

Ross McLeod: Twyford School

Investigate formative leadership practice and in particular what coaching and mentoring strategies are being effectively implemented in schools.

I am very grateful to the Ministry of Education for making sabbaticals available to New Zealand Principals; and to the Twyford School Board of Trustees for their encouragement and support to apply for this leave. I would also like to thank Graeme Mueller who relieved as principal and also to all our staff who provided support in many ways and helped keep the school running so well.

This was a wonderful opportunity to have time away from my school and reflect on an aspect of formative practice which has become increasingly topical. Day to day school life can be exceptionally busy and time can be quite limiting to be able to investigate, read and discuss formative strategies in some depth.

“ We have an innate desire to endlessly learn, grow and develop. We want to become more than we already are. Once we yield to this inclination for continuous and never-ending improvement, we lead a life of endless accomplishments and satisfaction.”

Jack Cameron. Oscar winning director of Titanic.

One of the many challenges school leaders face is to create an environment where teachers are learning, growing and developing as practitioners. Formative Assessment practices have helped teachers learn more on how children learn best. Research over recent years has supported a formative approach using such strategies as feedback and feed forward, questioning strategies, goal setting and so on. The formative approach is reflected in the New Zealand Curriculum and many schools in the last eight years have adopted these practices to support curriculum delivery. Key aims of Formative practice are based around creating motivated and engaged learners. This can also be applied to the adult learning environment too and many of these formative strategies are being implemented to support better teacher development and support. A key area has been the development of coaching and mentoring in schools. So how effective have schools been in providing formative feedback to engage teachers in their professional development?

Background

Classroom observations have been a traditional means to provide formal feedback and complete the requirements of Performance Management. It was often completed by the Principal or senior staff once a year. A pre meeting would clarify what would be observed. The observation would take place and feedback was written up and shared with the observed teacher a day or days later. In some cases goals were set to work on.

Often these goals would lose meaning in between annual reviews. Sometimes this process didn't capture what was really happening in the classroom and therefore provide meaningful goals for the teacher to pursue. Schools have therefore looked to other options to provide relevant feedback to their teachers.

Coaching and mentoring are terms often used to describe processes of feedback in schools. However once defined these approaches may not reflect exactly what is happening in schools.

Mentoring often uses the coaching process however the key here is the mentor is usually chosen by the individual rather than being imposed by the organisation. The mentor is often a trusted and experienced advisor. The relationship is usually long term and the mentor maybe part of the organisation or could be outside of it. Mentoring is more people focussed.

"The mentor comes from the Greek myth of the king who asked Mentor, an older, wiser man, to look after his son during the king's absence. Pure mentoring still has this implication and is how the word is most often used" (Rogers, Coaching Skills).

Coaching helps people recognize and harness their capacity to deal with specific tasks. There is a commitment on both sides to develop and make change. There is a commitment of awareness and self responsibility. In her book Coaching Skills, Rogers defines coaching as " working with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness in their lives and careers through focussed learning. The coach's sole aim is to work with the client to achieve all of the clients potential – as defined by the client."

Rogers expands on her definition of coaching and discusses six important principles which help differentiate coaching from other disciplines.

- 1) The client is resourceful. The client has the resources to resolve their problem.
- 2) The coaches role is to develop the clients resourcefulness through skilful questioning, challenge and support.
- 3) Coaching addresses the whole person – past, present and future.
- 4) The client sets the agenda.
- 5) The coach and client are equals.
- 6) Coaching is about change and action.

There are subtle differences between Coaching and Mentoring. The mentor is often a career friend. Someone who is experienced and lends a supportive hand. Coaching is more focussed on change and driven by the individual with the coaches support. However the key to both is that they are determined by the individual and not forced by the organisation. The effectiveness of coaching and mentoring can easily breakdown if the motivation has originated from the organisation and not the individual.

Interest in coaching as an alternative to command and control is growing in organisations including schools. Roger's explains " in a non authoritarian society people reject command and control, i.e. the telling mode, is very limited in its effectiveness." She goes on to explain how organisations are offering development to nurture innovation and coaching is one of the best ways to grow innovation and skill. In this way coaching can be used as a form of performance management which has the managers role as a developer rather than controller. She says Managers are taking on a coaches role to develop and encourage self confidence, resourcefulness, skills , knowledge, decision making in their staff. However when the boss takes on the coaches role it can easily fall over due to the fact the boss can be part of the problems the coachee has and this can be difficult to see or acknowledge. As a boss you have a stake in the outcomes, whereas when you are the coach you do not.

G.R.O.W is a popular framework for successful coaching. It provides a 4 step process to work through. The aim of the framework is to develop awareness and responsibility in the coachee.

1. GOALS What do you want?
2. REALITY What is really happening?
3. OPTIONS What choices do you have?
4. WILL What will you commit?

Goals and reality generate awareness in the coachee. Options and Will help develop their responsibility in committing to a plan within a set time. The next coaching session could start by reviewing progress of their plan. When used effectively the coaching approach can be collaborative and exciting to work on. Teachers are being supported to becoming more effective and this impacts positively on improving student achievement. Coaching can be described as most effective when it is aligned to professional development strategies.

Achieve is a recent coaching model. It has been developed by Eldridge and Dembkowski, (2004) after studying the best practice of executive coaches through out Europe. The model builds on from the GROW approach. It has a seven step method and focuses on five essential coaching skills.

Essential coaching skills

1. Development of rapport;
2. Deep listening;
3. Creative and open questioning;
4. Open and honest feedback; and
5. Use of intuition.

The Achieve Coaching Model (2004)



Step 1. Assess the current situation.

Become aware of the current situation whilst establishing rapport.

Step 2. Brainstorming.

Should be free and creative producing all types of options.

Step 3. Hone the goal.

Spend time working out a goal that is meaningful and motivating.

Step 4. Initiate options.

Effective coaches take their time at this stage to use good questioning to generate options. Its only when the options come from the client that real commitment can be generated for action and change.

Step 5. Evaluate Options.

What skills, time, resourcing is needed for each option. It often helps by presenting this information visually.

Step 6. Valid action Programme design.

Coaches work with their clients to build the bridge from where they are to where they aim to be. Clarity is established of how we will know the goal has been achieved.

Step 7. Encourage momentum.

Coaches keep motivating, encouraging by phone , email to keep the client on track.

Findings

Malachi Pancoast, who spoke to New Zealand Principals two years ago, promotes the Principal as the coach. He describes the Principal as the teachers teacher. He drew parallels with the All Blacks coach Graham Henry in that he asked the question of where Henry is during games and training runs. He is on the sidelines observing, advising and supporting. The coach is not sitting in his office. Pancoast explains how to reorganise administrative duties to free up time, so the principal can be where the core teaching is happening - in the classroom. Teaching and learning are what schools are all about. As Principal it makes sense to be in classrooms observing and interacting with students and teachers. Through observations one would gather a detailed picture on the quality of teaching and learning and therefore be informed and better positioned to offer support, encouragement and advice.

Carolyn Stuart, of Tawa Intermediate wrote an excellent article in NZ Principal (March 2010) about Malachi Pancoast's ideas. " He spoke of the role of the principal as being the coach – the person on the side-line helping players to be at the top of their game. He spoke about the need for principals to stop doing things that others in the school could do. He said the principal of the school was the teachers' teacher and this was the message that went deep into my soul."

Stuart tried different ways to incorporate coaching into her school and has developed the following approach. She sets herself the goal of visiting three classrooms a day. A meeting with each teacher was organised twice a term. " At these meetings we talked about how it was going in the classroom, what teachers saw as their challenges, and what were their successes. I got to practice listening, questioning and paraphrasing – the tools of a coach."

Non judgmental data was collected during classroom visits and used as feedback for agreed areas of practice. Teachers were able to reflect on this information and it was also discussed during 1 – 1 meetings during the term.

I was fortunate to visit a small school near the River Rhone, Valence in France. The school was audited once every three years and this was the only time a teacher would receive feedback on their teaching. The Principals role was different to most New Zealand principals. He taught a class full time and liaised with a regional education centre. His role did not involve providing specific ongoing feedback to his teachers or organising opportunities for peer feedback.

Feedback was more conventional at a High school in Grenoble, France. Each year the Principal of this medium sized school would provide a report to each teacher on what they were doing well and areas to develop further. It was part of an annual cycle of review and was general in nature.

Two teaching colleagues in a Public School for Girls in South England shared their experiences of feedback. One who was in a team leaders position indicated feedback was shared termly in the form of how well different units of learning had progressed. This team planned and worked together closely. Our other colleague who worked in a different department received no feedback throughout the year and was left to get on with the job. So within different departments of the school there was a range of approaches.

We also organised a visit to Twyford School in South England. It is a Public Prep school for boys and girls to the age of thirteen. It has naming links to Twyford School in New Zealand through one of its former students. The schools have been in correspondence over the past few years and it was a pleasure for everyone to finally meet. A highlight was meeting staff and children through the morning and be shown around this delightful school. We were able to discuss coaching and mentoring and in what ways teachers receive feedback. It was interesting to note how similar barriers exist even in schools on the other side of the world. The staff were in the midst of introducing Peer Observation where teachers could observe Team leaders in action and discuss their observations. They had found time was a constant barrier. The ability to align timetables to enable teachers to be free and observe team leaders proved challenging.

An initiative introduced at our school last year was a form of coaching which we named Peer Feedback. Teachers of mixed levels were paired up. Protocols for observations were discussed and agreed. The teacher observing went in with the Principal to watch a written language lesson and then provide feedback on agreed set criteria. Afterwards the Principal and teacher observing would meet to discuss their findings before meeting with the observed teacher. The Principal's role was to step back and support the process. The observed teacher initiated discussion by reviewing their lesson and it was common for similar ideas to come forth. Discussions were professional and positive. Goal setting was used to provide agreed work ons for the following term. The process was later reciprocated and roles reversed. There were several excellent discussions about the teaching and learning of Written Language. Classroom Release Time was used for the teacher observing to visit the classroom. This was flexible and cost effective.

At a later stage the Principal did not participate in observations and discussions. Teachers continued the process independently. It was interesting to note, several Teachers indicated how they enjoyed the process more when there had been a three way dynamic. Teachers also noted how they enjoyed the opportunity to share practice and discuss particular aspects of their teaching for the observing teacher to focus on. They felt the feedback was interesting and beneficial to their development.

Several schools have also implemented the four minute walk throughs. We were fortunate to discuss this strategy with John McLellan of Interlead. Four minute walkthroughs are a systematic classroom visit. Each minute is focussed on collecting data on a specific element. Observations build a picture of what is happening related to school expectations and goals. Feedback is naturally linked to these observations. It is a time saving strategy and can be used effectively by management and leaders.

Implications

After having the opportunity to discuss coaching in other schools, read about the topic and attend several courses we have introduced several initiatives for our school. These may provide discussion starters for principals in other schools when reviewing their professional development systems.

In the near future we are planning to have Appraisals in Term 1 whilst everyone is fresh after the summer break. The observation based feedback will provide agreed teacher goals for the remainder of the year. These will be revisited each term in discussions with the Principal and formally reviewed in Term 4 at the conclusion of the school year. This approach was highlighted by Malachi Pancoast as an effective timeline for feedback to teachers.

We also find having time to visit classrooms during the week makes a significant difference in knowing our teachers and children. Decision making is sharper because we are more informed of what is happening and better placed to provide support. Changes in office management systems have created more time for the principal to be amongst the children and teachers. These changes were recommended by Pancoast.

Some of these are :

- Daily meeting with secretary to discuss the days diary and tasks.
- Secretary organises daily schedule, meetings and appointments.
- At times close the door and attack the paperwork task by task.
- Secretary completes all filing.
- Minimise what is in your office so there is less distraction.
- Timetable classroom time.

Providing teachers with regular non judgemental feedback will build on visits to their classrooms. It will provide the stimulus for discussion, self reflection and goal setting. The Principal's approach will be from the angle of coach as much as this is possible.

Peer Feedback will be the second stream of 'coaching' where teachers will observe a colleague and share their observations. This will be reciprocal in nature. Peer Feedback will focus on the Professional development aims of the school for the year which in our schools case will be Maths. The aim will be to implement Peer Feedback at least once term.

Our school will work alongside an advisor for Maths Development. The advisor will work with teachers, model lessons and observe/ feedback teacher lessons also. This could be described as a third stream of coaching for teacher development. We find teachers enjoy working alongside an advisor who is somewhat independent of school and management.

These strategies are implemented throughout the year and aimed to support high standards of teaching in classrooms, effective professional development, self reflection, goal setting and professional collegiality among staff.

Summary

It was interesting to travel and discuss coaching and mentoring processes in other schools. They face similar challenges to New Zealand schools although one couldn't help thinking that in our country we seem to be well along this road. There are of course a wide range of approaches to coaching. Every school has their own methods which are usually similar and at the same time different to their neighbours. The best approach will be what suits the school, staff and leader at that point in time.

The key to effective feedback for teachers is creating a non threatening environment where they can be assisted to identify areas of strength and development. The environment will then support them to act on areas of development, take responsibility and make necessary changes.

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