

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a red shirt, is shouting into a grey megaphone. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

Hear and forget,  
see and remember,  
do and understand

# Why coaching works

IN A WORLD OF CHANGING FADS, YOU COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR DISMISSING COACHING AS JUST THE LATEST IN A LONG LINE OF BUZZ WORDS, THE NEXT 'NEXT BIG THING,' BUT THERE'S MORE TO COACHING THAN THE NAME SUGGESTS, SAYS JENNIFER McCOY.

LOOK AT THE BUSINESS WORLD, AND you'll find executives are using coaching increasingly, to develop their own skills and to develop downstream coaching-skill training for their managers and team leaders. Look at the educational world, and school principals and their staff are now also heading in the same direction. So what's coaching all about?

While formal definitions vary between the experts, essentially coaching involves an expert working in a respectful and collabo-

rative way with someone, not strictly a novice, who wants to improve the way he or she operates. The focus is on finding solutions that suit the person and their needs rather than on analysing problems; it involves building on their existing strengths and seeking potential for their development. Think of the relationship between an athlete or sportsperson and her coach, both of whom have expertise, but one of whom – the athlete – wants guidance in pursuing a program to achieve particular aims. Those in school or

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businesses who are seeking a coaching relationship are like athletes and sportspeople, although here I'll call them clients.

At a fundamental level, coaching involves the application of a set of communication skills, especially questioning skills, combined with interpersonal skills, to assist another person or people to change the way they operate and so achieve far more than they might otherwise have done on their own. The value of coaching lies in the systems, the process and the professionalism of the coach – the knowledge, expertise and skills they bring to the role. The coach needs to have a good understanding of the client's issues and the context of their workplace. They may not need to have held the same position – Marcello Lippi succeeded in leading Italy to success in the World Cup, despite never having played for Italy – but if trust is to be established they do need to bring relevant expertise to the relationship.

Confidence and confidentiality is fundamental to the coaching relationship, which generally involves one-to-one interaction to allow time and space for conversation and reflection. Good coaches use skilful questioning and tools to help the client look more objectively at their situation and consider alternative courses of action; a coach might also challenge self-imposed limitations. The end result is a formal action plan for achieving agreed goals. The client in return accepts accountability for making and keeping commitments.

#### Where coaching can work

Coaching at work takes place at two levels:

- executive coaching for principals
- workplace coaching by teachers in leadership positions and for teachers involved in peer review.

At the principal level, coaching has a developmental focus, to ensure that principals find the time and space for reflection and deep exploration of the leadership skills they have and need, and the leadership issues they face, with an objective and skilled coach. They may choose to deal with personal and professional issues, such as strategic deci-

sions, the development of their leadership teams, sometimes the management and leadership skill of one of the leaders of their leadership team, or communication with staff.

Coaching often helps principals simply by affirming that the goal they're pursuing, and the path they're taking to reach that goal, is the right one. It also helps simply because the commitments principals make for themselves typically go beyond those they might otherwise lock into in the busyness of work life, although one of the roles of a good coach is to make sure their action plans acknowledge the value of work-life balance. Going back to my athletic coaching analogy, a good part of the benefit for principals, like athletes, comes from their conscious dedication to the coaching processes, and the principal, like the athlete, brings a huge amount of expertise, ability and talent to those processes.

While similar to executive coaching, workplace coaching is generally more about improving skills or performance. The coach might observe lessons and model teaching skills, and the coaching might involve participants in some skill practice, reflection and feedback. Other participants might work with a coach to improve their team leadership, or their interpersonal or feedback skills, often linked to performance plans and review. Sometimes this kind of coaching is informal, a brief touching-base once the relationship is established, while at other times it might be off campus in, say, a coffee shop, to relax the pressure and underscore confidence and confidentiality.

School-based opportunities for coaching are numerous. Teacher-leaders training as workplace coaches talk about coaching for:

- teachers new to the school or to the profession
- teachers with obvious potential who are not volunteering for new roles
- teachers who lack confidence in particular teaching or interpersonal skills
- others who are challenged by new curriculum
- staff challenged by new technologies, and

- generational concerns as young staff assume leadership positions over older colleagues.

Leaders or coordinators of key learning areas speak of their concerns in trying to assist people who have been their peers, or are still their peers in another setting. The issues they talk about range from how they can motivate their staff, to how they can assist teaching colleagues to manage their own student discipline problems through to how they can best delegate responsibility and encourage accountability in their team members.

Many say the value of coaching is that it gives them the skills to give tactful but useful feedback to their peers without causing offence. Some say they use coaching skills to bring out potential in their students, others pass on the skills to their students to encourage supportive peer relationships. Teacher-leaders trained in coaching skills also acknowledge the potential for decreasing their own workload when they have the skills to deflect responsibility back to the person seeking an easy solution.

#### How coaching works

To be effective, a coach must be able to establish trust, to listen to the messages behind the words in order to assess their client's needs, to question skilfully so as to help the client to develop an insight into their problems and to see solutions, to guide reflection that can reveal the existing strengths that can be brought to a situation, to identify areas of concern and to challenge excuses. A coach must be able to use coaching tools effectively to distance the person from the situation, thereby increasing objectivity in order to allow honesty and confidence to emerge, and help their client to set goals, or negotiate performance commitments, and ensure they are met.

Coaching doesn't necessarily work in every situation. It's not meant to be an easy option and it's not always the answer to discipline problems. Its real value depends on the client making the commitment to follow through and, where that doesn't happen, hard decisions may still need to be made.

Coaching can't yet lay claim to professional status, although individual coaches may legitimately defend their own claim. The current debate amongst professional coaches is about how to establish coaching as a profession, how to set and maintain standards, and how to ensure the 'profession' and the reputations of committed and highly-trained coaches aren't hijacked by people simply styling themselves as coaches.

Sports coaching has long been respectable, its coaches held up there almost at the level with the heroes they coach to success. In a sports-focussed culture we might argue that they deserve all the accolades they are given, because their reputations, and careers, depend utterly on the results they deliver. We have only to look at the post-season shufflings at the top to see how precarious is the life-span of a sports coach. But therein probably lies the seeds of professional legitimacy for sports coaching and its coaches. Workplace coaching, however, cannot so obviously deliver results.

According to Anthony Grant's very recent research, coaching 'can be considered an emerging cross-disciplinary occupation, its primary purpose being to enhance wellbeing, improve performance, and facilitate individual and organisational change.' (Grant, 2006, in Cavanagh, Grant & Kemp) To build credibility, however, coaching needs to demonstrate that it operates on the solid foundation of the best current knowledge, which can be drawn from the following key areas that directly relate to research and practice in coaching:

- the behavioural sciences in relation, for example, to sports psychology, educational psychology, counselling
- business management and economic sciences
- adult education, including workplace learning and development; and
- philosophy in relation, for example, to corporate governance, ethics and personal values.

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it matures, however, we can still learn from personal experiences and from school-based examples where coaching has been introduced with positive results.

As we begin to adopt coaching as a professional development strategy for staff, as we accept coaching as an intervention for improving performance at any level within the school, principals and school leadership teams need to ask some key questions as they begin to consider coaching as a strategy for their schools. How do we want coaching to be used within the school? Do we want to trial the process in a department or with a few members of staff? Who should be trained in coaching skills? How can we support those people involved in coaching so that their new skills aren't wasted, misused or lost? How do we ensure that all people involved understand the potential value of coaching and aren't threatened by the process? How can we maximise the power of coaching to support the work of our school? If coaching is ultimately to be made an integral part of our school's culture – 'the way we do things around here' – then what policies do we put in place to safeguard the process and the people involved? When we do implement coaching as a strategy, no matter how small the investment, how will we measure the results of that strategy?

For coaching to have value for schools, for the school executive and teachers in leadership positions or involved in peer review, it has to have the support of those at the top. That's why there's one more key question: if coaching is to have value in the school, why don't I make a commitment to personal coaching? ▲

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