

# What is Incremental Coaching?

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# Leverage Leadership

- In the last few years I have become increasingly convinced that a powerful way to support teachers' development and improve the quality of teaching is to use regular 'incremental' coaching. I first came across this approach in Paul Bambrick-Santoyo's (2012) *Leverage Leadership*.
- His approach is based on avoiding some of the common errors he believes we make when thinking about how best to improve the performance of teachers. In the diagram below, which is based on his work, the left-hand column summarises what he thinks are common pitfalls that schools fall into.

## Five incorrect assumptions

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More is better

Less is more

Having written feedback is really important

Face-to-face feedback is much more useful

Just tell them and they will be motivated to make the change

They need to do the thinking for themselves

They will know the best way to improve something

In-depth coaching and guided practice works best

Teachers can implement the feedback at any time

You need to nail down the timing and review point

Adapted from Paul Bambrick-Santoyo

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# Incremental Coaching

- It typically involves a short drop-in into a lesson where the short coaching conversation that follows, ideally that day, elicits the areas of strength and a single area of focus for improvement with some strategies to try. Ideally, the teacher has a chance to practise these as part of the follow-up conversation. The teacher then spends just one week really focusing on this single area for improvement until the next short drop-in a week later when there can then be a discussion about the progress that has been made. This may result in another week or two on the same focus or the opportunity to move into a new area. Questioning starts very open, allowing the teacher to work out as much as possible for themselves. Only if needed, are more closed or probing questions introduced. In all cases, clear actions for follow-up are clarified, with a clear timeline for each.

## Keep left

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
100% teacher driven	50% teacher driven.	Leader guided	Leader driven (when all else fails)
Teacher identifies the problem.	Teacher can identify the problem when leader prompts with appropriate scaffolded questions.	Leader needs to present the classroom data for the teacher to be able to understand the problem.	When teacher has been unable to identify the problem despite attempts, the leader identifies the problem for the teacher.

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# Ownership of improvement

Over time, this incremental process enables teachers to develop mastery in the full range of basic classroom skills and pedagogies that will lead to improved classroom delivery and improved outcomes for pupils. At its heart, the incremental coaching approach gives ownership for improvement to the teachers themselves.

# So what's the evidence?

Peter Matthews has looked into incremental coaching and believes its potential is significant. In his recent article for Professional Development Today he says: “In the research carried out into incremental coaching I found that where it has been adopted by a school, incremental coaching is *the* core process for developing the teaching workforce; it builds on other training and is central to continuing professional development (CPD), effectively transforming continuing to *continuous* professional development

# So what's the evidence?

One further characteristic, essential to the successful establishment of incremental coaching, is that it is developmental and non-judgemental. It is best when detached from performance management; indeed, perceptions of such a link are detrimental to the process. For this reason it is better if coaches are not the line managers of those they are coaching, and the outcomes of coaching are owned by the coachee rather than management.”

# So what's the evidence?

Matthews also notes that the way in which incremental coaching is presented is crucial. The climate within which it is implemented makes a real difference: “The schools presented incremental coaching as an entitlement for teachers: something that will support them in their work, enhance their skills and accelerate their progress towards professional mastery. Even when this stage is reached, it remains valuable, as demonstrated by leaders in education and other organisations and in a range of occupations.

# So what's the evidence?

- Coaching has the potential to make teaching more effective, more satisfying and more successful, through its agency for professional and personal growth. Undertaken systematically across a school, it can improve instructional quality and consistency.”
- In other words, the approach is all about helping teachers be better teachers and is separated from the judgemental approach that sits behind formal lesson observations and appraisal. Crucially, the focus is on “fattening the pig, not weighing it”.

# In summary

The term incremental coaching encapsulates *a regular, frequent and ongoing cycle of observation and action-based coaching*. The coaching is a dialogue that typically includes review, praise, feedback, reflection, modelling, planning and goal setting:

- The process focuses on one action step at a time.
- Each step is followed up in subsequent observations until it is demonstrably embedded in practice.

# In summary

- There is a minimal interval between observation and coaching.
- The observation and coaching events are planned into the organisation of the school.
- Coaching is a disciplined activity which incorporates common elements.
- Coaches are trained in the process.
- Coaches are lead practitioners who have earned professional respect.

# In summary

This blog is taken from the second edition of Leadership Matters, published by John Catt.