Case Study – Kim

(excerpted and adapted from *Instructional Coaching* by Jim Knight, 2008)

When instructional coaching was introduced at Kim Wilson’s inner-city middle school, Kim, a language arts teacher, wasn’t impressed. She stated bluntly that she didn’t want any of whatever her instructional coach, Alison Shanahan, was offering. Kim refused to meet her coach, telling her straight out, “I don’t need anyone to help me teach my class, and I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from wasting my time.” When Alison tried to set up an interview with Kim to better understand Kim’s concerns, Kim pointedly replied, “I’d prefer not to have anyone spying on me, if you don’t mind.”

Kim was hostile and suspicious, and some might say rude in her dealings with her coach. Luckily for Kim and her students, Kim’s coach was an outstanding relationship builder. Alison respected Kim’s request, didn’t mention coaching for many months, in fact, and concentrated instead on building a trusting relationship with Kim. Alison was friendly, positive, supportive and caring in all her interactions with Kim, even though for a long time, Kim did not respond in kind. Eventually, however, Alison and Kim began to have brief conversations in the staff lounge, the hallway, or before and after school. During these little interactions, Alison learned about Kim and showed a genuine interest and concern for her, asking questions about Kim’s family and life outside of school. This wasn’t a technique or trick. Alison truly was interested; she really did care.

Over time, Kim warmed to Alison. Alison began to ask Kim advice on different aspects of teaching writing (Alison learned quickly that Kim had a lot of expertise to share), and during those conversations Kim eventually began telling Alison about the challenges she was facing. Alison came to understand that Kim was very proud of the writing scores that her students achieved, and was equally frustrated when she couldn’t get through to her students. At first, when Kim expressed her frustrations, Alison simply listened empathetically. Then, when she thought it was appropriate, every so often she would mention some of the effective practices that she was introducing with other teachers and the results those teachers were achieving.

Through these informal conversations, Alison learned that Kim was especially frustrated by her students’ struggles to organize their writing. Alison decided that Kim’s pride in her students’ skills and her frustration with her students’ organizing challenges might be a way to open the door to a collaborative relationship with Kim. When Alison was sure that she was starting to have Kim’s trust, she asked her if she was willing to try a little experiment and let Alison teach the Framing Routine (Ellis, 1998) with a
class of Kim’s students. Since the Framing Routine employed a graphic organizer that students could use to organize their ideas, Alison suggested that after the class, they look at the data and see whether the strategy had helped the students organize their thoughts. “This will be quick and easy,” Alison said. “I promise it won’t hurt. If it works, we will have found another way to improve your kids’ scores. If it doesn’t work, we’ll know what not to do.” Keen to increase student achievement, beginning to trust Alison, and aware that she was in the risk-free position of only having to watch, Kim said yes.

After Alison’s lesson, a simple informal assessment showed that the strategy had helped students. Kim grew more interested and, after talking with Alison, decided that her students might benefit from learning an essay writing strategy, the Theme Writing Strategy (Schumaker, 2002b).

At first, perhaps she was uncomfortable being observed, Kim didn’t want to teach the strategy herself, and asked Alison to do it. Alison would likely have refused Kim’s suggestion if she felt that Kim was simply trying to get out of teaching. However, Alison had a hunch that if Kim watched her teach parts of the strategy a few times, she might get on board. Alison guided Kim to watch for and gather data on certain teaching practices that she used during the model lessons, and sure enough, after watching a few lessons, Kim began to feel confident that she too could teach the strategy.

Alison then arranged to meet during Kim’s planning time. Alison explained in direct, simple language exactly what to do to implement the strategy. She also shared an instructor’s manual with Kim, and even highlighted some sections that she considered especially important. When Kim first taught the strategy, Alison was there more as a support than an observer. Although she had some helpful tips after the first class, Alison mostly offered genuine, specific positive comments about Kim’s performance. Kim lit up like a Christmas tree when Alison gave her specific, positive feedback on her teaching methods.

In all of her subsequent actions with Kim, Alison was careful to support Kim first, always offering suggestions in a way that was supportive, not critical. Alison gathered data on the critical teaching practices both she and Kim agreed should be observed (the same practices that Kim had watched for when Alison provided her model lessons), and then, like partners, they reviewed the data together. Alison never judged or evaluated Kim; Alison simply collaborated like a friend, a support, a second pair of hands, to help Kim help her students to be better writers.

Alison and Kim’s hard work paid off. After learning then writing strategy, Kim’s students’ scores improved dramatically. Kim was hooked. She began to tell other teachers in the school how effective the strategy had been, and teachers around the school realized that if Kim liked it, there must be something to it. Indeed, at the start of the next school year, Kim spoke out at a district language arts meeting in favor of the strategy. “I’m going to be doing this strategy in my class no matter what, and I plan on trying some other new strategies this year, too. I actually think that’s what we all should be doing,” she said, “because this helps our kids.” It took a long time, it took false starts, overcoming rejection, patience, and support, but Alison’s efforts were rewarded. The students in her school and district were actually better learners thanks to Alison’s efforts.

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