

Coaching leaders: The path to improvement

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People don't appreciate just how much your leadership programme has firstly had me reflect on my current beliefs and practice, then challenge me through research and debate to develop further as a leader.

Yes!!!! Celebrate our successes because they are definitely your successes as well. The whole process has got me away from an emphasis on management and a far better appreciation of the potential growth influence I can generate from being the school's educational leader. Thank you.

(Garry De Thierry, Principal, Rotorua Intermediate)

Educational leaders

We often hear the question “Are leaders born or made?” My answer is neither, really, or both, as leadership essentially cannot be taught in a lecture or learned from a book, and you are not born with the leadership qualities. Effective leadership is a learned process over time that requires a certain type of leadership skill to initiate and maintain. That is why the process of coaching with a peer partner is paramount to the continued learning of effective leadership practice. The leadership learning is based on real experiences in the leader's work, reflective observation of those experiences, opportunities to question, problem solve, analyse and develop new ways of thinking and leading, and then trying out new ideas. Both support and challenge are necessary in the learning process. A coaching partner, in a similar position and role, is well-placed to be able to provide both of these elements to a professional colleague. It is part of the ideal of professionalism.

Once leaders have experienced being coached, they should be more confident, able and willing, to coach the development of others in the education community. This is how coaching can lead to the building of leadership capacity for educational improvement (Harris & Lambert, 2003). A particular kind of organisational culture is developed in which leadership and learning are two key components. At the end of this paper there are case studies of how leaders, who learned and practised the skills of coaching themselves, then worked with others to develop their coaching skills and build communities of learners.

Over the last decade this model has been continually researched and developed with educational leaders from all sectors, in New Zealand and internationally (Robertson, 1999). It is a valuable model for formative appraisal, as it focuses on improving learning experiences and opportunities. It is about keeping the role of educational leader at the centre of leaders' practice. It is about keeping a focus on the improvement of student achievement.

I am quite sure that in all my interactions with staff I am all the time subconsciously, and occasionally quite consciously, thinking back to some of the techniques and topics that were discussed in the big group. I remember one of the things you said...that in the

long run, the one criteria that you need to apply to everything is "What is the educational value—the impact on learning—of what is going on?" That is a criterion that I consciously apply all the time [now].

The leaders who use this coaching model will develop their coaching practices in the way that best suits their context, their experience, their culture and their situation. It means that culture can be placed at the heart of the learning process. Leaders take responsibility for their learning and take ownership of the process through coaching. These are, of course, the important principles for lifelong learning.

...you are developing very independent principals by causing them to reflect and do their own learning and since learning is change, change themselves...I think the strength of the system is the expectation that each principal is responsible for her own development. We don't want clones.

There are several premises that underlie this coaching model. The first is that leaders are teachers by preparation. This means that effective leadership development is based on many of the same principles as effective teacher development. Secondly, that professional development should be a lifelong process. Although leaders may be at different stages of their careers, there will always be a need for continual renewal, refreshment and redirection in educational leadership practice. There will always be new expectations and roles. The only thing that is constant in education today is change. There will always be a need to redirect energies and branch out into new areas for development. Leaders need to be able to embrace change and the possibilities and opportunities it can bring. Every professional, therefore, has the responsibility to keep learning throughout their career. Thirdly, people who are influential in education should have as their main priority a focus on educative leadership. The bottom line for educational institutions should be the students' learning. This requires a continual critique of learning experiences to identify those experiences that lead to improved learning.

Educational platforms

When people are asked about what they would do in a certain situation, the answers they give are their espoused theories of action, which influence their theories-in-use (Schon, 1984, 1987). Espoused theories and theories-in-use are not always the same and if leaders are not aware of the discrepancy or gap between their theories-in-action and their espoused theories they may not see the necessity for, or be open to, new learning. Espoused theories are often closely aligned to the leaders' values and beliefs. Coaching is effective because it helps to close the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use. It creates the essential conditions for double-loop learning to occur which is paramount to effective professional development occurring (Argyris, 1976). Double-loop learning only happens when learners invite other people to confront their own views. Therefore, the only way these theories-in-use can be discovered, according to Argyris (1976), is through

the observation of one's behaviour by others. Outside perspectives, through the eyes of the coaching partner, are at the core of the leadership learning process.

Educational leadership requires that values, beliefs and interests are identified and articulated. This model is also based on the fourth premise that those in positions of leadership who are involved in praxis, will do so from an ethical, moral and educative stance. Therefore, leaders need to understand and articulate their educational platforms (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002) and critique how the myriad of daily actions they carry out, on the issues of immediacy, and the every day understandings that they have, either rest or fall from these platforms depending upon how great the gap is between the rhetoric of espoused theories and the actuality of their leadership-in-action. The discontinuity between these and the non-fulfillment of their professional, educative goals, principles and values, can lead to stress and tensions within their daily practice (Duignan, 1989). An increased awareness of the discontinuity between values and practices can direct attention to the possibility for social transformation.

Coaching should assist leaders to not only understand their values and beliefs about how students learn best and what their true interests as leaders of their institutions are, but it can also assist them to develop the ability to be able to articulate their educational leadership platform in their leadership dialectic with their coaching partner and the others they work with. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) believed that what is most important is “knowing *what* the platform position is, understanding the relationship between ...practices and platform elements, perceiving inconsistencies between the spoken platform and the platform in practice, appreciating differences between one's own platform and that of another...” (p. 71). They give examples of platforms: the basic competency platform, the democratic socialisation platform, the urban teacher platform, the ecological platform, as examples of the ways educators view knowledge and learning.

Most of the principles of these platforms could belong to teachers, principals, academics, and so on, but it becomes complete for those senior leaders, who are responsible for the work of others, when they add their values and beliefs about their “supervision” role – that is, the monitoring of the teaching and learning within the institution. This must be a key practice of educational leaders.

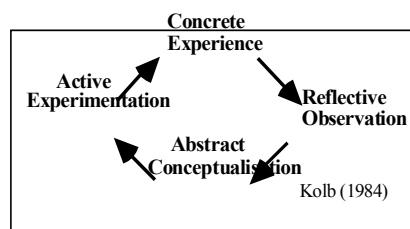
Reflection on and clarification of educational platforms can bring a critical perspective to educational leadership theory development. Coaching sets in place a structure that can provide leaders with support and opportunities for exercising considered, deliberated educative leadership as part of their daily practice. This would, then, also assist them to solve the dilemmas in their own leadership practice, and, if necessary, change their practice.

To exercise educational leadership a transformative capacity is needed. *Transformational leadership* is intentional action to improve the learning experiences of students in the community. This requires reflective action and conscious changes to ways of working which is the heart of praxis. Praxis can

also be defined as "conscious, reflective, intentional action...and is the bridge between theory and practice—between reflection, analysis and action" (Duignan, 1989, p. 77). To achieve this conscious, reflective, intentional action, educational leaders need many opportunities for discourse, observation, experimentation and reflection on their practice and coaching can provide these in a structured situation throughout the year. This ongoing learning relationship makes coaching a powerful agent of change in adult learners.

Adult learning

Adult learning principles are at the basis of the coaching model presented in these case studies. Kolb (1984, p. 40) described the processes of experiential learning as "a four stage cycle involving four adaptive learning modes: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation." Praxis is the desired outcome of Kolb's model of learning theory when all four aspects are given an equal weighting.



Experiencing

Work experience itself has great value in professional development. The transformation of a leader's concrete, daily experiences can become new learning (Kolb, 1984). Professional development begins when the leader makes the most of an experience by considering it carefully and listening to feedback from the coach and others they work with, and then combines his or her information with this outside information to develop new principles and concepts and theories to use on the job. When the leader experiments reflexively with these new theories, new learning is likely to have taken place.

They can't do it for you, but they can listen and give support, and they can give another perspective.

The daily roles, tasks and experiences of leaders provide the concrete experiences for effective learning to occur. This type of learning is more likely to enhance intellectual independence and self-direction in the professional development process. Self-directed learning is "a form of study in which learners have primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences...and is the way most adults, including professional educators, go about acquiring new ideas, skills, and attitudes" (Caffarella, 1993, p. 30). Drawing on these experiences, and building on prior experiences and knowledge, assists

with *the construction* of new learning. Coaching is a constructivist approach to learning, between two professionals, in a social interactive context. Stein and Spillane (2003) define learning in a social interactive context by stating that as individuals exchange ideas and views, listen to and critique other's contributions, and expose their own beliefs and assumptions, they together create a shared, new understanding.

The shadowing and reflective processes have provided insight into my professional performance and philosophies.

Coaching allows for the *individual needs* of the leader to be met as they focus on their daily issues and the experiences they are having on a daily basis and take the time to reflect critically on their practices relating to these issues.

Reflecting

Reflection on previous actions will help to bring leaders to a state of openness in which they are prepared to try out new strategies and behaviours. There are times when leaders' attitudes and values need to be challenged before they will be open to changing the ways they act, and there are other times when new experiences will initiate a change of values and beliefs, and therefore future actions.

Reflection with a professional partner, can assist in this process. To encourage reflection on practice, leaders need to be given opportunities to relive their experiences through careful prompting and questioning. "Once they have brought to a level of conscious awareness the strategies and values which were previously implicit, they are in a position to modify them and then to try them out again in another situation" (Candy, Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1985, p. 115). This model of coaching (Robertson, 1995) gives strategies for such reflective questioning to occur.

Conceptualising

For *abstract conceptualisation* of new ideas to occur, linking theory and practice is important for leaders to begin to formulate new concepts about their practice. Critical reflection should begin to take place when the leader is in this phase of the learning process. When leaders can free themselves from their taken-for-granted ways of viewing the world they may be able to start "seriously entertaining and evaluating alternative possibilities" (Berlak & Berlak, 1987, p. 169). This process is abstract conceptualisation in which leaders can create a type of psychological distancing from the issues under reflection. The collaboration with others assists them in the deconstruction of the dominant, prevalent discourses and the effect they are having on their role (Foucault, 1977). This leads them to an awareness that there are others in their role who are experiencing the same difficulties and dilemmas. This then helps them to deal with the problems rather than to deal with the lack of confidence that they may have been experiencing in their own ability, before the psychological distancing and the collaboration assisted them to find solutions to shared problems (Berlak & Berlak, 1983).

To be honest, I think I am a lot more relaxed because I know there is a least one other [person] out there who has got the same problems as me, the same hassles, the same worries, and I know that I am not unique, not the only person who has got everybody doing the wrong thing at the wrong time and some days are like that, and it's something you can ring up and laugh about.

Coaching also provides opportunities for affirmation and validation of practice, which is important in leadership development. Self-esteem of the learner is paramount, and any form of professional critique needs to have a careful balance of positive and negative feedback. Chapter six describes the rules and processes of providing effective feedback.

Experimenting

After abstract conceptualisation learners may have the readiness to try new experiences. Leaders should now feel confident to *actively experiment* with different concepts and ideas. This experimentation with new ideas has been based on the learning from reflection on previous experience and the critical reflection following that reflection. The experimentation becomes the new concrete experience as the learning cycle begins again. This active experimentation is, therefore, not uninformed action but praxis.

When leaders are involved in such experiences in which decisions have been made based on prior experience, reflection on that experience and abstract conceptualization, then the reflection that they have been involved in is what Schön (1983) called knowing-in-action. "It is this whole process of reflection-in-action which is central to the "art" by which practitioners sometimes deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts" (p. 50). Reflection-in-action is the essence of praxis. Schön (1983) said that this reflection-in-action "consists of on-the-spot surfacing, criticising, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena; often it takes the form of a reflective conversation with the situation" (p. 242) and leads to the "knowing-in-action" which is so important in nonlinear conditions within a work context such as that found in education.

Leaders who are reflective practitioners can then act with a degree of confidence in new situations as they make informed decisions about their actions. Coaching with a professional partner assists leaders to be reflective *in action*, *on action* and *for future action*, which results in a knowledge *of practice*. This moves leadership enquiry into a new paradigm for conceptions of learning leadership.

Thinking about learning

New conceptions of learning	Differing Assumptions	Implications for P-D
Knowledge FOR practice	Research generates formal knowledge for use	Dissemination of knowledge
Knowledge IN practice	Knowledge embedded in exemplary practice and reflection	Focus on experience-based projects and practical knowledge
Knowledge OF practice critical	Learn by making Leadership, Learning and Research problematic	Systematic and enquiry in communities

(Lieberman & Miller, 2002)

When leaders become involved in systematic enquiry about their practice, in partnership or in community, they begin to form a knowledge *of* practice which is important to effective leadership. Grossman, Wineberg, and Woolworth (2000) write that leaders working together in these ways are different from other gatherings of leaders. There are three things, they say, that are important for systematic collaborative enquiry on leadership practice: Commitment to colleagues' growth; recognition that participation is expected; and recognition that colleagues are resources for one's own learning. This type of thinking about leadership learning places leaders at the centre of their own learning and the responsibility for learning firmly in their court. Educational leadership, after all, is about organising learning for oneself and others in the education community.

Effective professional development

Not only do the principles of adult learning form the basis of an effective coaching programme, but coaching is also built upon the four main elements that Fullan (1991) identified as being important in *effective professional development* programmes. They are:

- active initiation and participation within the process;
- pressure and support to maintain the continuity of the process;
- changed behaviour and beliefs which are paramount for changed behaviours to become institutionalized;
- and the over-riding problem of ownership of the change process.

Coaching practices need to be initiated in an institution, (as they do not necessarily happen by chance), by one of the educational leaders, or by an outside leader who has had experience in the processes of coaching. There are several reasons for the lack of initiation and participation of leaders in professional development that will lead to new learning and practices.

Firstly, there is the relative isolation people in educational institutions work in (Lortie, 1975). The education profession is a lonely one when compared with the collegial interactions and a culture of shared experience and observation of practice that occurs within other professions such as medicine and law.

Secondly, the 'dailiness' or routine-task oriented behaviours in which educators become so embedded they seldom take up the time for quality reflection. They are caught up in the routines and schedules of habit and do not think critically about their actions.

Thirdly, there is the need for others to be also participating in the process for critical reflection to occur. Collegial exchange and dialogue is paramount in the adult learning process.

Fourthly, there is often a lack of skills necessary to enable reflective practice to occur. Many leaders do not have the interpersonal skills to provide quality feedback to their peers or to reflect critically on their own practice. Educators have often not been taught *how* to reflect critically on their practice at any stage of their career development. It is difficult to change leaders' habits so that they become reflective practitioners and this cannot be achieved by leaders reading the theory about the importance of it. Critical reflection becomes a habit through use and through reflection on that use. There needs to be the structures, the time and the expectation to be involved in critical reflection on practice.

Coaching practices can alleviate all of these potential issues in the professional development process. Coaching ensures participation, and the effect of a professional partner becomes the pressure and support to continue with new learning.

There is definitely a challenge and there is work involved, but it is rewarding and it's very worthwhile.

After leaders have been working with a professional partner over a period of time, these ways of working do become institutionalised into their daily practice. The coach influences practice even when not working with the leader.

I now question what I am doing and think "What would my partner think of that?"

Importantly, there is the realisation that the ongoing support and challenge is essential to continued learning. Critical reflection is a learned process and an outcome of effective coaching.

Ultimately it is about keeping education firmly at the centre of practice (Robertson, 1999) and the coaching model assists leaders to do this in many ways. The following case studies describe how these three leaders used the coaching model with their professional colleagues.

Case Study 1

Facilitating Professional Partnerships - Gerry

Context of development:

A supportive and trusting partnership was established with two local, urban, low decile school principals. The intention of this professional partnership was to recognise and appreciate the uniqueness of each principal's circumstance. Then, through an agreed, structured process of reflective questioning, utilise our collective capacity to assist each person reflect and deal with the various types of challenges pertaining to their daily management and leadership roles.

Overview of process:

The process was undertaken during 10 sessions set aside specifically for this exercise. The standard agenda had those involved sharing their leadership stories and then developing skilful questioning to analyse each other's issues without being judgemental. Skills of active listening and reflective interviewing were fostered to enhance maximum learning opportunities for these principals. Developing these skills helped support our partnership by providing a framework for interactions, reflection and shared understanding.

Description of process:

The initial meetings were one-on-one, allowing the facilitator to explain the intention of the programme, time and task commitments, along with the probable long term benefits from their involvement.

Opportunity was also given to allow any personal resistance, concerns related to possible anxiety, or insecurity, to surface. Meetings first took place in each other's schools, then at the agreed neutral environment of a city café. Meetings lasted on average 90 minutes and followed an agreed format:

- Coffee and generally down loading of what's been happening at school.
- Identifying significant issues to be shared.
- Reviewing of partner's questioning and coaching role to be practised during discussion.
- Undertaking the sharing and questioning process.
- Identifying possible options for action to support the resolution of an individual's issue.
- Discussing possible indicators that may suggest the issue is being resolved.

Having this agreed approach to facilitating supportive discussion fostered greater appreciation of each individual's leadership context while enhancing trusting relationships within our professional partnership. Our development was also supported by the facilitator supplying a range of research articles on:

- *communication skills*
- *group processes; an introduction to group dynamics*
- *principal mentoring.*

Summary:

The facilitation of this professional leadership partnership challenged the way those involved thought of, and undertook, their leadership roles. The process also refocused participants on the behaviours and the positive attitudes required for effective leadership.

The learning undertaken through the process has better prepared those involved to 'walk the talk' as reflective practitioners. The strength gained as a result of this positive collegial and collaborative experience has fostered a support network that addresses the increasing concern of professional isolation felt by principals. Those involved recognize the value of supportive dialogue to encourage risk-taking and promote the importance of connecting theory and practice. Through regularly discussing quality education and effective leadership, there now is an increasing openness to new ideas. Simply, our increased professional bond has formed a social context of group learning.

Developing professional partners should be considered as an effective way to support professional development, while decreasing a feeling of professional isolation. It challenges school leaders to transfer behaviours of active listening and reflective interviewing into the context of their daily roles, thereby developing behaviours designed to enhance the collective ability of a school to adapt, solve problems and improve performance.

As principals, we need to consistently engage our staff, community and students in the decision making process. To achieve this we need to facilitate our own learning opportunities and those of others within the context of our schools. We need to be fostering partnerships to bring the vision of our schools to life, by utilising the collective capacity of others as we continually seek to improve the quality of our schools. 'Walking the talk', through 'professional partnerships', is one successful way of developing and practicing the required skills to achieve this.

**Case Study 2 - Mary
Facilitating Leadership Through a Peer Coaching Partnership**

As part of a university assignment I facilitated the development of educational leadership in two of my work colleagues based on a peer coaching model by Robertson (1997). I was working in a large intermediate school, with approximately 1200 students, as an assistant principal. The two colleagues I chose to work with were mature women, experienced teachers, in some ways lacking in self confidence yet seeking to extend their leadership capacity.

The aim of the facilitation of a coaching partnership was to give the two participants the skills, attitudes and behaviours to become more reflective about their practice and in doing so develop their leadership skills and add to the focus on quality of what was happening in our school. I also wanted to help provide

these two women with a sense of personal importance, significance and work meaningfulness and motivation as described by Sergiovanni (2001).

The basis for trust and respect between us was established through having worked together for the last seven years. The basis for trust was not taken for granted though and was furthered from the outset by agreeing on the ground rules. A statement of ethics was signed by us all and the women were assured that it was my facilitation of the process which was important, not what they had to say. We practiced to develop skills in context such as observation, reflective interviewing, three level questioning and active listening. Once trust was established the two women observed each other's practice, with a set focus, followed by reflective interviewing.

The facilitation of leadership skills through a peer coaching model occurred intensively over a two month time span. Meetings between the three of us were held weekly, before or after a work day, mainly on the worksite but sometimes over breakfast down town. The meetings were set in place from one to the next to ensure that they happened amidst our busy daily lives. Meetings were formalised and purposeful as I was appreciative of the amount of personal time these women were prepared to sacrifice. Meetings were a vehicle for any issues the participants wished to raise and involved readings to encourage fresh perspectives.

As a facilitator of the development of leadership skills in others it was necessary to take on various roles, similar to those suggested by Robertson (1997) and have the ability to move in and out of them. These roles included relationship builder, motivator, planner, pace setter, encourager, advocate goal setter, task facilitator, scribe, conscience, observer, confidant and conversation starter. It was important that I was sincere, enthusiastic and motivational.

On reflection of the facilitation of leadership skills process it was important to come from the position of coach and not mentor in order not to destroy the confidence of the participants and to further empower them. I did not want them to feel I was telling them what to do or how to do it. Taking the time to reflect on practice through formalised arrangements was absolutely powerful. Both participants exclaimed they never otherwise took the time. I was somewhat surprised by this reaction as I had taken for granted that structures were already in place to provide the opportunity for reflection. This highlighted for me the importance of a facilitator for reflective practice to occur. The participants agreed that they felt empowered in their leadership practice through their improved ability to question. Acting in a non-judgmental way was crucial to the success and continuation of this coaching partnership. Both felt it was affirming to have the positives. One of the women commented that she had been 'waiting for the punch' because that was what she was conditioned for. Knowing when and how to feed in the evaluative feedback was crucial to the success or otherwise of our partnership. For me this coaching model has the potential to empower teachers by giving them input into their professional development and can assist participants in career development as suggested by Ehrich (1996).

Conclusion

These two leaders are just two examples of how leaders who have experienced the coaching model of leadership learning, have taken their new knowledge and learned facilitation skills, and worked with others to increase leadership capacity. Both case studies have demonstrated how important trust is in the coaching partnership; how important it is to affirm as well as challenge the leadership practice of colleagues; how important it is to bring theory to the process of learning, and how leaders can begin to take ownership of their development in this social interactive context. Leadership is an action that many people should be a part of, not just those who have designated leadership positions. Coaching towards set goals, vision and values can successfully build the capacity required for sustaining improvement. These practices build a special type of organisation culture. New types of institutions may develop, where learning processes are built on shared, reciprocal processes, and power becomes “power to achieve the vision held.” In these places, leadership is abundant and valued.

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