

Coaching

for leadership in schools

Jennifer McCoy

Since October last year, scores of principals in Victorian schools have been given the opportunity, under a funded program, to work with personal coaches to improve their leadership skills, thus joining increasing numbers of business executives who work with similar coaches.

Some of the issues raised by people at a senior level – principal or business executive – relate to matters of strategic planning, staff management concerns, how to lead change more effectively, how to motivate people; some explore career changes and/or how to achieve balance in their frantic lives. Participants also are keen to discuss the use of simple coaching strategies to use themselves in developing their leadership teams.

If personalised coaching is seen as appropriate for 'high performing' school principals, could not school coordinators, heads of departments and team leaders also benefit from the process?

Does coaching work?

The question to be addressed should probably be – Can coaching help people improve their leadership skills, make better decisions, make the most of their talents, achieve more at work?

While independent research has yet to prove conclusively that these benefits always accrue from the coaching process, feedback from one school principal at an early stage in the program seems to be representative:

‘What coaching has done is to allow me to be reflective and honest with my thoughts in greater depth. At school you can get interrupted. At home you need to tune out and relax...

Do I feel stronger as a result of the session? Yes. Probably through a sense of control. Coaching should encourage me to be more strategic. It should encourage me to identify opportunities.’

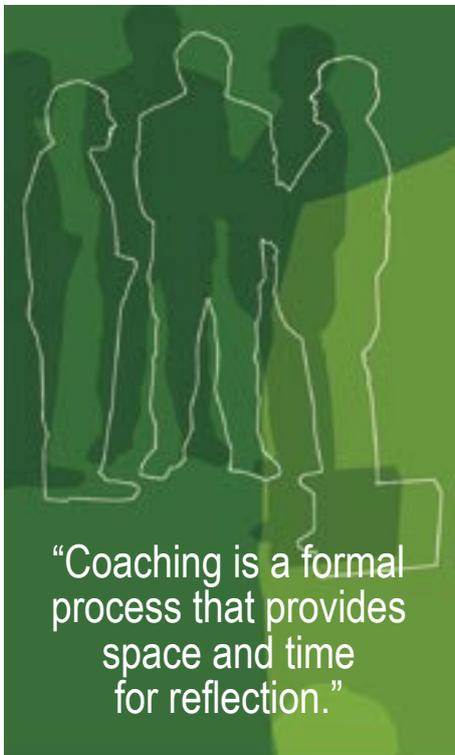
What is coaching?

Coaching is essentially based on the understanding that, given the opportunity to reflect and a commitment to act, people are able to change the way they operate, develop their potential, and achieve more in the areas they choose to address.

Coaching is a formal process that provides space and time for reflection, in a partnership and a framework of mutual respect and strict confidence.

Coaches use skilful questioning and tools to lift their clients above their situations, guide reflection, question assumptions that might lie behind issues, and help clients to find solutions that fit their needs. Coaches have a responsibility to be more than simply nice. They must be able to establish trust, confident in challenging fixed ideas, and capable of providing skill-training in a range of communication and leadership behaviours. They may challenge self-imposed limitations, opening the potential for development and growth. The client in return must accept accountability for making and keeping any commitments made.

But can't people do this on their own? Yes, possibly! How-



“Coaching is a formal process that provides space and time for reflection.”

ever, leaders in any workplace (perhaps especially in schools) are always under pressure – for example, to make decisions... yesterday, to solve problems instantly, and to deal with a multitude of very personal issues sensitively and with understanding. Objectivity is often difficult under such circumstances; and if you add procrastination to the list, plus a family/personal life to maintain, the load can become onerous. Leadership becomes subsumed under the load of management matters and school administration.

Coaching for other school leaders

The Victorian program is currently aimed at ‘providing high performing principals with coaching in a bid to improve leadership skills, prevent burnout and balance work and personal lives’. But is there a place for coaching of others further down in our schools? Could coordinators, heads of departments and team leaders in schools benefit from coaching as well? Could they, in turn, use coaching skills to lead their teams more effectively?

Consider this list of ‘high-priority needs’ for professional development, put forward by a group of Year Level Coordinators in a secondary college. These are very similar issues to those discussed by principals – and therefore they are, presumably, just as critical at a lower level of the school:

- Team-building: what makes a team? how do I develop a team? how do I create a positive climate? how do I deal with negative people?
- How do I handle conflict – in various scenarios?
- What is working for me and what is not? how do I maintain balance? how do I look after my health?

These coordinators returned, in general discussion, over and over, to the frustrations of trying to motivate their staff, manage their own time, explain (yet again) to a teacher how to manage student discipline problems, and how to delegate responsibility to and encourage accountability in their team members.

Some of the specific and more personal concerns included: ‘What do I actually say when...’, ‘I don’t know how to encourage/confront a member of my staff who...’, ‘How do I help a staff member to...’ and ‘How do I encourage staff not to come to me always to solve their problems?’ They spoke of conflicts they had to defuse, meetings to be managed, and teacher-parent interviews to run. All this, plus teach their own classes.

These are people in leadership positions and yet they have not been trained in leadership skills. Many of the issues they are facing are very personal, involving inadequate teaching skills, and requiring quite sensitive handling.

Could basic coaching skills help them? Coaching skills (such as engaging in respectful discussion, questioning to uncover where the problem lies, guided reflection to identify what strengths can be brought to the situation, and exploring what new strategies might comfortably be applied) provide simple methodologies, even some of the words to say, for handling difficult situations. Coaching tools allow both participants to distance the situation from the personal, increasing objectivity, and allowing honesty and confidence to emerge.

Briefly...

- Following the recent implementation of a coaching program for principals in Victorian schools, this article explores the possibility of its wider adoption.
- Basically, coaching is a formal process that provides the opportunity for leaders, with a personal advisor, to reflect, consider the way they operate, develop their potential, and achieve more in areas of focus.
- But is there a place for coaching of others further down in our schools?
- Could coordinators, heads of departments and team leaders in schools benefit from coaching as well?
- Could they, in turn, use coaching skills to lead their teams more effectively?

Some comments from coordinators and facilitators working in Victorian primary, secondary and private schools – and newly trained in coaching skills – have included:

‘I will probably listen a little more closely at the beginning (of a teacher interview) without pre-judging scenarios/situations.’

‘I developed the understanding that coaching takes place in a relationship.’

‘I will promote the teacher as being the central activist in change.’

‘Coaching is about questioning – I need to think more carefully about questioning.’

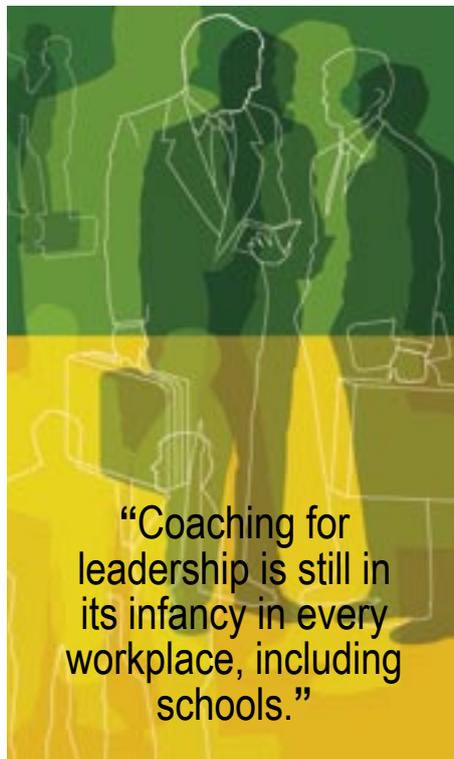
‘Coaching has made me more accountable to myself.’

These people are not yet skilled coaches but, as a result of coaching episodes, they feel more confident about handling staff management and teaching-skill issues and they have a greater understanding of interpersonal skills and leadership. They also have a ‘bag’ of professional tools to call upon to help defuse and clarify sensitive issues.

Coaching for leadership is still in its infancy in every workplace, including schools. Increasingly, organisations are engaging coaches to prepare their supervisors for promotion – developing their leadership skills, ensuring their understanding of accountability, fine-tuning interpersonal and presentation skills, improving their ability to coach their new team members. In short, coaching is being used to help supervisors become better leaders. Research too documents, for example, the role line managers (team leaders and coordinators) play in motivating staff and the time they waste in trying to manage staff. [See Box 1]

If coaching skills are being validated at middle management level in industry, is there a place for them in schools as well? Certainly the process has begun with the program for Victorian principals.

And, while issues such as school policy, coach commitment, confidentiality and trust also need to be considered, if coaching skills allow coordinators, heads of departments, and team leaders a greater ‘sense of control’ and ‘encourage them to be more



strategic’, there may well be value in it.

As one coordinator commented ruefully, ‘We can handle things like this with students, but it’s different when the people are staff members’.

Coaching skills could just be the answer. ■

Sources

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Box 1: Can parallels be drawn with non-education organisations?

Line managers are critical to staff motivation

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (UK) published the results of a major three-year investigation which looked at HR practices, staff views and performance in 11 large organisations – *Understanding the People and Performance Link: Unlocking the black box*. Among the findings:

‘One of the critical conclusions is that the most carefully thought through HR strategy is a waste of time unless it is embraced by line managers who have the skills and understanding necessary to engage and motivate employees... and, where effective HR practices are not in place, levels of employee commitment are up to 90% lower.’

– CCH May 19, 2003

Manager-staff issues cost time and money

Based on the time managers spend dealing with poor performers, Australian businesses waste \$1,118 for every full-time employee. This figure equates to a loss of more than \$82 million a year for Australia’s top 50 private businesses alone, according to the report, *Getting the Edge in the New People Economy*. The UK research group The Future Foundation, had surveyed 700 managers and 2,500 employees across Australia, the UK, USA, Sweden, Netherlands, India and Hong Kong and found that ‘Australian managers spend approximately 12 per cent of their time, or one hour every day, correcting others’ mistakes’.

– <http://www.humanresourcesmagazine.com.au>

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