

The Impact Cycle

What Instructional Coaches Should Do to Foster Powerful Improvements in Teaching



Jim Knight

A working handbook for anyone who coaches teachers toward real, evidenced change in the classroom.

The Single Most Important Idea

Knight's central argument is simple: **coaching only changes teaching when it is structured, evidence-based, and genuinely owned by the teacher, not delivered as advice from an expert.** Most schools treat improvement as something that happens to a teacher, through a workshop, an observation, or a directive. Knight is saying it has to happen with them, through a repeatable cycle: get an honest picture of reality, agree a goal worth chasing, choose a strategy together, then keep checking real data until it lands.

For NZ principals, this matters because so much PLD money goes on one-off days that never touch classroom practice. The Impact Cycle is Knight's answer to that waste: three stages, Identify, Learn, Improve, built on a partnership between equals rather than a hierarchy between expert and novice.

Coaching that isn't built on partnership and evidence isn't coaching. It's just supervision with better branding.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1: What Does It Mean to Improve?

Lays out why most professional development fails and what Knight thinks coaching should look like instead.

Key argument

Knight argues most PD is a one-off event done to teachers, not a process done with them, and that this is precisely why it doesn't change practice. Real improvement needs a structured cycle, a real relationship, and a teacher who is actually in charge of the goal.

Main lesson

If your PLD calendar is full of one-off workshops with no follow-up, you are funding activity, not improvement.

Quote

"Coaching is one of the most effective forms of professional learning because it is built on a real relationship, focused on a real goal, and sustained over time."
— Knight, *The Impact Cycle*

What it means

Coaching only works because it keeps going after the training day ends and stays anchored to something the teacher actually wants to change.

Why it matters

Boards and principals often buy the workshop and skip the follow-through, then wonder why nothing sticks in the classroom.

How to use it today

Before booking the next PLD day, ask what happens in week two. If there's no answer, the money is better spent on coaching time instead.

Chapter 2: Identify — Getting a Clear Picture of Reality

Before anyone sets a goal, coach and teacher need an honest, evidence-based picture of what's actually happening in the room.

Key argument

Most teachers' self-perception of their own teaching is inaccurate, not through dishonesty but because it's hard to see yourself while you're in the middle of it. Knight pushes video, student interviews, and student work as the fastest routes to an accurate baseline.

Main lesson

You can't coach a goal that's based on a guess. Get real data before you get a plan.

Quote

"Video offers a tremendous advantage because it allows teachers a glimpse of themselves in action that they would otherwise never see." — Knight, *The Impact Cycle*

What it means

Watching yourself teach shows you things that memory and intention smooth over, both good and bad.

Why it matters

A lot of coaching conversations in schools start from opinion, not evidence, which makes them easy to dismiss or argue with.

How to use it today

Next time you're setting a coaching goal with a teacher, film ten minutes of the lesson first and watch it together before you talk about what to work on.

Chapter 3: Identify — PEERS Goals

Knight's method for turning a vague improvement wish into a goal that will actually hold up under the pressure of a busy term.

Key argument

A goal only works if it is Powerful, Easy, Emotionally compelling, Reachable, and Student-focused. Miss any one of those five and the goal quietly falls off the to-do list by week three.

Main lesson

Vague goals like "improve engagement" don't survive contact with a real classroom. Specific, student-focused goals do.

Quote

"A PEERS goal is powerful, easy, emotionally compelling, reachable, and student-focused." — Knight, *The Impact Cycle*

What it means

The acronym is a checklist: if a goal fails even one of these tests, it needs to be sharpened before you start.

Why it matters

Principals often see coaching goals fizzle out. Usually the goal was too broad, too teacher-focused, or too hard to measure in the first place.

How to use it today

Take the next coaching goal in your team and run it through PEERS. If it can't be phrased as a specific, measurable, student-level outcome, keep refining it before moving on.

Chapter 4: Learn

Once the goal is set, the coach and teacher work out what strategy will actually move the needle, together.

Key argument

The coach's job here isn't to hand over a technique and walk away. It's a genuine dialogue about options, grounded in the partnership principles, so the teacher owns the strategy rather than just complying with it.

Main lesson

A strategy imposed by the coach gets tried once and abandoned. A strategy chosen with the teacher gets a real trial.

Quote

"Coaches don't tell teachers what to do; they engage in dialogue with teachers so that together they can identify strategies that will help students meet the goal." — Knight, The Impact Cycle

What it means

The Learn stage is a conversation, not a prescription. The coach brings options and expertise; the teacher makes the call.

Why it matters

Handing a teacher a strategy is fast but shallow. It rarely survives the first hard day in the classroom.

How to use it today

When suggesting a strategy, offer two or three options with trade-offs rather than one instruction, and let the teacher choose which to trial first.

Chapter 5: Improve

The teacher implements the strategy, and coach and teacher monitor real classroom data until the goal is genuinely met.

Key argument

This is where most coaching models quietly stop, but Knight insists it's where the actual impact happens. Progress gets checked against the same kind of evidence used in Identify, and the strategy gets adjusted, not abandoned, when it isn't working yet.

Main lesson

Don't call a coaching cycle finished because the training happened. Call it finished when the data shows the goal was met.

Quote

"The cycle isn't over until the goal is met. If the strategy isn't working, the answer usually isn't to give up on it, but to refine how it's being used." — Knight, The Impact Cycle

What it means

A strategy that isn't working yet is a signal to adjust it, not proof it doesn't work.

Why it matters

Coaching relationships often end at the first sign of a wobble, exactly when the teacher needs the coach most.

How to use it today

Set a short check-in point, a week or two out, to look at real data again before deciding whether a strategy is or isn't working.

Leadership Tools and Frameworks

Framework: The Seven Partnership Principles

These sit underneath every stage of the Impact Cycle. Knight's argument is that coaching only works if it is built on a genuine partnership between equals, not a hierarchy between an expert coach and a deficient teacher.

The seven principles are:

1. Equality: no one in the conversation is more valuable than anyone else.
2. Choice: the teacher makes the real decisions, not the coach.
3. Voice: the teacher's perspective genuinely shapes the conversation.
4. Dialogue: it's a back-and-forth exchange, not a briefing.
5. Reflection: conversations look back, look at, and look ahead.
6. Praxis: learning is grounded in real classroom life, not theory.
7. Reciprocity: the coach goes in expecting to learn something too.

Worked example: a deputy principal coaching a first-year teacher on behaviour management could use these to check their own conduct in the conversation. Are they offering choices, or telling the teacher what to do? Are they genuinely listening, or waiting to give advice?

How to introduce it: put the seven principles on one page and ask your leadership team to rate their last coaching or appraisal conversation against each one, honestly. It's a quick way to expose conversations that are coaching in name only.

Caution: these principles are easy to say and hard to live under time pressure. A coach in a rush will default to telling, not partnering. Watch for that especially at the end of a busy term.

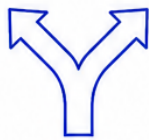
Partnership Principles

Seven principles that keep coaching conversations genuinely collaborative.



1. Equality

No one in the conversation is more valuable than anyone else.



2. Choice

The teacher makes the real decisions, not the coach.



3. Voice

The teacher's perspective genuinely shapes the conversation.



4. Dialogue

It's a back-and-forth exchange, not a briefing.



5. Reflection

Conversations look back, look at, and look ahead.



6. Praxis

Learning is grounded in real classroom life, not theory.



7. Reciprocity

The coach goes in expecting to learn something too.

Framework: PEERS Goals

A checklist for turning a vague coaching aspiration into a goal that will actually survive a school term. A goal must be Powerful, Easy, Emotionally compelling, Reachable, and Student-focused.

Worked example: "improve student engagement" is not a PEERS goal. "85 per cent of the class actively responding during maths questioning" is, because it's specific, measurable, and framed around student outcomes rather than teacher intentions.

How to introduce it: run every proposed appraisal or coaching goal in your school through the five PEERS letters before it's locked in. If a goal can't clear all five, it needs more work before anyone commits time to it.

Caution: don't let PEERS become a box-ticking exercise divorced from what the teacher actually cares about. The "emotionally compelling" test exists precisely to stop that.

PEERS Goals

A framework for setting coaching goals that actually hold up, from Jim Knight's The Impact Cycle.



1. Powerful

The goal targets something that will genuinely shift student outcomes, not a minor tweak to teaching style.



2. Easy

The strategy is simple enough that a busy teacher can realistically fit it into an already full day.



3. Emotionally compelling

The goal connects to something the teacher actually cares about, not just a box the school needs ticked.



4. Reachable

The goal is achievable within a term, with visible progress along the way.



5. Student-focused

The goal is framed around a measurable student outcome, not a teacher behaviour.

'Improve student engagement' is not a PEERS goal; '85% of the class actively responding during maths questioning' is.

Brad's Take

This is one I'd hand straight to anyone doing instructional leadership work in a NZ primary school, whether that's a DP running observations or a lead teacher mentoring a graduate. The PEERS goal framework alone is worth adopting, it fixes the vague, unmeasurable goals I see in far too many appraisal documents.

I'd recommend it especially to principals who want their PLG or coaching programme to actually change classroom practice, not just tick a professional growth box. It's US-written and some of the language leans corporate, but the underlying model translates cleanly to our context.

The honest caveat: Knight repeats himself across chapters, and the Toolkit checklists are more useful in practice than the prose explaining them. Skim for the tools, read closely for the Identify and Learn chapters.