**Tips for Coaches on Relationships, Trust, Facilitation**

*Source: Adapted with permission from Achieving the Dream*

Purpose: This is a set of tips for coaches to read before they begin an engagement and to return to throughout the engagement for assistance in certain areas. This tool is intended to help coaches develop their confidence and expertise in the art of coaching and offer tips, best practices and tools to use on the job in areas such as:

* Building a trusting relationship with key stakeholders at a college
* Facilitating meetings and group sessions with these key stakeholders
* Developing further the skill of being a good listener
* Communicating effectively using visual presentation material.
* Trustworthiness

Regardless of the expertise, experience, creativity and commitment you bring to coaching, it is whether you can be trusted that matters most. What you know, the lessons you can share, how eloquently you articulate ideas and how much you care about student success have little relevance if no one believes you. Difficult as this may be to digest, it is your behavior that demonstrates trustworthiness.

**Creating Trust**

Ideally, you are coaching an institution characterized by a high degree of mutual respect, integrity, and transparency. In this environment, your credibility will be easier to earn. However, not all colleges meet this standard. Some will disappoint. Easy as it may be to attribute an environment of acrimony and mistrust to the institution’s culture, it is not a forgone conclusion that you too, and by association, the Student Success Center, are contributing to the problem.

In The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything, Stephen Covey discusses trust as a trait that can be learned and modeled. He suggests, “Contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don’t; rather trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create-much faster than you probably think possible”.

In order to create trust, you must demonstrate trust. How to do this is not as nebulous as it appears--and there is no shortage of resources to guide us. For example, in The Trust Edge, David Horsager identifies seven actionable pillars of trust:

* consistency
* clarity
* compassion
* character (doing what is right not just easy)
* contribution (delivering results)
* competency (staying relevant)
* connection (being friendly), and
* commitment (persisting)

For even more easily understood defining behaviors, we can turn to Trust Rules, a publication by Bob Lee that discusses the importance of such seemingly simple actions like keeping your promises, being easy to talk with, giving straight answers, and treating everyone fairly.

**Relationships**

In addition to modelling trustworthiness, your goal as a coach is to help build working relationships among college faculty and staff that are based on mutual respect and trust. The culture and political dynamics at a given institution will determine how much effort this will take.

Your continuing awareness of behavioral norms and historical context will provide clues. Some groups with which you work may have different and sometimes conflicting priorities even if the outwardly agreed-upon overall goal is student success. For example, workload issues, governed by collective bargaining, may appear to conflict with implementation of a particular student success strategy. Recognition that no one is right or wrong and that working together in a spirit of mutual respect to reach an acceptable resolution can speak volumes.

In some cases, external forces, such as declining enrollment exacerbated by decreased state funding, may provoke tensions among otherwise cooperative faculty and staff. Presidential transitions are another opportunity for institutional anxiety, often resulting in a loss of focus on a student success agenda.

In cases such as these, your role and the trust you have earned become even more critical to helping the institution stay the course and move forward.

**Confidentiality**

A corollary to gaining trust involves the concept of confidentiality. If you are successful, the President at your institution may consider you to be a trusted advisor. Similarly, the college’s core/data team members will rely upon you for advice. During the course of your relationship with the institution, it is probable that you will be told something in confidence or hear something inadvertently that may have the potential to have a negative impact upon individuals or the institution. In these cases, very careful discretion is warranted.

You may believe after reading this, that establishing trust with a new college may consist of just being who you are and behaving how you have always behaved. While this may be true for you as a person, you will be a better coach if you intentionally practice applying your life skills within the context of coaching demands. The extent to which you are able to build relationships, based upon mutual respect and honesty, with disparate constituencies from the college president through faculty and staff will determine how successful your coaching experience will be both for you and the institution.

**Facilitation Tips**

As a coach you will be facilitating meetings with a wide range of faculty, staff, administrators, students, and community partners.  The documents listed below are quick resources to assist you in facilitating meetings.

**Intentional Group Learning**

The booklet *Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities*by FSG is a resource to use to help facilitate Intentional Group Learning.

[FSG](https://www.fsg.org/) is a company whose teams work internationally across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, business, non-profits and governments. They support learning communities to provide tools and relationships that enable change agents to be successful. The booklet discusses the following

* Why you should use Intentional Group Learning
* Where Intentional Group Learning can be supported
* What the goal is of learning together
* What activities will foster Intentional Group Learning
* Quick learning activities
* Detailed learning activities
* Systems-Thinking Learning activities

A cursory online search for references pertaining to effective listening yielded more than 1,500 results.

Most intriguing was one publication titled, Find Out Anything From Anyone, Anytime: Secrets of Calculated Questioning From a Veteran Interrogator, written by US Army intelligence training instructor, James Pyle and co-author, Maryann Karinch.  Among their insights, the authors maintain that while listening skills are important, “…the secret of finding out anything you want to know is simply to ask good questions."

Their advice sounds deceptively obvious. You may wonder, however, what constitutes a good question and how to promote an interactive discussion given the “show and tell” nature that characterizes the culture at some institutions. How do coaches tackle a college-developed agenda that consists of a scripted program with wall to wall presentations that provide little or no time for meaningful questions, discussions, or exploration?

As a coach, you have an important role to play in assisting your institution to set the agenda for your visit to maximize the value of the experience for all participants. Good listening begins here. The preparatory telephone conversation you have with the college is your opportunity to identify any unspoken issues and challenges facing the college. You may decide to request the inclusion of these topics in the formal agenda or simply file them away in your mind for future reference.

In planning the agenda, the institution will have accomplishments they want to showcase. However, discussion of other “works in progress” and challenges may be equally or even more helpful to the college. This is the time for you to suggest that these kinds of issues be included in the agenda. For example, if the college is designing a first-year experience, you may want to assist them in developing issues to consider and questions to ask themselves and others. Perhaps you might assist them during your visit to conduct student focus groups to identify student perceptions to guide their work rather than just hearing a report about their plans from staff.

Unless this specific activity is planned ahead of time, it will not take place. Among the many meetings included in the agenda, you need to be sure that there is sufficient time allocated during each meeting for interaction among participants. Group conversations can go a long way to promote a collaborative dynamic and valuable exchange of ideas among participants.

**Asking Questions**

What defines “good questions” to ask during your visit? There are two parts to this answer: The first part involves how you structure your questions to obtain useful responses, and the second part has to do with how you conduct a discussion.

In general, simple questions elicit better responses. Pyle comments further on this advice and suggests that the intent of a good question is to “…find out one thing at a time."  For example, phrasing the question to ask "What have you found to be the most valuable outcome of your student orientation?”, rather than “Can you describe your student orientation?" will likely yield more valuable information. Your verbal "following" by nodding affirmatively, taking notes and asking follow-up questions will reassure the respondent that you value what you are hearing.

It is also your role to encourage everyone in the room to participate in the discussion and to engage those who are reticent to speak without causing them to be self- conscious. One way you can do this is by dividing up participants into small discussion groups. Another way is to prompt a discussion along the lines of “Our college cares most about…," asking each person in the meeting to finish the sentence.

**Listening Techniques**

How you listen and filter what’s being said is as important than the questions you ask and how you ask them. There are some obvious “dos” and “don’ts” to keep in mind when listening to someone speak that are perennial favorites of those experts who publish on this topic. These range from not being distracted by stray thoughts or your cell phone to courtesies such as permitting the speaker to finish before you cut in or resisting the urge to judge what is being said prematurely.

More substantive advice includes understanding what’s being said within the historical context of the institution and from the perspective of who is speaking. For example, an opinion about the same issue may differ drastically depending upon whether the respondent is a student, faculty member, union leader, administrator, community member, trustee or college President. You can learn a lot from considering carefully diverse viewpoints and not yielding to the temptation to discount some remarks due to a bias you may have about their source.

**Purposeful Questioning and Listening**

Finally, it is important for you to know why you are asking the questions you ask. This will help you formulate good questions, listen for the most relevant information and help frame the letter to the President following the visit. For example, are you asking a question solely for a description of an initiative or are you asking a question to help you assess the progress and identify the challenges an institution is facing in implementing a student success strategy?

Whatever your purpose, it is valuable to paraphrase what you have heard to confirm your understanding and summarize for the group what you are hearing. Most importantly, effective communication is reciprocal – a respectful process that encourages divergent viewpoints among groups in a give and take atmosphere. One of your most important roles as a coach is to create the environment for this type of interaction to occur.