%) of all college officials responding to the survey say they have established a goal for improved retention of first-year students, and only a third (33%) say they have established a goal for improved degree completion. In addition, only around half (52%) say they have an individual on staff who is responsible for coordinating retention strategies."

The lack of importance of retention on college campuses is reinforced by the assignment of retention authority. Survey results showed that only 16.7% of colleges had assigned retention coordinating responsibilities to staff at the dean level or higher. Of the 52% who did report the existence of a retention coordinator, only 30.3% had the responsibility assignment at that level.

Further interpretation of survey data begins to unearth the root of the problem. According to the ACT report, "The findings suggest colleges are more likely to blame students than their own practices for high dropout rates." When college officials were asked to identify factors that they believe contribute to student dropout, thirteen student characteristics were identified in contrast to only two institutional characteristics. **This inclination, to focus on student characteristics vs. college shortcomings, is reflective of the "Right to Fail" institutional philosophy.**

John Gardner, Senior Fellow for the National Policy Center for the First Year College Student, offered a similar analysis, "It is quite troubling that, in spite of all we know from three decades of research on student retention, colleges are still inclined to hold students largely responsible for their retention, while dramatically minimizing the institutional role in this problem."

Clearly, retention should become a priority issue for all colleges. However, as Habley and McClanahan point out (What Works in Student Retention, 2004), "... improvements to student retention will only accrue if enhanced or new interventions are undertaken. Improved retention evolves from quality programs and services." Consequently, in order for colleges to effectively address student retention concerns, they **must adopt a different set of assumptions about the reasons for student failure.** Documentation clearly shows that significant improvement in student success is possible when colleges move from a "Right to Fail" to "Right to Succeed" institutional orientation.

Recent breakthroughs demonstrate the very real potential to **dramatically increase the success of our students when colleges shift their thinking and practice to the alternate paradigm.** Examples of this progress include fall-to-fall persistence rate increases to the 80% level with an at-risk student sample (Johnson, 2003), from 16% to 67% (fall-to-fall) for a highly at-risk student sample (Johnson, 2003), and from 57% to 94% (fall-to-spring) with an at-risk student sample (Karow, 2005).

Colleges that make the shift to a "Right to Succeed" philosophy utilize proven learning models that yield **substantially higher retention results.** "Right to Succeed" colleges create **highly focused, learning-centered** institutions that **engage students** in partnerships within an environment characterized by **mutual responsibility and personal empowerment.**