

The Power of Coaching

During the 2016 Knowles Teacher Initiative Summer Meeting and much of the prior school year, I was consumed with the question of how to change a system. At that time, I was trying to establish an advisory program at my large comprehensive high school. After a year's efforts, I was finally at a point where I had convinced enough people at my school to pilot an advisory program called "Homeroom" with our incoming freshmen. I was excited, but being the *de facto* leader of this pilot, I was also nervous about making sure that I did things "right" so that the program could be successful and eventually established as part of our school's system.

As I was pondering how to ensure the pilot's success and feeling slightly overwhelmed by this big project I was taking on, Knowles announced that they would start to offer the opportunity to work with a Knowles coach during the school year. I was immediately intrigued because I knew that I would need as much support as possible as I tried to bring about this systemic change at my school. I was also fortunate enough to get to work with Knowles Senior Fellow **Jessica Uy** as a coach for our Summer Meeting presentation. Not only was Jessica super helpful for our presentation, but she also worked in my district as a mentor! I had had a very positive experience as a new teacher working with mentors in our district and knew that Jessica would be a great supportive resource.

So upon hearing about this opportunity, I approached Jessica during Summer Meeting to ask if she would be interested in being my coach for the upcoming school year, as I embarked upon leading this big project. I explained that I thought it would be helpful to have a veteran teacher's perspective on "the system" as I tried to navigate the complexities of making sure that Homeroom was successful AND trying to convince the rest of the staff who were not yet participating that this would be a good and necessary program for our students. Luckily, Jessica was interested and agreed to be my coach!

At first, I think that Jessica and I were both a bit uncertain about how we would work together and what we would work on because it was not in the realm of typical topics that a teacher might be coached on (such as inquiry into a pedagogical practice). I originally asked Jessica to help me apply the inquiry cycle to the five Homeroom Resource Group meetings that I would be leading

throughout the year. Resource Groups were opportunities for colleagues to collaborate across different departments on priority topics of our school, and I was able to receive permission to gather the volunteer Homeroom advisors in a Resource Group for the upcoming year. As the lead for this group, I wanted Jessica's help in planning these meetings to ensure that the advisors felt supported as much as possible throughout the year. However, as the pilot started, I quickly realized that I would need much more varied support beyond simply planning these meetings because there were many issues that came up as I tried to ensure the success of the program. Fortunately, Jessica was able to adapt the inquiry cycle model to my needs.

The experience of working with Jessica as my coach highlighted for me the profound power of coaching, beyond what I might have anticipated. Our coaching relationship afforded me space to process my feelings and ideas, a structure to consider the bigger picture and reevaluate my goals and motivation, and a path toward important learnings.

Space to Process

It was helpful to be able to “vent” my frustrations regarding individual incidents that had come up because Jessica would first offer empathy but then help me step back and see the bigger picture. I looked forward to our scheduled meetings and felt relieved knowing that a coaching session was coming up because I knew that I had a time and place to get out all the feelings and thoughts regarding Homeroom that were swirling in my head. Without these designated meetings, I would not have been able to process all of these emotions and ideas and move onto next steps because they would have been crowded in my mind along with my lesson plans, concerns about certain students, feedback I needed to give on assignments, a checklist of things I had to do as the Biology Team Lead, professional development events that I had to design as the district's Biology Curriculum Lead, etc. Coaching helped me compartmentalize and consequently prioritize this initiative that I strongly believed in.

Adjusting Goals and Staying Motivated

Jessica helped focus my efforts. What was my ultimate goal, and what small next steps could I take to work towards achieving that goal? Jessica also helped me figure out in the course of our coaching that perhaps my “goal” had even

changed. Although the external measure of success may be getting the program established next year, my internal measure of success was actually shifting my colleagues' perspectives to value and prioritize students' socio-emotional and mental health as much as (or more than) their academic achievements. That was actually the driving motivation behind why I wanted to establish an advisory program in the first place, but I had started feeling discouraged when certain mechanics of the program were not working as well as I would have hoped. Meeting with Jessica helped me push past these "low points" of my roller coaster ride of emotions regarding Homeroom.

Important Learnings and New Understandings

With the support of Jessica (as well as my Knowles inquiry group and colleagues), I was also able to more easily and intentionally share the leadership responsibility I felt towards Homeroom. Even though I had initially taken on most of the leadership work regarding Homeroom because I felt guilty asking my colleagues to take on extra responsibilities for something that was "my" idea, I realized that not only would it be less burdening for me but that sharing the leadership would be the key to shifting our school's culture on a broader scale. Without others joining me in the trenches, I would never be able to spread this "grassroots" movement. I most likely would have come to this conclusion on my own eventually, but having the periodic meetings with Jessica helped me realize this more quickly and implement crucial next steps earlier in the process, which I think ultimately helped Homeroom go down a smoother path than it otherwise would have.

Although I didn't achieve the initial goal of establishing Homeroom as a permanent fixture of our school's system, I do think that I was able to shift more of our staff's perspective on the non-academic types of support that our students need. Without Jessica's help, I may have simply felt like I had failed with this conclusion, but I actually felt empowered and hopeful that there were more chapters to come in the story.

Coaching helped me take away deeper learnings that have stayed with me beyond this one initiative. I realized that "changing the system" is not necessarily about a news headline that I can point to proving the success of a certain initiative. I gained more perspective on why change can sometimes seem frustratingly slow at large schools like ours and that no one person can do it alone. Since 2016, I have

worked with a coach in some capacity every year, because I know how impactful it is to my growth as I continue to find ways to push and change the system as a teacher leader.