Practical Implications for Implementing Effective Coaching Practices in Schools

"Coaching supports the principles of lifelong learning, capacity building and continual improvement"
Jan Robertson 2016.

Principal Sabbatical Report

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Purpose:

To explore the practical implementation of effective coaching practices in schools. Investigating how school leaders build a culture of coaching, how this has developed over time, and identify positive outcomes for staff and students.

Introduction:

This sabbatical project is focused on exploring how school leaders could build a school wide culture of 'coaching'.

The aims of this sabbatical project included exploring how school leaders focus on improving teaching and learning outcomes for students by:

- developing the coaching skills of the leadership team
- developing the coaching skills of teachers
- embedding a staff culture of reflection and critical thinking
- improving leadership capability
- improving teacher performance

History

When I became the principal of my current school I had a clear mandate from the parent community, Board of Trustees and the Ministry of Education to implement significant change in the way the school was currently providing for the needs of its students. In particular, extensive work was required to improve the teaching and learning practices and to embed the essence of the New Zealand Curriculum.

There needed to be a strong focus on providing professional development opportunities for staff and decision making needed to take into account the voices of family and whānau, focusing on changes that would be in the best interests of the students. To begin to implement in-depth change, there needed to be a clear vision, a positive culture, appropriate strategic planning, adequate resourcing and effective leadership.

During this period, I identified many of the leadership skills and dispositions required including the leadership of vision, pedagogy, culture, organisation and learning. Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) described transformational leaders as being able to "inspire their people with a vision that energises them and encourages them to work collaboratively towards a common good" (2009, p. 85). I was required to explore and effectively utilise a range of leadership skills focusing on inspiring others to work together, for the good of our students and community, to lead the major 'transformation' required.

The first and ongoing leadership challenge was to develop that a new school vision for learning, through consultation with the community, teachers and students. It was clear that understanding and collectively owning a shared vision was crucial in forming the basis for the work ahead. Developing a vision with all stakeholders was a pivotal step in beginning to lead this change and improvement. Collaboratively working on clarifying the vision and unpacking what it meant for the students, staff and community enabled everyone to take ownership of the new direction.

As stated by Timperley, it was important to ensure that the vision wasn't just "empty rhetoric" but was actually "underpinned by expectations, particularly about student learning and achievement" (2011, p. 149). My leadership role was focused on ensuring that the vision was real and related to direct learning outcomes for students. This meant the vision couldn't be just a pretty poster on a wall but instead needed to guide the daily work at Greenacres School.

Once considerable time was spent in collecting information from all levels of the school, it was important for me as a leader to articulate a vision for the future and plan the actions required to achieve this vision. This included planning in a measured way how to implement this change through clear strategic and annual goals. Davies and Davies described this as 'strategic leadership', when a leader is responsible for "defining the vision and moral purpose and translating them into action" (2005, p.244). While progress has been made in recent years, it has been crucial for me to keep the vision at the heart of my leadership and therefore at the heart of school development as we implement strategic actions in the future.

Distributed Leadership

During this period of change a number of challenges and opportunities for leadership became apparent and there were a range of areas that required a deep leadership focus. Alongside this challenge came the opportunity for teachers to take on new and varied leadership roles.

I quickly realised that I could not achieve major system change alone and to meet the challenges ahead it became essential for the development of a distributed leadership approach. As stated in Kiwi Leadership for Principals when planning major change in schools "principals do not do this alone. They use their leadership and management skills in ways that motivate and develop the capabilities of others so that responsibility for strengthening and sustaining the work and direction of the school is shared" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p.7). Hallinger also noted "one of the major impediments to effective school leadership is trying to carry the burden alone" (2003, p.343).

Leading this immense change alone would not achieve our shared vision and developing highly effective leaders across the school became critical to achieving our collective purpose. During this process, it became a natural step for me to begin to focus on developing more of a distributed leadership approach to achieve our goals.

The leadership focus became not just the distribution of leadership but on how to grow the quality of leadership. A distributed leadership approach provided a way forward but the leadership focus needed to be on supporting staff to lead in ways that strengthened teaching and learning for students. As Spillane noted "what matters for instructional improvement and student achievement is not that leadership is distributed, but how it is distributed" (2005, p.149). Exploring how we could distribute leadership to have the biggest impact on improving student outcomes became essential in this process.

Once ways to distribute leadership had been identified, the focus moved on to the quality of that leadership, and this meant leading teachers to be more reflective in critically analysing their current leadership practices. As a school, we were attempting to make major system changes and as Harris and Spillane noted, research suggests "that school redesign is unlikely unless patterns of leadership practice are dramatically altered and flattened" (2008, p.32). Through exploring a distributed leadership approach, new models of leadership in our school began to emerge. While identifying ways in which we could develop the leadership skills required, the development of a coaching model became an important next step in leading the change required.

So Why Coaching?

Going forward a leadership model was required that wasn't just about sharing the load but about growing deeply reflective leaders, who were highly effective in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Developing a 'coaching model' was identified as a means to developing an effective distributed leadership approach. Robertson noted that adopting a coaching model can support leaders to "develop a greater awareness of themselves in practice and be supported and challenged to develop their practices in a manner that exemplifies the principles of lifelong learning" (2016, p.36). Through this period, we continued to embed a distributed leadership model but the key focus became developing leadership skills in coaching, to ensure that quality leadership in our school would improve outcomes for our students.

Developing a Culture of Coaching

To ensure an effective culture of coaching grew in our school I needed to develop my personal skills in coaching and therefore support others to reflect on their practice, whilst also providing the conditions for other leaders to grow their coaching capacity. This is in line with the work of Robertson, who contends that "engagement in mutually supportive coaching relationships can help leaders become self-aware and develop the capacity to challenge, support, reflect on, and change their professional practice" (2011, p. 215). Developing and strengthening my skills in coaching would mean I could model these practices with other school leaders. They in turn could share their skills with teachers from across the school so staff will learn from each other as we focused on continuous improvement.

Prior to my sabbatical I began using a range of evaluation strategies to monitor both my leadership and personal progress in using coaching practices in the following ways:

- Identifying specific coaching goals as part of my Principal Performance Agreement including objectives, tasks/indicators, evidence, expected outcomes and reflections (linked to school vision and strategic/annual goals)
- Regularly reviewing my coaching goals identifying progress and next steps with my appraiser
- Planning opportunities to put my coaching skills in to practice and seeking feedback
- Continuing to build my pedagogical knowledge of coaching (professional reading)
- Taking part in a PLG (Professional Learning Group) with other colleagues to critically reflect on my practice and learn from others
- Enlisting a personal coach
- Enlisting a provider of professional development in coaching to work with me and the staff
- Seeking and responding to feedback from staff, leadership team and professional colleagues

During my sabbatical, I had the opportunity to talk informally and formally with colleagues who are adopting coaching practices in their personal practice and with teachers in their schools. I have come to the conclusion that there are a wide range of elements to consider when attempting to embed this practice as a means to building teacher capability. Below I will outline some of the key themes that emerged, making links to relevant research. For the purpose of clarity, I have not specifically focused on 'principals' but the more generic focus on school leaders as all the principals I talked to are including their senior leaders in coaching developments.

What the research says?

Leading Vision

When developing a culture of coaching, skills in strategic and visionary leadership will continue to be vitally important. The ability to engage others in working towards common aims is strengthened when those involved can clearly understand the vision the leader is espousing or, as described by Robinson, Lloyd & Hohepa, if leaders can "articulate a compelling vision for the future" (2009, p.97) then a real difference can start to be made.

As leaders delve further into coaching they need to support staff to understand how coaching fits into their big picture vision and goals, helping them to comprehend how the hard work ahead could ultimately make a positive difference for their students. It is essential that staff have a clear understanding of why they are embarking on using a coaching approach. School leaders will need to develop clarity around the vision, ensuring that all understand it, are committed to it and are living it. In this sense, a school leader's role modelling of coaching practices and their ability to demonstrate commitment to their own professional growth will play an important part.

Leithwood, Harris and Hopkin's summarised literature that identified successful school leadership attributes and commented that "leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation" (2008 p. 29). Through developing the use of coaching practices school leader's may have the opportunity to 'unleash' the abilities that already exist within their staff, whilst also allowing them the opportunity to lead and support others to do the same.

Leading a Positive School Climate

Underpinning the vision for developing a culture of coaching will be the importance of building and maintaining a positive school climate. To enable a culture of coaching to grow the school climate will need to be positive and safe, enabling trusting relationships to develop. School leaders will be focused on fostering these positive relationships, and empowering staff to feel comfortable in being open about their practice in a non-threatening and supportive environment.

Bryk and Schneider declared that "principals play a key role in developing and sustaining relational trust" (2003, p.43). Leadership practices will need to be directed towards supporting the growth of relational trust and in particular the kinds of professional relationships discussed by Timperley that "more directly develop professional knowledge about the improvement of teaching and learning" (2011, p.148). After all a happy staff, who get on well with each other, won't in itself necessarily create the conditions for change that are needed in order to achieve school goals.

The key aim of developing skills in 'coaching' is to continue to improve teacher practice to make a difference in improving outcomes for students. The establishment of a reflective culture, where individuals are comfortable in critically reflecting on their own practice in a supportive and safe environment, will support teachers and leaders to be more willing to take part in in-depth professional conversations that promote long term, sustained improvement.

Pedagogical Leadership

It is evident that if school leaders are to be seen as authentic leaders it is essential that they are 'walking the talk' and seen as a knowledgeable practitioner in their own right. School leaders won't be just leading the implementation of a culture of coaching; they will be critical people in modelling this approach. The skills they demonstrate and develop as leaders in building the pedagogy of others and the way they go about it, will be a crucial model to the staff. As described by Shamir and Eilam, it is crucial that authentic leaders "actions are consistent with both their talk and their beliefs" (2005, p.397).

As school leaders develop their own pedagogical knowledge of coaching practices and grow personal skills in coaching, they will need to share this knowledge base. Robinson, Lloyd & Hohepa concluded "that leaders who are seen as sources of instructional advice and expertise gain respect

from staff, and as a result, have a greater influence over how they teach" (2009. p.101). Effective modelling of coaching practices by school leaders will be critical in guaranteeing they have an influence on whether coaching leads to an improvement in teaching practices. School leaders will need to ensure that they continue to grow and develop, critically analysing their practice for ongoing improvement.

Organisational Leadership

Implementing a coaching model will require thorough planning, appropriate resourcing and time given for this new learning to take place. The use of appropriate learning tools, the identification of outside experts to assist, the development of budgets and resourcing, will all be part of a school wide implementation plan. The organisational structure to implement this change will be crucial. This will include identifying when and how professional development will take place, who will provide it and how it will be evaluated to ensure progress is being made. If coaching practices are to make a difference, as identified by Robinson, Lloyd & Hohepa school leaders will need to ensure there is a focus on, "securing and allocating resources that are aligned to pedagogical purposes" (2009. p.98).

Evaluation of Success

After initial goal setting, a clear plan of achievable outcomes and associated tasks should be identified, that clearly link to strategic and annual goals providing a guide by which to evaluate success. These outcomes and tasks would form the baseline against which progress could be measured and monitored over time. Identifying key milestones to be achieved and regularly reporting to the Board of Trustees on progress would ensure a school wide focus on improvement was maintained. As noted by Dettmer, ensuring we have "definable benchmarks on which to measure success" (2011, p.12) will mean we can review our progress, make changes and be responsive during the development process.

Feedback for those who are in the role of coach will be critical in ensuring they are developing in their practice. Harris and Spillane assert "it is the nature and quality of leadership practice that matters" (2008, p.33), so as leaders we must be seeking feedback on the quality of our leadership to continue to make sustained improvements. We must examine carefully our individual practice as coaches, not just focusing on the outcomes from those who are being coached. Just like providing feedback on teaching, when seeking feedback on coaching practices, school leaders will need to be willing to reflect on their current practice, identify areas for improvement based on sound pedagogy, implement changes and monitor the effectiveness of the changes they make.

What is the 'coaching' reality?

The following more informal points emerged from discussions with colleagues before and during my sabbatical:

- Without exception, the principals I talked with who were implementing coaching practices have started with their personal development first. Many completed tertiary or other qualifications in order to begin the journey in their own schools

- Without exception principals have enlisted other skilled practitioners in this area to provide professional development in their schools or as personal coaches

- Most principals developed their personal coaching skills before focusing on developing the coaching skills of their leadership teams

- School leaders have started delving into coaching practices to improve teacher and leadership capability to improve outcomes for their students

- All school leaders have been confronted by the challenge of not adding more to the workload of their leaders and teachers as they implement coaching practices

- To varying degrees, school leaders recognised the need to provide extra resourcing (i.e. release time to coach or be coached) and appropriate structures to support the ongoing success of the coaching model i.e. timetables, organisational structures, coaching models, resourcing

- Some school leaders have made coaching links to their teacher inquiry and appraisal systems although they acknowledge that research indicates coaching is at its most effective when it is not impacted on by external layers of accountability

- All school leaders agreed that it initially takes a lot of work but they can already see the benefits and staff have responded positively

- All school leaders agreed that is hard to measure the direct impact of coaching on student outcomes at this stage, but agree that if teaching practice improves it can only be beneficial to their students

Conclusion

Finally, I believe it is the role of school leaders to build a school culture of mutual respect where a positive environment for successful learning is created not only for students but just as importantly for school leaders and teachers. By working positively with our colleagues and embedding coaching as a supportive tool for change, I believe we can make improvements for our students that are both real and sustainable.

As Robertson (2016) concludes, working in coaching partnerships presents the opportunity for the shared construction of new knowledge as we face the many challenges ahead. It is apparent to me that in our everyday work as school leaders we must take every opportunity to develop new ways of thinking and leading. By providing the time and opportunity for professional coaching conversations, we may come closer to finding the innovative and creative solutions we desperately seek for our students to thrive as lifelong learners in the 21st Century.

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