

## **Building Capacity through Coaching.**

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*In 2017, I had a sabbatical and my focus was coaching. I had several questions that I wanted to explore. In hindsight these were too numerous - I was a bit ambitious given the time I had. Therefore, I narrowed my focus to the use of coaching as a professional development (PD) model building learner capacity in a sustainable way. The following is my research summary in which I define coaching, summarise the skills used in coaching, detail the attributes of coaching and finish with the benefits before concluding my findings.*

*My research included attending coaching conferences, reviewing the literature and our school's coaching model and running a professional learning group for those new to coaching within my school.*

Coaching, as a professional development (PD) model, adds depth, which leads to sustained schooling improvement and is a wise PD choice. Schools need to move away from a linear approach to PD as one-off courses or school based learning programmes, while well intentioned and provide short-term interest, are easily swamped by the many priorities being demanded of schools in this climate of continual change. Any benefits from this type of development are short lived. Coaching, on the other hand, has the capacity to bring about improved teacher practice, school leadership and enriching students' learning (Grant, 2012, Robertson, 2016).

Coaching is a sustainable learning and developmental model that is agile, Grant, 2012) and dynamic (Robertson, 2016). Coaching brings elements that engage the learner and are responsive to their needs while benefitting the organisation. Coaching sits in the lifelong learner domain as it has the potential to develop technical and cognitive capabilities. Through coaching, the learner can apply knowledge, experience and expertise to new, unfamiliar situations and engage with new learning.

### **What is coaching?**

There are many definitions for coaching in education. The following is Professor Christian van Nieuwerburgh's definition and is useful in that it emphasises coaching as a positive action where learning and development result through productive partnerships that use the skills of coaching while operating within an appropriate, encouraging and supportive climate.

"... a one-to-one conversation that focuses on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate."(van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p.17)

### **What skills are used in coaching?**

Communication and interpersonal skills are key. These skills build trust and understanding and move the learner forward. Coaching skills include listening, questioning, self-assessment, goal setting and giving evaluative feedback.

#### **Listening:**

Active and deep listening are fundamental as most people do not listen with the intent to understand - rather they listen with the intent to reply. Robertson, (2016) stresses the importance of listening for understanding. She outlines a tutorial to develop these skills as her research shows those new to coaching find it hard to do. It is essential that coaches learn to listen by being attentive, are curious and not judgemental, not interrupting by questioning, giving advice or telling about their own

experiences. Also important are the taking of notes for future reference and listening for what is and is not said (Robertson, 2016).

### **Questioning:**

There are different terms to describe questioning used in coaching. Some use the term 'effective questioning' (Marshall, 2016) or powerful questions (Cheliotis and Reilly, 2010) while others prefer 'reflective questioning' (Barnett & et.al. 2004; Robertson, 2016). While these terms may differ, all agree that questioning is essential and must leave the ownership with the coachee. It is through questioning that the coach facilitates ownership of the change process by enabling the coachee to deeply reflection on practice. Robertson, (2016) believes there are three levels to coaching questioning– firstly those that clarify so that the coach is clear about what is being discussed. The next level are those questions where the coach is the learner and they are exploring the reasons and intended outcomes. Finally at the deepest level are those questions that challenge the coachee to explore the outcomes of their actions. Rogers (2012) summarised coaching questions as 'What?' (Identifying the issue), 'So what?' (Implications) and 'What next?' (Action) (Marshall, 2016).

Questioning by the coach is powerful as it not only helps the coachee think for themselves it explores and challenges the underlying assumptions behind the coachee's behaviour and has the potential to create new core assumptions or mind-sets. The coach facilitates reflection on and understanding of practice asking the coachee to consider what was positive or challenging and if appropriate plan how it might be enhanced, improved or done differently in the future. In this way, questioning allows the coachee to become a researcher of his or her own practice. This questioning should not be rushed and if done well helps to build trust.

### **Self-assessment**

Coaching is about self-determination therefore self-assessment is an integral part offering the coachee an opportunity to look inward and so focus on their learning (Robertson, 2016). Through the coach's questioning skills the coachee is encouraged to deeply inquire into taken-for-granted assumptions and explore their underlying beliefs, values about teaching and learning (Marshall, 2016).

### **Goal setting**

Goal setting also fits into the theme of self-determination mentioned above. The setting of goals, when left in the coachee's domain, creates a sense of agency and personal growth. The coach's role is to direct the coachee to set their own realistic goals thus increasing commitment and building self-confidence which will lead to a greater chance of success (Briggs and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). The use of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-focused and Time-bound) goals are promoted as they

Clearly define what the coachee wants to accomplish. They have indicators to measure if the goal has been achieved. They set the coachee up for success by considering if the goal is possible and what knowledge, skills, abilities and resources will be needed to accomplish it. Knowing the reason, purpose, or benefit of accomplishing the goal will help the coachee know what result they want. Finally, by setting a completion date gives the coachee an idea of the time frame in which they need to work.

### **Feedback:**

The order of giving feedback is important to ensure greater ownership of the learning. First, the coachee self-assess their own performance and highlights areas of strength and those for development. Then it is the coach's turn sharing their account by recalling what was observed. This

account is clean of coach's judgment or assessment and does not need to repeat any items the coachee has mentioned unless simply to acknowledge the coachee for their own self-diagnosis.

### **What are the Attributes of Coaching?**

Coaching involves conversations usually between partners. When done well these conversations empower the partners and enhance those partnerships to be productive. In addition, organisations that take on coaching, as a PD model, end up with coaching as a way of being thus supporting a coaching culture to grow within their environment. These attributes are explored in the following section.

#### Coaching Conversations:

Both coach and coachee need to know that in order for the 'one on one' conversations to bear fruit and bring about change the skills of coaching, outlined earlier, are actioned. Also to be effective their dialogue needs to be based on evidence, which is explored through their inquiry (Earl and Timperley, 2009). This evidence may include the use of data, observations of lessons or video clips of the teacher at work, (Marshall, 2016).

#### Productive partnerships:

Productive partnerships have the power to change and challenge previously held ways of knowing and being. They do not just happen - those involved need to agree about how they want to be, how they work together and the responsibilities they each assume. Each member needs to be open to learning (Robertson, 2016).

These partnership need to be built on trust. They are reciprocal in nature where each partner contributes through reflection, to the creation of new knowledge and learning. Where there is deep trust, there will also be a depth of reflection on the reality of the learning context (Robertson, 2016).

To optimise productivity schools, using the coaching model for schooling improvement, need to support new coaches. This support needs to be both in resourcing for release to work with their coachee as well as providing an experienced coach to be the 'guide on the side' for the new coach.

These relationships work best when the coach understands the pivotal role they, as coach, play in the success of the coaching relationship. To do this they need to:

- Know the essential elements of the coaching process
- Know their own mind-set and that coaching is a way of being
- Understand where the accountability sits within the coaching conversations i.e. leave the ownership with the learner. So rather than telling the coach keeps thinking of extracting information from the coachee through clever questioning.
- Understand they cannot just 'plug and play' - they need to know the context in which the coachee works (Robertson, 2016)
- Understand that good things take time.
- Be attuned to the coachee's feelings through what they say and do not say.
- Watch the coachee's body language for a match with what is being said
- Know what triggers change in the brain to promote new learning, and reduce fear (Marshall, 2016).
- Know that the coachee needs practise to embed new thinking (Marshall, 2016)

### Empowerment and strengthening of self-efficacy:

For coaching to be empowerment and strengthening of self-efficacy, the coach needs to use the coaching skills outlined above and not default to telling war stories and giving advice. They need to understand that to build the agency of their coachee they must not control by telling - rather they encourage the coachee, through skilled questioning, mentioned earlier, to do their own thinking within their own context (Hogan 2004; Popper et.al., 1992). The coach approaches the relationship as a learner wearing many hats - that of a teacher, learner, leader, follower, expert and novice but never that of the 'know all', (Robertson, 2016). In addition, the coach needs to understand that for the success of goal attainment the setting of goals and strategies to reach it is the responsibility of the coachee (Latham & Locke, 2006).

### Coaching Cultures:

When done well coaching has the capacity to create an environment where people have clarity, engagement and energy to deliver great results. The development of a coaching culture is a collaborative process that is grounded in the values of the school so that everyone is on board (Hawkins, 2012). To reduce teacher resistance leaders need to be open and honest about the reasons for introducing coaching as a professional developmental model for schooling improvement. They also need to lead by example demonstrating a strong personal commitment and modelling the expected behaviours (Anderson and Anderson, 2009; Clutterbuck and Megginson, (2005); van Nieuwerburgh and Passmore, 2012). When coaching is introduced as a new form of professional learning it cannot be done as an add-on (Suggett, 2012), rather it needs to be a well thought through process. Consideration needs to be given to both simple and complex elements, which may include the following:

- alignment with the schools strategic goals
- planned with a shared understanding of the purpose and alignment of the school's work (Clutterbuck and Megginson, (2005), Tolhurst, (2010), (Hawkins, 2012)
- building up of a bank of reflective questions
- a preferred model
- the quality of the trainers (Grant,2012)
- the context in which it will be used
- sufficient resourcing which includes initial training and upskilling new staff
- provision of support for new coaches e.g. coach for the coach or a professional learning group for sharing successes and concerns,
- time (Munro, 2016)
- opportunity to practise (Grant, 2012; Marshall, 2016) as practise makes permanent
- partner choice (Briggs and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; Marshall, 2016)
- teaching the skills of coaching (Robertson, 2016)
- building coaching capacity (Suggett, 2012)
- the use of an outside provider and off site training as there are no distractions.

### **What are the benefits of coaching in schools?**

Coaching done well will ultimately benefit students with improved achievement and wellbeing. Along the way, there are many benefits from coaching. These I have categorised into benefits for the coachee, the coach, and for the organisation.

### The Coachee:

- teachers work is strengthened by lifting the level of conversation through formalised casual conversations
- increased ownership - with the coachee being in charge of their own learning
- productive relationships grow between teachers and students
- engagement on a personal and professional level increases
- teachers are reenergised with renewed focus through one on one conversations
- through reflective questioning, the coachee becomes more self-reflective.
- relationships change- trust grows and there becomes more connection at a personal level
- the coaching process opened up thinking about the benefits across other environments e.g. use with parent conversations.
- the framework was helpful – when they were able to imagine a future perfect, they could work back from that.
- Marshall, (2016) found coaching conversations have the potential to lead to, not only incremental improvements in teaching, but also evoke a transformational shift to bring about sustained change by creating a shift in a coachee’s core assumptions (Hawkins & Smith, 2014).

### The coach:

- The coach’s confidence increased
- The questions help them to be self-reflective.
- Some coaches used the process to establish their own goals.
- Relationships changed - there was more trust and they got to know their coachee better at a personal level
- Productive relationships with teachers and students grew
- Provided a tutor teacher with a new way of being - they now ask more questions rather than telling.
- Some felt they were better listeners and now waited to hear a parent’s view without jumping in with a solution. This, they felt, made them more open with parents.
- Helped the teacher to help children to find solutions for themselves.
- Improved use of the coaching skills through practise and the development of a repertoire of interpersonal skills that can be used in other places (Hogan, 2004) e.g.
  - used their coaching skills with children in the classroom and then by reframing their coaching vocab they found success by using it with family members.
  - using the future perfect with a family member who often is stuck in the past and is unable to move on; “what do you want it to look like?”
  - some used the listening skills with those at home
  - used it for emotional needs
- Empowering a change in mind-set:
  - to be more mindful of themselves as a self-check e.g. being grateful
  - helped to open up the coach’s own mind-set.
- Through the coaching training, coaches learn a process for having successful conversations with those they lead. They also gained a deeper understanding of the impact of words, emotions and body language in a coaching situation (Robertson, 2016).

### Benefits for the organisation:

When a school adopts coaching as a PD model, they create a system of relationships where all members of the system benefit from the coaching connections.

The many benefits to the coachee and coach (listed above) will also have a positive impact on the school through personal development.

School leaders, using the Growth Coaching International coaching model, spoke highly of the value of coaching. The following are benefits these school leaders shared:

- helped schools clarify and stay focused on their strategic direction and aided the sustainability of implementing projects
- allowed leaders to lead rather than direct
- provided an opportunity for teachers to reframe and rethink about the effectiveness of their practice for most impact
- children saw themselves as being in charge of their own learning
- increased teacher accountability for goal achievement and strategic intent
- Provided a private safe place for teachers to have professional confidential conversations and so trusting relationships developed.
- When teachers worked in coaching teams, there was a heightened attention on collegiality and increased performance.
- Relationships are strengthened
- provided a frame work for schooling improvement even for those who were weary of prescribed formats
- Changed the conversations within the school from blaming the circumstances to ways for improvement.
- Leaders found it was a way of being.
- Transferable skills – the coaching speaking frame helped the teacher talk with the students. In time it was noted this was transferred to the class -the teacher could hear children using the coaching speaking frame with other children
- Coaching gave the school the tools (enhanced relationships, code of conduct for conversations) for improvement – moved from a failing school to a high functioning school now a model for others.
- Aligned with leaders' beliefs
- When used as a solution for schooling improvement, it reduced the leaders' isolation and the need to do all the work on their own. Coaching developed trust and ability to reach consensus as coaching created common ground for staff from which to work.
- Found coaching stops teachers defaulting to deficit thinking.
- In 'teaching inquiry meetings' teachers asked others about tactics and habits so that what had been identified as needing to change was given timeframes.

### **In conclusion:**

*Coaching is an effective PD model. It generates sustained schooling improvement that benefits more than just the coachee. When developed in a safe environment where, coaching methodologies are 'normalised', the language of coaching becomes part of the everyday way of working together. Human potential is unleashed through learning that involves teachers talking, reflection and goal setting. Successful conversations become part of productive partnerships that in turn result in greater agency, empowerment, strengthening of self-efficacy, shifts in pedagogical practice and schooling improvement.*

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