

ENRICHING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT THROUGH COACHING

Research and Practice Issue Brief

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Yale University School of the 21st Century (21C) program publishes Research and Practice Issue Briefs to summarize and disseminate current research on topics of special interest to educators and policymakers, as well as to provide information to facilitate the application of research to practice. The goal is to provide concise, objective, and constructive information and explore the implications for the 21C program and other school reform efforts.

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Enriching School Leadership Development Through Coaching

BACKGROUND

The Essence of Leadership

Effective leaders convey a vision and, through their example, expand others' view of what is possible. They set high expectations, create a strong sense of community, and get results. Leaders accomplish this both by what they do, as well as by who they are. In terms of tasks, good leaders "enhance the skills and knowledge of the people in the organization, create a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, hold the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and hold individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective results."¹

In addition, when great leaders act, they do so not only because their role demands it, but also because their own life purpose, values, beliefs, and assumptions require it. Who they are, what they do, and how they do it are powerfully congruent. As a result, they are highly authentic, credible, and inspirational, which, in turn, motivates others to act genuinely and powerfully, as well.

School Leader Support Is Critical

With many pressing issues and challenges facing schools today, effective leadership is essential to meet educational goals and ensure that students achieve academic success. The rationale for a focus on leadership is noted in studies that demonstrate a positive correlation between a school's leadership and academic achievement. One analysis of 69 studies involving 2,802 schools, 14,000 teachers, and 1.4 million students showed that improving an average principal's leadership by 34 percent usually results in a 10 percent increase in student academic achievement in that principal's school over time. Similarly, a 49 percent increase in leadership ability predicted a 22 percent academic achievement increase over time.² In other words, the potential to increase academic achievement through developing a principal's leadership is significant.

Other studies suggest that many current principals lack skills necessary to provide effective leadership and that principal vacancies will increase by 20 percent over a five year period.³ These two factors indicate a growing problem with finding an adequate supply of leaders and retaining principals. Frequent turnover among principals costs schools large sums to recruit replacements, as well as much lost productivity.

Traditional Leadership Development in Schools

Generally, administrators develop leadership skills through various training, mentoring, and on-the-job assignments. These include in-house methods, such as participation on leadership teams, district task forces, or school improvement teams; involvement in school change initiatives; use of mentors, consultants, or peer consultations/visits; participation in pre-service and in-service training; and expanded job assignments.

Administrators also reach into their community to expand their skills by participating in university-sponsored leadership development programs, workshops and conferences, professional associations, and state educational task forces. Additional traditional options for gaining leadership skills include, among others, pursuing speaking opportunities and collaborating with administrators from other districts on school change initiatives.

Limitations of Traditional Approaches to Leadership Development

These traditional approaches to leadership development provide a variety of benefits and are useful options for consideration. Traditional approaches have some limitations, however, such as:

- When training, mentoring, and on-the-job leadership assignments involve a school leader with one's peers and/or superiors, discussing thorny leadership issues without the threat of repercussions (either real or perceived) may be awkward. As a result, root issues may not get discussed adequately, if at all.
- While many school leaders receive good ideas from training programs, many do not obtain follow-up support to transfer that learning to their real life situations, limiting the application of that learning to 5 to 10 percent.⁴
- In many instances, there is either minimal or no system of accountability to ensure that a leader's overall leadership goals are identified and being met. While most school leaders have an annual performance review, such reviews may not focus on leadership skills beyond minimum requirements.

Coaching as a Leadership Development Tool

To address these limitations, educational leaders can integrate leadership coaching as part of their overall strategy for leadership development, succession planning, and performance management. Leadership coaching is a highly customized learning process that focuses on empowering a school leader to achieve exceptional results by aligning their purpose, choices, and actions. By increasing the leader's focus, broadening perspectives, improving relationships, and augmenting one's ability to make effective choices and changes, coaching supports a leader in being powerfully aligned with themselves and the people around them.

How Coaching Works

Through weekly or biweekly ½ hour to 1 hour sessions either in person or over the phone, leaders develop new perspectives on their challenges and are accountable for taking specific actions to address them. In each coaching session, the coach supports the leader in finding his or her own answers rather than prescribing solutions or trying to “fix” the leader. The leader chooses the topic and the coach listens, asks questions, makes comments, and provides tools and frameworks to help the leader gain clarity and move forward. The leader is then challenged and held accountable for taking agreed upon action steps between sessions to accelerate the achievement of their goals and learning.

Part of what makes coaching effective is the sense of psychological safety that a leader experiences while being coached. The coach is typically not an employee of the district and is professionally bound to keep the content of coaching sessions strictly confidential. By contrast, leaders who are being coached may talk about their coaching with whomever they wish and typically share the overall goals of the coaching with their supervisor. Sessions are structured so that the leader can safely explore new perspectives and learn from successes and failures in a way that is non-threatening, highly rigorous, and specifically tailored to the leader’s needs.

Research Studies on Leadership Coaching

Most school principals in the United States have not received leadership coaching from a certified professional coach. Thus, formal research documenting the benefits and impacts of leadership coaching in American schools is scarce. Lessons learned from school districts in other countries, however, have important implications. One formal study done in British Columbia that involved 18 principals, vice-principals, and district office administrators found that “coaching resulted in the participants gaining new skills, taking different approaches in their jobs, increasing their [sense of] well-being, gaining better balance, and feeling supported, all results which [are likely to] increase the effectiveness of the school district’s leaders, and will likely retain them as leaders.”⁵

Studies on the effect of leadership (i.e. executive) coaching for the private and nonprofit sectors are also instructive. One study, comprised of 24 executive directors of nonprofits who received 40 hours of one-on-one coaching over the course of a year,⁶ found that coaching provided greater confidence in exercising leadership, improved ability to communicate and advance the organization’s vision, increased productivity, stronger staff management skills, and closer relationships with staff and board members.

Another study of 100 executives in the private sector who received coaching reported that the average return on investment (ROI) of their coaching was 5.7 times the cost of the coaching (a 570 percent ROI).⁷ In another study, 43 executives in a Fortune 500 company found that coaching produced a 529 percent return on investment, as well as significant intangible benefits to the business. When the financial benefits from employee retention were included, the ROI for this firm was 788 percent.⁸

Coaching: Cost/Benefit Analysis for Schools

To evaluate whether the investment in coaching will benefit a school, it is useful to consider not only the cost of the coach and the dollar value of the coaching goals, but also the cost of not meeting one's goals. Typically the costs of coaching a school leader ranges from \$300 to \$600 per month, while the value of improved student achievement and successful development of children that results from the improved leadership is worth much more. Similarly, the cost of turnover for a principal who did not learn, grow, and perform in the job is usually tens of thousands of dollars for the recruitment and training expenses of a new principal. When staff productivity, school climate, and other intangible factors are also entered into the equation, benefits of coaching typically far outweigh costs.

Finding the Right Coach for You

Since coaches fill many niches and have wide ranging credentials, doing some homework before hiring a coach is important. Consider the following:

- Is the coach certified? Look for a professional coach who has been trained and certified through an accredited coach training program. The Coaches Training Institute is the largest and most respected.
<http://www.thecoaches.com/index.html>
- Are they are a member of the International Coach Federation (ICF), the professional association for coaches? See <http://www.coachfederation.org/ICF/>
- Are they a leadership coach? Have they coached leaders like you in schools like your own? Check their websites. Find out what others have to say about them.
- After checking their credentials, pick three coaches to interview and have a sample coaching session with each of them. Note: as coaching is often done over the phone, they needn't live nearby.
- Finally, and most importantly, how is the connection between you and the coach during your sample session? Ultimately, your relationship with the coach will influence your results--more than any of the coach's credentials or other people's recommendations.

SUMMARY

Developing the best educational leaders possible is critical to create the quality of learning environments in schools that we seek. With high turnover rates and an inadequate supply of principals, we must recognize leadership development as a prerequisite for healthy school operations and substantive student achievement. Leadership coaching is a powerful and cost-effective means for developing school leaders, both in conjunction with other leadership development strategies and by itself. Moreover, by engaging in coaching, a school leader invests in the most important lever for school improvement available: oneself.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ Mazzeo, V. (2003). *Issue Brief: Improving teaching and learning by improving school leadership*. NGA Center for Best Practices. p. 10.
- ⁴ Leadership Innovations Team. *Leadership Training and Executive Coaching: Ensuring New Principal Support is Effective, Consistent, and Research Based*. <http://www.slideshare.net/ptl/leadership-training-and-executive-coaching-ensuring-new-principal-support-is-effective-consistent-and-researchbased>
- ⁵ Bradley, N, & MacGregor, B, & Buckley, M, & Ryan-McNee, S, & McCoubrey, S. (May 2006) Coaching Educational Leaders. *BC Educational Leadership Research*
- ⁶ Compasspoint. (Sept. 2003) *Executive Coaching Project: Evaluation of Findings*:
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- ⁸ MetrixGlobal: (2001) *Executive Briefing: Case Study on the Return on Investment of Executive Coaching*. See: <http://www.coachfederation.org/Downloads/Docs/MetrixGlobal-CoachingROI%20Briefing.pdf>