

# “I’m So Glad You’re **1** Here!”

## *The First Day as an Instructional Coach*

### DAY ONE

Mrs. Janice Wright, Instructional Coach  
Journal Entry: September 6

*What a day! I’ve had crazy days before at this school but never anything like this. Teaching has never been easy. I’ve been there with the frustrations, pressures, and uncertainty, but I always knew what the mission was and where I fit in with that mission. I had twenty-two fourth graders, and it was my job to make sure they learned everything, stayed safe and happy, and worked toward proficiency or better on their standardized tests. It was a tough job for sure, but I always knew what the job was and so did everyone else. But not today!*

*Today, I started a new job at school, and I have never been so confused, so lost, or so scared in my entire professional life. I came home more worried and upset than ever before, and I am starting to rethink this entire thing.*

*After ten years in the classroom, I was happy but stuck. I wanted a new challenge, a new perspective. I wanted to make a difference beyond my classroom, and, yes, I wanted a little recognition for all my skills and good work. I did not want to become an administrator. Not me! No way! That is an important role for sure, but I wanted to keep closer to my role as teacher, plus a little more. They posted the position of Instructional Coach and I jumped at it, but now I have no idea what I said “Yes” to.*

*When I got to school this morning, I headed for Principal Sander’s office. It was weird not going to my old classroom and thinking of someone else in there setting up my bulletin board. I guess I’ll have to get over that. I knocked on Principal Sander’s door and when invited in, I sat down, hoping to discuss the day ahead.*

*“I’m glad you’re here!” she said with a big smile. “There is so much to do, and I can use all the help I can get. I know we’ve talked a little about all you will be*

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*doing this year, but I wrote down some things I think you might do, just to get us started. We can refine and revise as we go along. I can't tell you how happy I am to finally have some help around here. Well, here is the list. Why don't you check out your new office, and I'll meet you in a half hour in the library for the opening faculty meeting. I am so glad you are here!"*

*With that, her phone rang and I took it as my cue to leave the office. I headed to my new office, a converted book storage room across the hall; not a bad space—just not my space. Not yet anyway. I sat down with my coffee and started reading the list Principal Sanders had handed me. By the time I got to the third item, I was questioning everything about this decision I had made to become the school's instructional coach. The list she had made included the following tasks:*

1. Assist with student discipline as needed
2. Standardize test administration
3. Cover office when principal is out of the building
4. Visit classrooms and teacher consultation
5. Serve as parent liaison
6. Organize testing materials and supplies
7. Serve as school rep on ELA curriculum committee

*Is this what an instructional coach is supposed to be doing? What did these things have to do with instruction? This sounds like an assistant principal's job description and more. I don't want to be an administrator.*

*This was clearly not what I had signed on for. I wasn't sure what my new job was, but I knew this wasn't what I thought it was. How could I handle all of these tasks and still have time to really make a difference in the academic achievement of our students? The only task on the list I thought did belong was number four. How could I tell Principal Sanders that I just didn't agree that assisting with student discipline was a part of my new role? After all, she is my boss and I am supposed to be helping her, right? What a mess I have made for myself! How am I ever going to get it straightened out?*

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Mrs. Skyler Sanders, School Principal  
Journal Entry: September 6

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*Today was the first day of school. It is always exciting, but this year, I think is going to be particularly good. I welcomed the students back to school at a morning assembly and had the first meeting with Mrs. Wright, my instructional coach. Although this is only my second year here as principal, I know Mrs. Wright will do an excellent job as an instructional coach. She is a highly effective teacher who understands classroom instruction and the literacy program we are now using here. Most important, she is very well respected by the other teachers. I think she will do a superb job.*

*We have never had an instructional coach here before at Franklin Elementary. I am not exactly sure what an instructional coach is or what one does. But when the district office called me over the summer and said that they had grant monies to fund an instructional coach for the next three years and did we want one, I certainly wasn't going to refuse. Who refuses help like this? Besides, I also know*

*that the principals in the other elementary buildings were getting instructional coaches. Hopefully, she will be able to take some of the load off my desk and free me up so I can go in and conduct more observations of teachers.*

*During our meeting today, I gave Mrs. Wright a list of her new job responsibilities. A lot of them were things that I know I am supposed to be doing, but I honestly can’t find the time. It is going to be a big help having her around to take some of the load off. I imagine that after awhile she will be able to get into the classrooms and help teachers directly, but for now I need her to help me as much as possible, to shoulder some of this responsibility I have on a daily basis. I am so glad she is here. This is going to be a great school year!*

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Ms. Amanda Shaffer, Veteran Teacher  
Journal Entry: September 6

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*Today was the first day of school. At the assembly this morning, Principal Sanders announced that Mrs. Wright was going to be our instructional coach for our building this year. Principal Sanders said that many of the other elementary buildings also got an instructional coach and that these coaches are supposed to help us improve our instruction. I have been teaching for 20 years. Why didn’t someone ask me if I wanted to be an instructional coach? I think I do a pretty good job with these students, so I don’t know how much help the instructional coach will be. If she thinks she is going to come into my room and tell me what to do, she’d better think again. Some of the other teachers were talking about it in the break room this afternoon. They said that we’d better be careful; they had heard that this instructional coach was going to be a spy for administration and that Mrs. Wright was reporting directly to the principal. In fact, several of the teachers said that the instructional coach had already met with the principal first thing this morning. I will be nice to her, but I am not going to let her in my room. She can’t help me. All in all though, I guess it was a good first day. It feels good to be back. Now, I just have to make it through one more school year. Can’t wait until June . . .*

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## **WHAT IS AN INSTRUCTIONAL COACH (IC)?**

Instructional coaches have recently become a popular strategy for schools in need of improvement (Makibbin, & Sprague, 1993). While there are many titles used to refer to instructional coaches (e.g., school leader, instructional support specialist, curriculum specialist, etc.) one thing remains certain—their purpose. The purpose of the instructional coach (IC) is to work directly and indirectly with teachers, staff, and the building principals to improve the effectiveness of classroom instruction and increase student learning, performance, and overall achievement; however, the IC cannot and will not be successful working solo in a school building. Researcher studies suggest that it takes a school community working with its IC to be successful in improving classroom instruction and eventually student performance.

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### **THE INSTRUCTIONAL COACH—THE EARLY EXPLORER**

In some ways, being an instructional coach is like being an early explorer, setting sail for uncharted waters. While there is certainly research and literature to guide instructional coaches, the process or steps an instructional coach takes to be successful still remains virtually unexplored. Ultimately, the coach has to be willing to try out certain strategies and practices to determine what works. In some ways, the instructional coach has to be a researcher, conducting small, informal experiments; studying what strategies or techniques are the most effective for changing teachers' classroom practices; and improving classroom instruction. While the uncertainty of this job may be frightening, for those who want to reflect critically on practice and collaborate with others, the opportunity is quite different from years of teaching in a classroom.

Many times, administrators introduce an instructional coach to a school, believing that an instructional coach is the secret ingredient needed to fix a low-performing school (Joyce, Showers, Murphy, & Murphy, 1989). While having an instructional coach is certainly a step in the right direction, an effective instructional coach is not something that happens by accident or chance. In fact, experts note that this type of success only happens with a lot of planning, time, commitment, support, and strategizing (Saphier & West, 2010).

In the case depicted in the earlier journal entries, several steps should have taken place to avoid what transpired in the school. Presented below are the steps:

- Step One: Establish an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) (e.g., principal, IC, teachers, and staff).
- Step Two: Establish a job description for the IC.
- Step Three: Establish the role and responsibilities for the IC.
- Step Four: Develop an action plan for the IC.

### **STEP ONE: ESTABLISH AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM (ILT)**

In further examining this situation, it is important to remember that the principal is still the instructional leader of the building; however, this creates a real challenge for principals trying to improve the instructional level in the building. We all acknowledge the fact that in order to improve instruction, one has to enter the classroom to observe it. No matter how much the principal reassures a teacher that the observation and

feedback is informal and for improving practice, the teacher believes that he or she is being judged. The IC, being a third party (and not in an administrative position), can function differently in this situation.

Take another minute to reexamine the three journal entries at the beginning of this chapter. Then ask yourself: How did one great idea get so misunderstood so quickly? The obvious answer is that there was no clear understanding or agreement about the instructional coach’s role prior to its launch. That is the obvious answer, but not the entire answer. The bigger issue surrounds a concept that is usually seen in a very positive light: Help is coming! Help was arriving for this school in the form of a new position—an instructional coach; however, in a situation such as this, where help arrives undefined, those who need the assistance will define it through their own lens, regardless of the relevance to its intended goals. Help can be seen as a welcomed gift, but it also can be received with suspicion and an assumption of judgment, as shown in the journal entries above. Unsolicited help can be greatly resented, feared, and sometimes even sabotaged. Those who welcome the help will, if permitted, focus it on their immediate needs while ignoring (for the most part) what the original intent of the help was for.

In this scenario, help was seen as coming from one, and only one, outside source—the instructional coach. Somehow this help would magically be able to fix all the problems in a school building. We all know that *real* help comes from the facilitation of problem solving by those most closely involved. Real help comes not as a Band-Aid but as an entire first aid kit, providing the practitioners with the right tools, opportunities, and information at the right time. Real help comes from within the group that requires it.

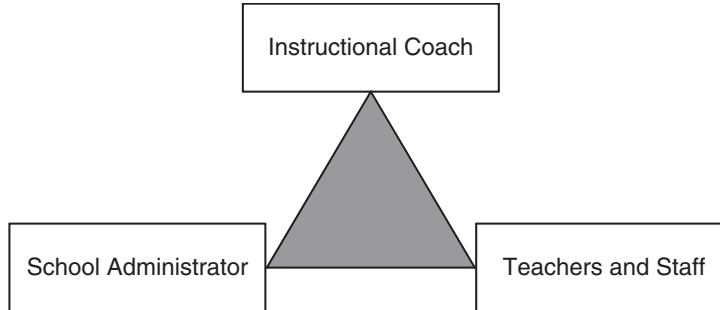
Despite how the help was perceived by the various players in this situation, we do know that the instructional coach model works—and works well when properly implemented and supported (Knight, 2007). We also believe it only works when it is an important component in a broader Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The ILT includes not only the IC, but also the support of the school leader and faculty. The ILT is a team of three as shown here in Figure 1.1.

As you can see from Figure 1.1, the ILT is made up of three main components: the school administrator, the IC, and teachers/staff. It is these three entities working together that identify issues related to instruction in the building (as well as determine methods to address these issues). In the next chapter, you will see how the IC works with the ILT to accomplish these feats.

The IC can, and must, work within this team of three to develop a fluid, responsive, proactive, research-based process that is present throughout the fabric of the school community. Within this framework, the role of the

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**Figure 1.1** The Instructional Leadership Team



IC can be defined, revised, and redefined as needs arise. If this is done, it will help to ensure that this position will be a benefit for everyone involved.

### **STEP TWO: ESTABLISH A JOB DESCRIPTION FOR THE IC**

As you read the earlier journal entries, you may have asked yourself the question, why didn't the school district develop a job description for the instructional coach? Could all of this confusion been prevented? This is a good question, and in most cases, the answer would have been "yes." A job description is a written statement that conveys key characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities for a position. While job descriptions will vary greatly depending on the nature of the position, all job descriptions should have some essential elements. A carefully constructed job description should have the qualifications one needs to hold the position, a general list of task and responsibilities, salary range, and benefits. It also should clearly identify the persons to whom the IC would report.

As you can see from the journal entries, having all members of the school building aware of the role and responsibilities of the IC is a pivotal component to the overall success of this initiative. Without it, things could become counterproductive for all members of the school community, preventing the attainment of the primary goal of improved students' learning and academic achievement.

The role of instructional coach is and must always be tailored to meet the specific and evolving needs of the school, its faculty, and its principal. There is no "one size fits all" boilerplate job description that will cover every nuance of this component of the Instructional Leadership Team. Because of the complexities of the IC position, developing a job description that accurately reflects the depth and breadth of work an IC may conduct is both critical as well as challenging. Despite these challenges, there are some general guidelines that districts can embrace as the overarching blueprint within which all the tailoring may occur.

### **STEP THREE: ESTABLISH THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE IC**

While the role and responsibilities for the IC would most likely be embedded in the job description, it is important that these components are carefully crafted. Take a look and examine for a moment the role and responsibilities in the example job description below. Which of these descriptors meet your perception for an IC?

#### **Purpose Statement:**

An instructional coach position was created to improve classroom instruction and enhance student achievement.

#### **Roles**

- Mentor to teachers
- Model to teachers
- Instructional leader
- Data analyst
- Teacher liaison (teacher-administrator)

#### **Responsibilities**

- Demonstrates knowledge about effective curricular instruction and assessment practices
- Helps teachers design curricular activities
- Monitors effectiveness of classroom strategies
- Provides quality interactions with teachers through frequent classroom visits
- Models best practices for teachers in their classrooms
- Coaches teachers to improve student learning and provides feedback in a nonevaluative manner
- Analyzes and reports student achievement data
- Uses student achievement data to drive instruction
- Plans professional development
- Meets with grade-level teachers on a regular basis (e.g., to review student work, deal with areas of concern, and plan upcoming units)
- Uses and models use of technology as an instructional tool to support student learning

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- Assists in the selection of instructional and professional materials
- Maintains open and effective lines of communication with all parties
- Has both the willingness and the ability to actively lead change initiatives with hopes of inspiring new and better ways of instruction and learning

### **Nature of Work**

Under the direction of the principal, the primary role of this individual is to act as an agent of change, leading initiatives that will systematically result in higher levels of engagement and thinking among students and teachers.

### **Duties and Responsibilities**

- Is directly involved in designing curricular activities and assessments that inform instruction
- Models and supports effective teaching strategies and techniques in a nonevaluative manner
- Facilitates ongoing dialogue about instructional practices
- Is informed of current research in learning across all areas and acts as an informational resource for teachers at the building level
- Effectively integrates the use of technology as an instructional tool to support student learning
- Assumes responsibility for supporting new teachers at the building level

When launching any new initiative that is not already part of the historic fabric of the organization, it is important to give clear parameters indicating what the position can and will include. It is equally important to delineate what the position does not include in its roles and responsibilities. The challenging and resource-strapped circumstances our schools often face make it tempting to use this new resource—the IC, without an immediate and daily responsibility for a class of students—as the first person to be called upon to fill other unmet needs within the building. While we understand the temptation, we strongly suggest that this should be avoided completely. If the instructional coach becomes the person on call, it will be far more difficult to define the actual role within the school community.

Faculty perception of the purpose of the instructional coach is vital to the success of this initiative. If the instructional coach is seen through the lens of other roles and responsibilities, the important perception becomes diluted, skewed, and damaged. The effectiveness of the instructional coach will be reduced to a large degree. Of course, there will always be emergency



situations that require everyone to pitch in and help, but the instructional coach cannot become the permanent “first responder” for the building.

Here are some suggested descriptions of what an instructional coaching position should *not* include:

- The IC is not a substitute teacher, administrator, paraprofessional, nurse, lunch supervisor, and so on.
- The IC is not a faculty evaluator.
- The IC is not the assistant principal, discipline dean, or office supervisor.
- The IC is not a clerical assistant.
- The IC is not a resource teacher, remedial subject area teacher, or special education teacher; although, they may certainly have expertise in any of these areas.
- The IC is not part of the administration.

Having this list available for all faculty as the ILT begins its work should help clear up a lot of confusion, reduce the amount of misinformation, prevent unrealistic expectations, and allay a great many fears, suspicions, and concerns.

#### **STEP FOUR: DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN FOR THE IC**

For many instructional coaches new to the position, knowing where to begin is not only a frightening thought but one that may seem almost insurmountable. This lack of knowing where to start can often derail even the most focused IC, since the IC can be misdirected by request for help by others. In close examination of the journal entries, this may have contributed to some of the frustrations felt by Mrs. Wright, the new IC. Not knowing her role and responsibilities completely as an IC, coupled with the fact that she had no real game plan, created a less-than-perfect day for this instructional coach.

An action plan is a sort of blueprint that will provide even the most experienced IC with a more accurate perspective of the need within the building and also a clear starting point of where to begin. The action plan should be developed by the ILT. The building principal, IC, and staff should all contribute to this process of strategically determining where the IC should focus time, energies, and available resources.

The ILT may go through a series of steps to determine what needs to be included in the action plan. The ILT may conduct an in-depth analysis of student performance data as part of this process. They may even conduct a trend analysis, examining student performance at the same grade

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level over a number of years to determine areas where students are not meeting the minimum benchmarks. This new knowledge would then help direct the IC's efforts, and the IC would focus his or her efforts on working with teachers in the specific areas identified via the in-depth data analysis.

In other cases, the action plan may be more micro in that it focuses the IC's efforts on a specific set or cohort of teachers who need to improve some aspect of their current classroom instruction. Action plans also can focus on a series of professional development areas. In this case, the IC would be responsible for carrying out the professional development and then pushing into classrooms to extend and support what teachers learned in the training.

Not only is the action plan versatile, but it also is flexible in that it can be modified and abridged on an as-needed basis. The action plan would be a working document used by the ILT to reflect upon and refine as the team works along with the IC to create progress in the school building. In future chapters in this book, you will learn more about the action plan and how, as an IC, you and your ILT can use this document to optimize your role and effectiveness in improving teacher practice.

### SUMMARY

Assistance for improving schools comes in many forms. In this chapter, you read about how a very good initiative to help improve instruction went astray. The instructional coach was uncomfortable about what her role entailed and, because of this, was taunted through the day with memories of her old position as a teacher in the building. The principal, already overloaded on the first day of school, also did not know the role or purpose of the instructional coach and, therefore, found an immediate way for the instructional coach to help out. In not knowing the IC's role, the principal selected some initial activities for the instructional coach; however, only one was aligned with what Mrs. Wright, the instructional coach, thought her duties should be. And then there was the teaching staff. They, too, had not been informed about the instructional coach position; many of them, no doubt, were just hearing about it for the first time that day. They were suspicious and judgmental and believed that the instructional coach was a sort of spy for the building principal. Unfortunately, these misperceptions are shared by many teachers in districts that implement an instructional coach model without first carefully developing a shared perception among the stakeholders in the building as to what the instructional coach's role and purpose will be. Unfortunately, this entire misunderstanding will eventually impact the depth and breadth of the work that the IC can do and greatly impede the effectiveness of the initiative overall.

A job description is a key element to any position; however, it is an even more critical element for the success of an instructional coach. Because there are so many possibilities (and distractions) for the instructional coach position, it is important to have a job description in place not so much for the coach but for others in the school community to understand the role and responsibility of the coach. If all members are aware of the purpose of the instructional coach, situations like the ones shown at the beginning of this chapter will most likely not be an issue. While job descriptions vary greatly, one of the most important factors when creating (or refining) a job description for an instructional coach is that it is a collaborative effort. Another is that its development is always focused on the goal—improved academic achievement for all students via strong and consistent instructional leadership at all levels.



### Self-Study Activity #1

**For the Instructional Coach:**

Pretend for a moment that you are instructional coach Mrs. Wright (or Mr. Wright). Pretend that you started your first day as the IC and everyone in the building had the same perception of your role as you did. How might your journal entry look now? Take a few minutes and write a journal entry about what the first day of school was like for you. Reexamine your journal entry and come up with a list of things that you believe would need to be in place in order for your journal entry to look the way that it does and not like Mrs. Wright's at the beginning of the chapter.

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**For the Building Principal:**

On the first day of school, Principal Sanders had a meeting with staff—what a missed opportunity to inform staff about the purpose of the IC. Knowing what you now know about an IC, prepare some key speaking points about how you would describe the purpose, role, and responsibilities of your building's newest member.

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**For the Teachers or Related Staff:**

Nothing is more powerful than a person's first impression. Knowing what you now know about instructional coaches, take a few minutes and write a new teacher journal entry. Pretend you are interested in working with the IC. On what types of activities or areas would you see the IC working with you and other instructional faculty in the building?

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