

## **Primary Principals' Sabbatical Report**

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### **Acknowledgements**

Firstly I want to acknowledge the Clearview Primary Board of Trustees for supporting my application for a sabbatical during Term 2 of 2013 and for providing financial support for the study undertaken.

A special thanks and acknowledgement goes to my Deputy Principal and Leadership team for doing a great job running the school in my absence.

I wish to acknowledge the Ministry of Education for the sabbatical provision for Principals. This was a timely opportunity for me to step off the wheel to reflect, think critically, engage in new learning and refresh and recharge.

My last acknowledgement is to the Sydney Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership with a special thanks to Dr Hilary Armstrong and Chip McFarlane. It would also be remiss not to acknowledge the Principals and schools who have generously shared time with me during my sabbatical.

### **Executive Summary**

Individual coaching allows any leader the space to reflect, discuss and plan in a confidential environment where they can be totally honest and be challenged in a way that is simply not possible in a group session.

Organisational coaching is an ideal solution for any senior person looking for guidance, objectivity and challenge.

Typical situations are:

- Leaders who need to have access to confidential and objective third party counsel
- Leaders new in a role
- Leaders facing considerable change
- Leaders who have recently received 360° feedback
- Leaders operating remotely from other senior people in their organisation

### **Purpose**

To explore the use of a coaching model to strengthen and develop the potential and performance of aspiring and current school leaders.

## Background

I believe the role of a principal is strongly centred around relationships to create a shared understanding with their staff and community around the type of leader they are. I also believe coaching is an integral part of being a principal as it is also their role to strengthen the capabilities of their staff in a school and with the various stakeholders involved in this environment.

During and upon the completion of my coach training I quickly recognised how well this study and course work supported my role as a principal. There is an increased awareness of coaching in the workplace however I believe it is either untapped in education or “coaching” itself is perceived as consulting or mentoring which is a common misconception.

In seeing the value in my own school I deemed it important to take it further a field, hence my sabbatical proposal and desire to create a greater awareness and understanding of organisational coaching.

## Methodology

- Complete final year of part-time study to gain full accreditation as an ICF Organisational Coach - (Sydney Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership).
- To further read and research the fundamentals of organisational coaching.
- Visit schools and coach leaders using a coaching model to help improve their performance.
- Assist leaders in recognising the essence of true organisational coaching

## Findings

My coach training is not sector specific and not New Zealand based. The framework for the training was structured around the corporate and business environment. The point I want to make about this is that by not being sector specific the fundamentals can be applied to any environment. When I applied this in my own school I saw value and a marked improvement in the people I worked with.

The purpose of my sabbatical was to test this approach further than my own environment. I am pleased to say that the results were the same in that the leaders I worked with saw the value and were able to reflect on how coaching for them had a greater effect on their own performance.

Harvard Educationalist, Timothy Gallwey defines “Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them”.

Gallwey’s definition of coaching presents an interesting paradox to where we are heading in education and how we can best prepare and support our people in positions of leadership.

## **The Process**

**Step 1** – the coach and the coaching counterpart will meet face to face for a chemistry meeting of 30 minutes to make sure the ‘fit’ is right and both feel happy with working together.

**Step 2** – there is then a briefing process that involves the coach, the coaching counterpart and the sponsor (if required) to discuss the coaching process and program to ensure complete alignment around objectives. The set up process should involve some form of self and peer assessment. This would be the time to conduct that exercise, so that the coach and coaching counterpart have an accurate picture of strengths and areas to work on.

**Step 3** – the main coaching process then begins, with dates booked into both diaries. The initial program is to sign up for 6 sessions, ideally every three to four weeks, although the exact number of sessions depend on the outcomes required (This was reduced for the purpose of my sabbatical). Where possible the sessions are at a neutral venue away from work, or by talking on the phone, as it gets the coaching counterpart away from their work environment.

The discussion during the coaching sessions are confidential and any reporting back to the coaching sponsor is around engagement, motivation and broad progress being observed. The coaching counterpart is the person to choose how much or how little they discuss specifics with the sponsor.

**Step 4** - at the end of the sessions, all parties meet up again to discuss what has been achieved and next steps. The client can choose to continue the coaching or decide that the outcomes have been achieved.

## **The GROW Model**

The GROW model I utilise is acknowledged as best practice for coaching and approved by the International Coaching Federation. The four letters stand for 4 steps in the process: Goals; Reality; Options; Wrap Up. It’s based around the “ask don’t tell” principle. Coaching is about raising awareness and building the responsibility to act in the person being coached. As coaches, we guide the discussion.

It is not solely the coach’s role to come up with the ideas but to ask questions that increase the coaching counterpart’s insight into how they could improve in a particular area and generate their own options. That way the ideas are theirs to own and action. It is the principle of “If you catch a fish for someone they can eat for the day but if you teach them how to fish they can eat for life”.

Likewise the agenda for each session is driven jointly by the coaching counterpart and the coach. I expect that each meeting, the coaching counterpart has thought about the issues in the spotlight and in the context of the objectives set at the beginning of the process and know what they want to address in that session. I make sure this is addressed and has continuity between sessions. I’ll also be able to supply extra notes and information as different topics come up.

Whilst I mainly follow the coaching model outlined above (GROW), the sessions may crossover to a mentoring and advisory role at times (I make it very clear that I am doing this so that the counterpart understands the difference between the two spaces). In other words it won’t simply be the coach asking questions. The coach’s job is to challenge the coaching counterpart and hold them accountable for following through on any agreed actions and commitments.

## Implications

Too often we can be guilty of identifying the person as the problem and I have demonstrated through coaching that if we externalise the issue, name it and let it stand alone, the power of removing the person being the problem is quite profound. It is vital to truly listen and assist the person being coached to identify their issue. Furthermore once the issue is identified I understand the importance of working with the meaning of this issue not the person.

Language is generic until it is framed by experience so in the daily life of a principal when we are presented with a person raising an issue I pose this question... "Are we asking questions framed around our own experiences of the situation, to get a response that we want to hear, that we believe is right from our perspective?" I know there is a lot in this question but more often than not there are times when we are guilty of doing this. Coaching allows us to let go of this notion that it is about us, it's actually about the person sitting opposite us. We then need to truly focus on the issue and not the person. Simply we must ascertain what the issue or situation means to them instead of us framing it around what it means to us. It is this that unlocks people's potential by helping them to remove the issue or interference that gets in the way of doing their job.

An equation that I have learnt sums this up very well.

$$P = p - i$$

Performance equals your potential minus the interference. If we could think this way when dealing with the issues and that as principals we assist our staff in eliminating or reducing those interferences, what amazing environments would they be?! Here lies the challenge...

## Conclusion

What has seemed like a constant time of reflection, I know within myself I have grown as a person and as a coach. It has made me more aware of the idiosyncrasies people demonstrate in life and at their place of work. It has created an interest for me to want to find out more in this particular field, of which I am strongly considering further study.

I feel more in tune to the people I immediately work with and have developed a greater confidence about being able to move between my "self" and the "role" I assume. There is a dance that takes place to know when to be "you", "coach" or "principal".

Above all, this journey has made me realise that there is a place and a need for coaching to be present in education, particularly in our schools. The value I have seen in working with only a small group of people has been rewarding for me but also greatly beneficial for those leaders working in their environments.

I believe there is a place for coaching and coach training in all aspects of the career pathways for leaders whether it be in aspiring, first time or experienced principal programmes.

## References

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