

## Book Review



*Coaching conversations: Transforming your school one conversation at a time.* Linda Gross Cheliotas and Marceta Fleming Reilly. 2010. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. 109 pages. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4129-8183-5. US \$24.80.

*Opening the door to coaching conversations.* Linda Gross Cheliotas and Marceta Fleming Reilly. 2012. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. 151 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4522-0257-0. US \$28.56.



Reviewed by

Kathleen Topolka-Jorissen  
Western Carolina University

Leading in the field of curriculum and instruction requires knowledge in many areas, such as pedagogical content, assessment, developmental stages of learning, and accountability processes. Yet, even a knowledgeable expert in all of these areas may not be successful as an instructional leader without the communication skills required to influence and assist in the professional development of those expected to implement adopted curriculum and develop effective learning experiences. The ability to engage in productive one-on-one and group conversations with teachers, students, parents, and others in the school and district is essential for instructional leaders who are committed to developing high performing schools.

To that end, Linda Gross Cheliotas and Marceta Fleming Reilly have provided practitioners with a pair of books that together serve as a training manual and a reference guide for understanding, practicing, and implementing effective “coach-like conversations” focused on “building relationships through committed listening, asking powerful questions that result in deeper thinking, and utilizing reflective feedback that holds each person to high standards while at the same time preserv[ing] their personal dignity” (Cheliotas & Reilly, 2010, p. xi). Drawing on their careers as school and workshop leaders, the authors organize the first book, *Coaching conversations: Transforming your school one conversation at a time* into five chapters with the first two chapters serving to establish the context of change and leadership. The authors then get down to business with the

remaining three “how to” chapters on listening, speaking, and reflective feedback. The second book, *Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations*, published in 2012, is a compilation of examples of conversations that leaders are most likely to engage in, which makes it an illustrative rich companion reference to *Coaching Conversations*.

To delve deeper into the first and foundational book, *Coaching Conversations*, readers will first encounter the authors’ paradigm of leadership. The old leadership model, the authors say, “assumes leaders are experts and will tell others what to do” (p. 10), while in the new leadership model, “the leader does not know all the answers. The leader asks questions, listens to the content and underlying themes in the answers, and then is able to integrate the group’s thinking into a vision and direction to which people respond” (pp. 11-12). The most effective way for leaders to behave in the new model, the authors contend, is to facilitate conversations that are intentional, focused on the other person, and aimed at growth and change (p. 3). In essence, the authors define coaching conversations as those in which a leader listens carefully and frames open-ended questions to foster dialogue and, ultimately, change.

Readers who want to use *Coaching Conversations* as a self-directed learning guide will find many useful exercises throughout the book. For example, the authors include a 30-item Listening Skills Self Assessment with directions for self-scoring and a follow up action plan. The chapter on reflective feedback contains a list of authentic situations as a menu to practice framing good questions. This same chapter contains a set of questions that readers may use for journal reflections as a step in preparing for a difficult conversation. Finally, the book concludes with a “Next Steps Checklist” (pp. 94-95) that guides the reader through a sequenced set of steps, beginning with committed listening skills; progressing through powerful speaking, reflective feedback, coaching on the fly; and culminating in preparing for a difficult conversation.

Most school leaders will find in this book coaching maps and concrete examples for just about any type of conversation they want to explore. One of the most useful is the “reflective feedback” conversation. For this type of conversation, Cheliotis and Reilly adapt researcher David Perkins’ (2003) work on learning and cognition into a three-step feedback process that progresses from clarifying questions or statements to value statements or questions and concludes with questions or possibility statements (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010, p. 67). The strength of their discussion, however, is in the clear illustrations of the intentions or goals of each step and the specific examples of what each of these steps might look like in practice. Six or seven sample questions or statements are listed for each of the three steps. A school leader who wants to maximize the effectiveness of the post-observation or summative evaluation conference in evaluating teachers will find powerful guidance in this section of the book. As the authors say, reflective feedback “reduces potential for defensiveness and engages the other person in deep reflection and possibility thinking” (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010, p. 69). Furthermore, as the authors illustrate, this type of conversation is essential in working with teachers or other employees who are underperforming as well as supporting high flyers who may have few or no opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about their work,

simply because their supervisors are unsure of how to frame a meaningful conversation with them. Illustrating this type of conversation between a principal and both a struggling teacher and an outstanding teacher, the authors demonstrate how this conversation “stretches teachers’ thinking while also acknowledging their individual strengths” and “generates feelings of confidence and competence on the part of great teachers” (Cheliotas & Reilly, 2010, p. 75).

*Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations*, the companion book to *Coaching Conversations*, offers ten chapters of stories drawn from authentic situations in which the authors or other leaders successfully employ coaching conversations. Principals and other leaders will be able to find several conversation models in each of these topics:

- Discovering and Using Your Core Values
- Building Trust and Community
- Holding Up High Expectations for All
- Changing How We Change
- Getting Genuine Buy-In
- Engaging in Difficult Conversations
- Changing Blamers into Believers
- Everyone is Accountable
- Balancing Personal and Professional Commitments
- Navigating Successful Life Transitions

As an additional help in locating specific types of coaching conversations, the authors provide a matrix that lists every conversation, a synopsis of each situation, and indicators of which of the five coaching skills and seven coach-leadership skills are illustrated in the conversation.

One chapter that will interest many school leaders in *Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations* is the chapter titled “Getting Genuine Buy-In: Framing Expectations to Support Change” (Cheliotas & Reilly, 2012, p. 63). In their role as *change agent*, school leaders often are faced with communicating the rationale and specifics of desired changes, fostering collaboration, and dealing with implementation problems and issues. The authors present and discuss concepts from four scenarios, summarize approaches, and provide a reflection guide for readers who want to improve their coaching skills as change agents.

“Engaging in Difficult Conversations” is another chapter that will be of interest to readers who desire to go beyond the basics provided in *Coaching Conversations*. Like the other chapters in the book, this one includes four scenarios with accompanying commentaries and a summary of key ideas or components a coach must consider in preparing for and engaging in a difficult conversation. Examples are authentic, including conversations regarding low and underperforming teachers in a school that is in *corrective action* status, conversations to gain understanding of a complex state-funded program, coaching a marginal teacher, and terminating a secretary.

These books together offer both a concise overview of how to develop skills in several types of coaching conversations and a handy reference to models of those conversations. For those reasons, the books will be useful for principals and other school and district leaders who wish to engage in meaningful conversations to facilitate growth and change. Faculty in leadership preparation programs will also find these books useful in helping prospective school leaders and teacher leaders develop coaching expertise. However, both current and aspiring school leaders who are interested in delving deeper into the topic of coaching will want to supplement these books with additional research on the topic of coaching. In fact, the only caveat in recommending these books is that they merely hint at the science behind the method. Occasionally, the authors describe the goal of coaching conversations as that of fostering thinking. For example, they write, “New patterns of thinking that lead to changed behavior require deep reflection and intentional, ongoing practice in order to create and develop new neural pathways with the brain” (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010, p. 4). For the most part, though, the authors provide what they describe in the preface as “a simple guidebook for school leaders that will introduce you to effective coaching conversation skills, which are critical for making systemic change” (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010, p. xi). Readers interested not only in what the coach should think and do, but also in the intended impact on those being coached, will want to augment these books with the work of scholars like Costa and Garmston (2002). These authors point out:

Fundamental to the model is the focus on a practitioner’s cognitive development. This focus is based on the belief that growth is achieved through the development of intellectual functioning. Therefore, the coaching interaction focuses on mediating a practitioner’s thinking, perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions toward the goals of self-directed learning and increased complexity of cognitive processing. (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 5)

In other words, the intent of coaching goes beyond framing questions in just the right way to foster trust and produce behavior change; it is about fostering higher order thinking and self-directed learning among educational professionals. Ultimately, educators should be able to work collaboratively to foster each others’ thinking and decision-making and not rely on one person—the principal or other designated leader—to serve as the catalyst for powerful professional conversations.

Regardless of this concern, most curriculum and instruction leaders will find the companion books, *Coaching Conversations* and *Opening the Door to Coaching Conversations*, very useful in developing their personal effectiveness in small or large group conversations aimed at capacity building. With the burgeoning expectations for professional learning communities to lead school improvement, the imperative for teachers to assume major leadership responsibilities, and the ever-increasing complexity of schools as organizations, the need for a critical mass of educators skilled in coaching conversations should be apparent.

## References

- Cheliotas, L. G., & Reilly, M. F. (2010). *Coaching conversations: Transforming your school one conversation at a time*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Cheliotas, L. G., & Reilly, M. F. (2012). *Opening the door to coaching conversations: Transforming your school one conversation at a time*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Costa, A. L., & Garmston, R. J. (2002). *Cognitive coaching: A foundation for renaissance schools (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Perkins, D. (2003). *King Arthur's round table: How collaborative conversations create smart organizations*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.



## About the Reviewer



**Kathleen Topolka-Jorissen, PhD**, is an associate professor of Educational Leadership and Director of the Executive EdD Program in Educational Leadership at Western Carolina University. She received her PhD from the University of Minnesota. Dr. Topolka-Jorissen's research and development work focuses on how to promote collaborative processes that build capacity to improve student achievement. Prior to joining the WCU faculty, she spent 25 years as a school and district level administrator in Minnesota. She also taught in educational leadership programs at the University of Minnesota, Winona State University, and Bowling Green State University. Email: [ktjorissen@wcu.edu](mailto:ktjorissen@wcu.edu)

Cover graphics used with permission of Corwin Publishing, June 2013.