The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Instructional Leaders

By: Julie Adams

"What's the point, Mrs. Adams?" asked Brian.

I will never forget the confused yet honest look on my 8th grade student's face when he asked me this question after I had concluded my riveting lecture about the causes of the Civil War.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Brian again repeated, "What's the point … of our lesson?"

To be honest, his question both irritated and baffled me, as I wasn't sure how to answer it. I shrugged and told him the point was for him to know the information because it would be on the test.

It was 20 years ago and I was in my second year of teaching 8th grade Core, a three-period Humanities block of reading, English, and U.S. History in California. I began my teaching career for the same reason many other educators do – I wanted to inspire and teach students to reach their fullest potentials. The only problem was that I had shelves of textbooks filled with educational theory but still a nearly empty toolkit with which to accomplish my goal.

"What's the point, Mrs. Adams?" To this day, Brian's provocative yet earnest question lingers in my mind. However, his question provided the impetus that pushed me to seek wisdom from Instructional Leaders (ILs) and examine and build my instructional philosophy and repertoire.

Teacher leadership comes in many forms and among the most influential in promoting student success and positive school culture are those educators who serve as Instructional Leaders. It has been said that great leaders do not set out to be leaders, they set out to make a difference; and that is particularly true when it comes to ILs.

The golden rule in any leadership position is to develop and nurture positive relationships. Perhaps Ghandi said it best, "I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles, but today it means getting along with people." People do not want to collaborate with someone who is negative, confrontational, or critical, and successful ILs quickly learn that principle. First and foremost, they work to establish positive relationships with colleagues so learning and growth are possible.

Instructional Leaders also provide clarity, support, and resources for teachers to identify "the point" in our instruction and in our students' learning, thereby increasing effective teaching.
Habit #1—Instructional Leaders Understand Neuroscience
The brain develops from the stem forward, with the last area of the brain to activate called the Pre-Frontal Cortex (PFC). The PFC, otherwise known as the Executive Functioning Center, is in charge of processing cause and effect, impulse control, attention span, organizational skills, and emotional stability. Experts believe the PFC fully activates in the female around 20 years old. The male PFC often takes a little longer, fully activating in the mid-twenties. This has serious implications for educators as we sometimes place the same expectations on the young brain that we have for the mature brain, which sets our students up for failure.

The good news is that we can accelerate healthy brain development and help students develop the skills they need for success. When we provide students explicit instruction in literacy, communication and critical thinking strategies, reflection, social-emotional learning, and growth mindset, the neural connections in the PFC increase.

Instructional Leaders are knowledgeable in neuroscience and they provide professional development opportunities and resources to ensure routines, expectations, learning experiences, and assignments are developmentally appropriate, while simultaneously fostering healthy brain development.

Habit #2—Instructional Leaders Are Connected Lead Learners
As society changes, student and teacher needs change. From Standards Based Report Cards to PBL to 1:1 deployment, education is an evolving entity. It is imperative that educators evolve as well. To remain current, effective ILs model and demonstrate the importance of continued learning.

Instructional Leaders are often involved in one or more professional education organizations, such as AMLE, and are also connected to other educators via social media, such as Twitter. They may also facilitate staff book studies, Tech Tuesdays, webinars, and collaborative analysis of student work. These opportunities provide continued growth, collaboration, and networking with others in and outside our districts and maximize our resources and learning capacity.

Habit #3—Instructional Leaders Support Content AND Comprehension Instruction
Instructional Leaders know that effective teaching is not rocket science … it is far more complicated.

Making school relevant to our students requires that we teach students both content AND comprehension. An IL’s expertise and instructional resources are invaluable in helping others develop the knowledge and skills needed to increase student achievement and independence.

For example, an IL may provide training and resources in how to teach note-taking, analysis, or supporting a claim with evidence. More importantly, when students are explicitly taught how to use strategies, they develop competence and confidence and retain the comprehension strategies, resulting in more self-reliance and less teacher dependence.

Effective teaching and learning requires competence, confidence, and comprehension. Instructional leaders provide the support in which to meet those goals.
Habit #4—Instructional Leaders STOP, Collaborate and Listen
Instructional leaders develop instructional leadership capacity in others by investing the time and effort to meet with novices and veterans to clarify what is needed for success to occur. They also provide the resources and support in order to encourage continual growth.

Habit #5—Instructional Leaders Promote Peer Coaching & Observation Opportunities
An effective way to evaluate and develop our skill sets is to participate in peer coaching. Unlike evaluative observations performed by administration, peer coaching focuses on colleagues observing each other a few times per year and analyzing data to encourage reflection and growth.

Peer coaches do not act as evaluators; they simply observe a lesson and collect data based on what the observed teacher requests. For example, Mrs. Smith has an instructional goal of incorporating more multi-leveled questions and 50-50 teacher/student talk time in class. She asks her colleague to serve as a peer coach to observe her class and collect data on levels of questioning used and the percentage of time both she and her students spend discussing the content. The peer coach will observe and collect that data and then give it to the observed teacher so she can reflect and make adjustments in order to meet her goals.

This peer coaching structure is not a formal observation that is evaluative or punitive; it is a collegial way to collect classroom data to determine if an instructional goal is being met. Instructional leaders provide the support to facilitate this learning opportunity.

Habit #6—Instructional Leaders Encourage Growth Mindset through Reflection
In her book Mindset, Carol Dweck shares the importance of developing a growth mindset in our students by reflecting on mistakes and persevering to make adjustments to increase success.

Instructional Leaders foster a growth mindset in colleagues by modeling and practicing reflection. Some valuable reflection questions include:

1. What was the content objective of the lesson?
2. What was the critical thinking objective for the lesson?
3. Were the objectives met? If so, what did students do throughout the lesson to meet those objectives?
4. What changes would you make to the lesson? Why these changes?
5. What are your teaching strengths and what would you like to improve?
6. How do you differentiate to meet the needs of both struggling and advanced students?
7. How do you promote positive relationships with students and colleagues?
8. How do you encourage students to learn from mistakes?

Instructional Leaders encourage the development of a growth mindset by helping colleagues to reflect on what works and what does not and then use that data to guide their thinking and instruction.
Habit #7—Instructional Leaders Adjust Support Based on Need

In her book, The Instructional Leader's Guide to Strategic Conversations with Teachers, author Robyn Jackson categorizes the four types of teachers as:

- high will/high skill
- high will/low skill
- low will/high skill
- low will/low skill

Just as we wouldn't use the same approach for each student, based on a teacher's will/skill level, an IL coaches a teacher to develop goals and provide the proper support based on the educator's needs.

For example, a high will/low skill teacher is often a new(er) teacher who has the desire to increase student proficiency yet may lack the knowledge or skills to do so at such an early stage in his/her career.

An IL crafts a personalized plan that includes learning experiences, training, and mentoring to help this teacher move into the high will/high skill range. Realizing the need to differentiate, an IL adjusts support based on a teacher's will and skill levels to increase teacher effectiveness.

After working with skilled Instructional Leaders, I better understand what my role is as a teacher. I am not a gatekeeper of information but a conduit who promotes content comprehension through critical thinking, debate, analysis, role-playing, synthesis, and reflection.

Upon reflection, I would teach my Civil War lesson from 20 years ago differently, and I would also answer Brian's question differently. Instead of lecturing about the causes of the war, I would have students read, write, act out, listen, draw, view, and speak about it and then provide them assessment choices to demonstrate their knowledge. I would begin by clarifying both the content and critical thinking objectives so that students understood "the point" of the learning experience. Most important, I would involve them in the experience itself and not relegate them to being passive bystanders to my "sage on the stage" delivery.

Instructional Leaders use many (or all) of these 7 Habits to provide resources, promote collaboration, encourage reflection, and support opportunities that cultivate instructional expertise, which positively influences student and teacher learning and effectiveness.

How many of these habits do you have?

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*Julie Adams* is an NBCT and Educator of the Year who specializes in neuroscience, content area literacy, critical thinking, instructional leadership, and digital literacy trainings. Her most recent book is titled, Game Changers—7 Instructional Practices that Catapult Student Achievement