

Primary Principal's Sabbatical Report

To investigate how oral communication can build effective relationships and improve performance in a high performance environment

- the leader as a coach

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Background

As we are all aware, the key to any successful school or business is about developing a culture that focuses on building effective relationships and high performance at all levels. I have had a long standing interest in this area and the things we can do as leaders to maximise this environment.

The Ministry of Education document *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* with reference to the importance of relationships states that “ *Educational Leadership and leading change require principals to communicate clearly their intentions to teachers. The more principals focus their relations with teachers on the core business of teaching, and the more they communicate goals and expectations about quality teaching and learning for each student , the more effective they are likely to be in leading their schools towards improved student outcomes for all.* “

During our day as Principals we have many conversations with stakeholders that are wide and varied – children, staff, parents, people from the wider community, business partners and educationalists from far and wide. Staying present in these conversations is a challenge ! The privilege of Principalship is that we are in a position of influence and we are in a position to coach others in order to lift performance and ultimately lift student achievement for the children in our care.

It is in the context of coaching that I wanted to investigate how to be a more effective leader in the myriad of people conversations and contacts we have in the course of our professional life.

Purpose

To investigate how oral communication develops effective relationships in a high performance environment in the context of the leader as a coach.

Methodology

My plan was as follows :

- To read and research the fundamentals of effective verbal communication
- To interview a communication expert on the above
- To attend a seminar on high performance leadership from an outside education perspective – Ruth Aitken (former NZ Netball coach & Gordon Tietjans (NZ Rugby sevens coach)
- To visit schools and discuss with Principals
- To identify some personal development goals
- To attend a leadership course at the School of Business at Auckland University focussing on brain research and a coaching model to improve performance of others.

Findings

My journey has taken me on a path where I have revisited the fundamentals of effective communication. Elements of this include a trusting climate, the art of listening, questioning, empathising, communicating ideas clearly, story telling, acknowledging emotion, keeping it simple, being credible just to name a few. Further to this I have reflected as to how we as leaders can make a more tangible difference in the many conversations we have with people in the course of our day and why it is when we give one message we often get different outcomes.

My journey on communication has led me to focus on how we can really bring out the best performance in others. My experience has taught me that teachers perform at their best when in the context of a supportive team culture they feel valued and as such are intrinsically motivated. i.e. To have the freedom within a school frame work as professionals to be self directed and solutions focused as opposed to just being told what to do.

David Rock states that “ improving thinking is one of the fastest ways to improving performance and as such this should be a key function in leadership. “ My findings centre on the implications for leadership of recent brain research (neuroscience) and a model of coaching for leaders (focussed on improving thinking) as developed by David Rock who works with organisations world wide as a leadership coach.

What do we know about the brain (Research update)

Scientists have discovered that the brain acts like a very complex connection machine. Our thoughts, memories, skills and attributes are vast sets of connections or maps joined together via complex chemical and physical pathways. The brain has around 100 billion neurons and each neuron may have up to 100,000 dendrites (as roots gathering information for the neuron) and one axon (like a tree trunk passing on information) The connections between the neurons connected by the dendrites are the maps that guide our thoughts, behaviours and action. The thinking process involves the following: When we process any new idea we create a map of that idea in our mind and then compare it subconsciously in a fraction of a second to our existing maps. A connection

is made, a new map is created and this becomes part of the layout of our brain that literally becomes part of who we are. Our brains like to create order out of the chaos of data coming into them, to make links between information so that our lives make more sense.

We've all had that feeling of a sudden "aha" moment when various ideas that were not linked before come together to form a new idea. It feels like we've seen something new. This is the moment of the creation of a new map and goes with a release of energy and a feeling of "breakthrough".

We see many times in our working lives how different people look at the same situation from quite different perspectives. Often when we are trying to help a colleague think anything through we make the unconscious assumption that the other person's brain works the same as ours. We then tell people what we would do and are convinced it's what they should do. Our brains and related connections have been moulded by every second, thought, feeling, idea and experience for our whole lives. We see the world through our own unique frame.

Joseph LeDoux a neuroscientist at New York University believes that the brain can hold just seven concepts in working memory at any time. The brain likes to take any action or thought that is repeated or tagged as important and to code it by pushing this map down into the sub cortex which holds long term memory. This thought effectively becomes "hardwired". The analogy here is that this process is like water flowing over the earth surface. Over time the water finds a course through the land and over time this course deepens and it becomes less and less likely that the water will flow another way – like a well worn track.

Our automatic perceptions are driven by our hard wiring and finding ways to shift these hard wired habits is often our greatest challenge as leaders who are often in the mode of change management. David Rock states that "if the world is defined by the mental frames we hold in our mind it means it's possible to tangibly improve people's performance simply by helping them shift their thinking." He goes on to say that "it's almost impossible to change any hard wiring that's been embedded in the brain. Our default mode for trying to change our habits is to try to "unwire" what is already there " Going back to the root of the problem simply reinforces this in our brain and makes an existing habit even more engrained than before. (The well worn track becomes even more well worn.) He says that the way forward is to cut a new track. i.e. to leave the old wiring behind by being purely solutions focused and creating new wiring and thus a new habit.

Thoughts are held in our working memory and habits are held as hard wired maps in the deeper parts of our brain. Science is showing that it is not difficult to bridge the gap between a thought and a habit. Hard wiring a new behaviour involves giving our new mental map enough attention over enough time to ensure that it becomes embedded in the brain. Instead of just thinking about an idea we write it down, speak about it and take action. Chemical and physical changes occur in our brain and effectively the web of links thickens and spreads out so that our new map has more depth and more density. The attention economy in our brain (a million connections per second) enables a thought to become a habit.

Thomas Czrener from “ What Makes You Tick, “ talks states that “ the brain needs to see a happy face and to hear occasional laughter to cement its neural circuitry.” Thus the power of positive feedback to ensure that a positive new habit stays a habit. David Rock states that “ We can make a tremendous difference to other peoples thinking by helping them clearly identify the insights they would like to hardwire and over time reminding them about these insights.” In summary, if we want to improve peoples performance our job is to help them find new ways to approach situations that leaves their existing wiring where it is and allows for the development and ultimately the hard wiring of new habits. i.e. Focussing on solutions instead of problems through an art of enabling other people to have their own insights.

The Six Steps to Transforming Performance (David Rock – model)

1. Think about thinking

The first step is about becoming passionate about the way people think by facilitating a clear process to let the other person think through their own issue focussing on solutions rather than telling them what to do.” How can I help you with your thinking. “ the process is designed to stretch and challenge the other person’s thinking in order to come up with a solution that in turn will become a new habit. “ The energy created and the motivation that the other person feels as a result is one that leaders should be tapped into,” says Rock. Rock states that “ the importance of this process is that it occurs in a context of acknowledgement, encouragement and positive feedback. “ This means building new mental wiring around seeing what people are doing well. i.e. Watching out for how people are challenging themselves, growing , learning and developing and feeding back in ways that will make a difference.

Rocks says there are 5 different ways we can think about , or communicate about any issue or project. He refers to a “ Choose your focus model “ which helps us identify the type of thinking we are doing at any moment and thus allows us more easily where to put due focus.

Vision – what are we trying to achieve. What is our goal.

Planning – how are we going to get there

Detail – the detail of getting the job done

Problem – being strategic about what could go wrong

Drama – a state of emotional turbulence when the vision, planning, detail and problem solving has fallen apart

2. Listen for potential

Staying totally focussed when listening in a day of many conversations can be a challenge. Often we are guilty of having other thoughts running around in our head causing our attention to waver. Rock challenges us to listen in a whole new way – Listening for potential. By this he means listening to people in a way that they have all the tools to be successful. By consciously choosing to listen in such a way to people as successful, competent and able to resolve their own dilemmas they often solve their own problems as a result. As a group we practised listening this way and we discovered that almost instantly the internal chatter became almost non-existent. We found ourselves to be more present and in the moment.

Listening for potential requires a willingness to put aside mental states that can cloud our ability to listen openly. Rock states that “when you have distance from an issue we can really see what is going on.” i.e. Being lost in the details being misled by our own mental filters, being preoccupied by our own agenda or becoming too emotionally involved will naturally cloud our judgement and set us off course and not enable us to have clarity of distance and thus be able to listen for potential.

3. Speak with Intent

We speak on average 100 words per minute but think at a rate of about 600 words per minute. High level conversation skills will transform people’s performance and David Rock describes 3 key elements of being succinct, being specific and being generous for this to happen.

Being succinct means the speaker is clearer about the core message and as a result leads to more focussed conversation. The listener then has the chance to process more bite size pieces of information thus making it easier to form maps and connections in their own mind. This leaves more time and energy to go deeper into topics or move to a new issue.

Being specific – while using as fewer words as possible we still need to be specific enough so that people understand exactly what we mean. This involves providing just enough information to illustrate the point we are making. This allows the listener to form their own mental picture of what we are saying. The brain sends a signal to the head to nod a little. This is unconscious and universal.

Being generous – in a conversation means using words to give of yourself or show empathy. It means putting yourself in their shoes in a conversation and focusing on their needs. It is a way of showing that you care about the other person and it helps build a level of trust required for doing the work of improving thinking.

4. Dance towards insight

This step is about creating an environment in which people have insights for themselves. The coaching model talks about elements of permission, placement, questioning and clarifying. The power and motivation that the model offers is in people coming to their own insights. Marc Jung – Beeman al (2004) describes 4 distinct types of insights – awareness of dilemma, reflection, Illumination and motivation. The coaching model caters and actively fosters each of these insights.

Permission – When we want people to think more deeply than usual, we need their explicit permission to get personal and thus less resistance to providing harder conversations. Asking for permission to discuss an issue (and think differently) in a busy work environment shows that we respect their mental space and in turn creates trust. Some examples of this could be as follows:

- - *Can we spend a few minutes brainstorming about this ?*
- - *Would it be OK to have a chat about that ?*

- – *Can we talk more about that ? – I'd like to understand more about your thinking on that.*

Placement – This is about being explicit about what is going to be discussed and providing a structure to the intended conversation. Placement is about anchoring a conversation. i.e. where we have been, where we are and where are we going. It's about setting the scene, the length of time needed, the goal of the conversation, what is to be covered and what is intended to be achieved.

Questioning – Asking powerful open thinking questions is the key to the coaching model. Experience has taught us that people are more likely to act on ideas they have come up with themselves. Asking a “why “ question about a problem often leads the conversation to get lost in the detail and has no meaningful outcome. Thinking questions ask about the nature of people's thinking in ways that have them become more self aware and take more responsibility. Examples of useful thinking questions include questions such as:

How long have you been thinking about this ?

How often do you think about this ?

On a scale of 1 to 10 how important is this issue to you

Where are you up to in your thinking about this ?

Do you have a plan for shifting this issue ?

How can I best help you with your thinking on this ?

Clarifying – When we clarify we feedback the essence of what is being said. i.e. What the person is trying to say. Here we are listening for patterns rather than for every detail. This enables the speaker to see his/her thinking more clearly and gives a powerful message that he/she has been listened to intently. e.g. A peer might say “ today has been tiring, my partner yelled at me and I've been late for three appointments.” A clarifying statement might say “ Sounds like today has been a real stretch for you.”

5. Create new thinking – The CREATE model

Current Reality - When we want to improve someone's thinking the best place to start (having sought permission) is the current reality. Through a process of placement, questioning and clarifying starting at the current reality allows people to reflect on their own thinking which is a fast way for insights to happen. Questions here could be: Do you want to talk about this a bit more, Let's see if I can help you think this through, How long have you been thinking about this, On a scale of 1 to 10 how important is this issue to you? This process allows for the landscape of what is being dealt with to be clearly identified. The key to the create model is if we listen to our natural curiosity and ask questions where we sense the persons energy is going.

Exploring alternatives – Once the current reality has been established it becomes obvious when to explore alternatives and to open up the person to possibilities. Exploring alternatives means asking people to think more deeply. Questions could include : What are some possible paths we could take from here ? Do you want to explore a few different ideas on how to move this forward ? How could I best help you from here ? Can you see some different angles we could look at this from ? Ideally from this part of the discussion the person after having an insight can select an option for what is going to work for them.

Tap their energy – This phase is when we get specific and set actions. The energy released by making big sets of new connections spurs people into action and all the leader has to do is gently nudge people to keep them on the right track. However this motivation lasts for only a short time. It is important therefore to capture this moment of motivation by helping the person who is being coached to be more specific, to set a deadline, to report back and to do something tangible. Applying any type of physical activity to an insight strengthens the circuits holding the insight in place. Questions here could include : Do you want to think though how to make this happen ? How can I best help you think through how to make this work ? What specifically would you do in this situation ? When do you think you might do this by ? How can I best support you to turn this insight into a habit ?

6. Follow up

Following up is a key part of this process firstly to ensure that the coachee has acted on his/her intentions. The most important reason though for follow up after creating new thinking is to support the creation of new long term habits that will improve people performance. The action people set come out of the insights they have and these insights were generated in a moment of illumination. At this moment new connections between our neurons were formed in our brain and a new map came into existence. These new maps are fragile and are one of many millions of maps formed every day and have the potential to become part of our hard wiring. To make a new map become a part of our every day lives we need to give it some attention. Our job as leaders is to give people's new maps attention and positive feedback on whatever has happened since their initial insight.

Rock says that giving attention to the new hard wiring in the follow up phase includes the following:

Facts – to collect and discuss the facts of what was done , what can be observed

Emotions – how did they feel about what they achieved ?

Encouragement – Given that people have been stretched and challenged encouragement will help make the experience a positive one

Learning – By asking what has been learned as part of this new thinking helps to reinforce and deepen the new thinking and the new habit

Implications – By asking about the implications about a new learning further embeds the new circuits that have been made

New Goal – Often out of this follow up phase a new goal or next learning step emerges and so the next goal to focus on can be identified and worked on as per the CREATE model.

Implications

The coaching is a very powerful tool that can be used to affect change. There are times in leadership when situations call for direct instruction and advice. However it is often the questions we ask that give rise to new thinking and insights. This model recognizes the vast experience and skills that our fellow professionals bring. It is an effective way of saying that I value you as a professional in this school and that the solution to a particular dilemma resides in the other persons thinking. Our role as leaders is to facilitate a conversation that focuses on extending the thinking of the other person.

For me this work has set me on a new journey to spend time practising these skills with the people that I work with. I can see the power of this approach with the process of growing other leaders at school in particular the leadership team and also those aspiring to be leaders. I can also see the potential application to senior children in conflict resolution. I am keen to develop an adapted model that children could use.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal would be for the coaching model to become part of the whole school culture as a natural extension to the school thinking skills programme. The power of this approach is unlimited. The new curriculum talks about self directed learners in the way children embrace learning. It is no different for the staff in the way they go about their work. – self directed, solution focussed based on continually developing their own thinking and the thinking of others – building on peoples strengths by improving their thinking.

As leaders are our leadership practices keeping up with the realities of organisational life? Rock says that “ there is an increasing gap between the way employees are being managed at work and the way they want to be managed.” This is due to the changing nature of work, the increasing education of the employees, the needs of later generations and the pace of change. “

Rock states “ as regards leaders who are managing people and who are paid to think that it’s time we learned more about the thing we are paying for, not peoples shoulders or hands, but their minds and brains. Its time we better harness the power of the most complex and adaptive bit of technology in the universe.” By learning to lead with the brain in mind Theodore Zeldin states that “ our humanity will start to catch up with our humanity. “

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