

A Solutions-Focused Coaching Approach to Strengthening Autonomous Teacher Inquiry.

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Introduction

In my role as school leader I deliberately utilise coaching type conversations to further my mission of building leadership and professional capability in others, encouraging innovative thinking and modelling high-trust leadership.

There is potential for a dilemma in the mind of such a leader: a directive model of leadership might be seen as strong leadership by people within and outside of the organisation (Starr, 2012)¹ whereas a leader who operates from a coaching style of leadership operates 'from a different set of.....beliefs.....placing value on people's ability to think and act for themselves' (p.24). I am already an accredited coach with GROWTH Coaching International². My one-term sabbatical was spent attending a solutions-focused masterclass, then using my extended knowledge of a solutions-focused approach to inquire as to whether my approach is beginning to have the intended outcomes across the school, and considering ways in which to improve and further my vision of school-wide teacher-peer solutions-focused coaching.

¹ Starr, J. (2012). Brilliant coaching: How to be a brilliant coach in your workplace (2nd ed.). Pearson: Edinburgh Gate.

² Accessed on 9/1/18 at <http://www.growthcoaching.com.au>

Purpose

The purpose of this/my inquiry is to establish the potential of solutions focused coaching to deepen collaborative teacher inquiry, investigate the potential for a culture of autonomous collaborative inquiry³, and create a series of 'next steps' for the leadership of this project.

Methodology

In order to maintain a solutions-focus to my inquiry into coaching at Oranga School I have decided to utilise the solutions focused coaching framework developed by Jackson and McKergow (2014)⁴:

- Platform
- Future perfect
- Scale
- Counters
- Small actions

Each of these steps will be defined.

My inquiry included interviewing Oranga School leadership staff, reading current publications related to coaching for school leadership as well as teacher practice, accessing case studies through blogs and podcasts, and reflecting on intensive training in, and practice of, solutions-focused coaching methods.

Platform

(What do you want?)

If progress could be made on this, what difference would it make to others? To me?

What would be the pay off of working this out in some way?)

³ Donohoo, J., & Velasco, M. (2016). *The transformative power of collaborative inquiry: Realizing change in schools and classrooms*. Corwin: Thousand Oaks.

⁴ Jackson, P. & McKergow, M. (2014). *The solutions focus: Making coaching & change SIMPLE*. Nicholas Brealey International: London.

I seek to further a culture of inquiry focused on solutions rather than problems (Jackson and McKergow)⁵ where teachers actively seek out reciprocal coaching partnerships (Robinson)⁶ that deepen their understanding of the relationship between their theories and their actions (Timperley et al, 2007⁷; Donohoo, 2016)⁸, assist with the refining of goals linked to students' needs (Donohoo, 2016)⁸, set up actions that make a difference, provide and give feedback on their progress towards their goals, and are ultimately challenged and motivated to be the best that they can be within the community of adult learners at Oranga School.

Progressing a collaborative culture of inquiry where teachers' voices and learning processes are seen, heard, and valued, and inquiries are seen not as problem solving exercises but as focusing on solutions and possibilities, has the added benefit of building professional trust within teams, and across the organisation. Development of an autonomous model would include the notion of 'building human capital through building social capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan (2012)⁹. A coaching approach is an integral part of building that culture. Ultimately teachers will then approach their performance management conversations knowing that there will be possibilities and actions discussed that neither of us have yet thought of.

⁵ Jackson, P. & McKergow, M. (2014). *The solutions focus: Making coaching & change SIMPLE*. Nicholas Brealey International: London

⁶ Robertson, J. (2016). *Coaching leadership: Building educational leadership through partnership* (2nd ed.). NZCER Press: Wellington.

⁷ Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., Fung, I. (2007) *Teacher professional learning and development: Best evidence iteration*. Ministry of Education: Wellington

⁸ Donohoo, J., & Velasco, M. (2016). *The transformative power of collaborative inquiry: Realizing change in schools and classrooms*. Corwin: Thousand Oaks.

⁹ Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Hawker Brownlow Education: Moorabbin.

Lofthouse (2016)¹⁰ has observed that 'educational leadership has become very managerial process – one through which a priority is holding colleagues to account. The language of exploration and development which might be developed through coaching and mentoring does not always translate easily to accountability regimes.' (p.19) Her research found that when coaching programmes are set up by Senior Leadership teams those leaders have to 'work hard to overcome their own tendencies to over-manage it in the direction of the latest school agenda.' (p.20)

Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007)¹¹ discuss the terms "co- and self-regulatory" when synthesising research on ways in which teachers professional learning and development has led to sustainable impacts on student outcomes. A learning cycle is developed where 'teachers collectively and individually identify important issues, become the drivers for acquiring the knowledge they need to solve them, monitor the impact of their actions, and adjust their practice accordingly.' (p.xlii)

Autonomous collective inquiry is defined by Donohoo and Velasco (2016)¹² as teachers having choice and voice. Once the team has identified 'the most urgent learning needs of their students' (p.81), teachers have autonomy to determine how they will learn and what they need to learn, and their perspectives are valued once the team. One of the benefits of this approach is seen to be the enrichment of relationships.

O'Sullivan¹³, discussing the idea that Instructional Leadership one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of teaching and thereby student outcomes,

¹⁰ Lofthouse, R. (2016) *Teacher coaching: A series of think-pieces about professional development and leadership through teacher coaching*. Research Centre for Teaching and Learning: Newcastle University.

¹¹ Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., Fung, I. (2007) *Teacher professional learning and development: Best evidence iteration*. Ministry of Education: Wellington.

¹² Donohoo, J., & Velasco, M. (2016). *The transformative power of collaborative inquiry: Realizing change in schools and classrooms*. Corwin: Thousand Oaks.

¹³ O'Sullivan, G. *Instructional leadership and a coaching approach*.

www.growthcoaching.com.au//articles-new/instructional-leadership-and-a-coaching-approach.

Accessed 29/8/17.

challenges the practicality that the school leader be considered the only instructional expert in a school, and the only one who should give feedback. He agrees with Hattie (2012)¹⁴, when he suggests that teachers work collaboratively, supporting each other with a coaching approach, for very high effect.

I interviewed five of the leaders at Oranga School, all of whom have engaged in aspects of training for coaching in education. Several have completed a two-day Coaching for Leadership course, and all have completed a two-day peer coaching course. Both training courses were run by Growth Coaching International (GCI). I asked the following questions related to what they want, and what might be different if progress could be made on this:

1. If you had the opportunity to coach people around you at Oranga School more often, what would be different?
2. Of the coaching skills you have read about, learnt and practised, which would make the biggest difference to your team if you got better at it? What would improve?

Their responses to the first question detailed hopes for improved relationships resulting in greater openness in team talk, teachers taking greater responsibility for finding their own solutions to issues, and a desire for greater competence as coaches.

‘I’d know their hopes and aspirations better; there’d be more conversations, documentation and evidence, detailed plans, and a scheduled time.’

‘Teachers would be problem solvers, coming up with their own solutions – I would be doing less problem solving. The responsibility would be back on the teachers.’

¹⁴ Hattie, J. (2012) *Visible learning for teachers: Maximising impact on learning*. Routledge.

'I would be unconsciously competent, coordinating this in informal conversations as well as formal. It would be a 'way of being'.'

'There would be more open conversations in the team without fear of being judged. Professional and personal relationships would be built through coaching type informal and formal conversations.'

'People would be more excited about being coached.'

Responses to the second questions were varied, but more people thought improved questioning skills would lead to deeper thinking and consequently, deeper questioning. 'We would get beyond the surface, and would challenge.' Coupled with this was a desire to improve their listening skills, and to increase the time they spent modelling listening skills in their team meetings. 'I am trying to model this to grow the culture within the team so that people feel their ideas are valued and can get things 'off their chests' without interruption. Teachers would also be more likely to reach their own conclusions if I, and others, listened more effectively.' Again, this was seen as 'a way of being'.

One person talked about the need for other leaders in the school to learn coaching strategies - mentor teachers, associate teachers, Inquiry team leaders – and that this would be a way to grow the knowledge and practice throughout the school. Others also thought that if their team members understood the coaching process, 'then all the team might use the coaching model in everyday situations.'

Another leader wanted to become more competent at coaching the coachee to think of Options ¹⁵, clarifying what is possible, including what might have been thought impossible. 'The coachee would sense the possibilities.'

Future Perfect: (*What would I like to be different when Oranga School achieves this 'way of being'? What will we see, hear, experience?)*

- Coaching development groups will be meeting regularly to take part in coaching training. This will be offered at two levels: level 1 will look at the GROWTH coaching model with a one-day training session provided by outside experts, assisted by the Principal. Level 2 will take more experienced coaches deeper into a solutions focus approach, a coaching 'way of being', development of a coaching 'tool kit' that can be used in varying scenarios (e.g. 'Have you got a minute?'), and provide coaching for the coaches.
- Peer coaching partners throughout the school. – these may initially come from the development group, but others will be encouraged to experience this. Resourcing will provide for two coaching sessions per term. Costs could be cut and greater flexibility achieved through having the Senior Leadership Team release the peer coaching pairs.
- A growth mindset will be evident in teachers' portfolio reflections. 'This *growth mindset(sic)* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.....

¹⁵ The leadership coaching guide: Growing you and your organisation. (2009) Growth Coaching International

The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.'¹⁶

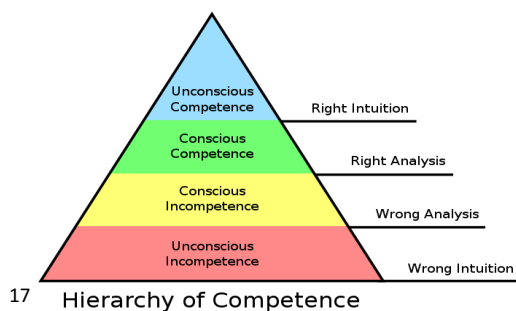
- A clear structure will be evident with children's urgent learning needs first identified in teams or school-wide, then autonomous observation, coaching and reflection in pairs to set and achieve teachers' individual goals to improve practice to meet those student learning needs.
- Organisational support and links: In order for teachers' professional learning and development to be augmented by peer coaching, and then be relevant to their reflective practice, performance appraisal, and ultimately their performance management feedback and feedforward from the Principal, the school's organisational structure and resourcing will need to be aligned to the goal. Some professional development budget will need to be used for the purpose of releasing teachers for coaching training, and for peer coaching. Funding could be sought from the MoE's Innovation fund.
- Modelling the practice – talk the walk, and walk the talk: the Senior Leadership Team will model a solutions focused approach, and will coach each other and/or seek coaching from personnel outside the school. Teachers will know that the SLT are being coached at a deep level.

¹⁶ Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House: New York.

Counters (examples of the solution happening already; evidence of parts of the solution happening; skills and resources that will help to create/build the solution; cooperation from others involved.)

When interviewing the school's leadership team, there were three questions I asked that were designed to elicit responses that provided evidence of parts of the solution happening already, including skills and resources. They were:

- On a scale of 1 – 10, where 10 is coaching in an unconsciously competent way, and 1 is 'unconsciously incompetent', where are you now in terms of your future-perfect ideal? What would be happening if you were.... (the next number on the scale)?



- What has worked for you in the past when you have used a coaching model? What's the best you ever did at this?
- What's one thing that might help you bring coaching into your everyday style at Oranga?

¹⁷ Competence Hierarchy adapted from Noel Burch by Igor Kokcharov.svg, Created: 24 June 2017. Accessed from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence#/media/File:Competence_Hierarchy_adapted_from_Noel_Burch_by_Igor_Kokcharov.svg, 11/09/2017.

Most placed themselves at a five or six on the scale. One opted for '1' because they had only recently completed training. What did they think would take them to the next level? Being given, and recognising, more opportunities – 'I need to start using it in team meetings, not just for appraisal,' and having and making more time - 'People may not come to me because they think I don't have enough time.' There was also reference to the need to prepare for coaching conversations, and 'to use prompts more'.

When thinking about what has worked well in the past, and what was the best they had ever done at coaching, these successes were recalled:

- Listening effectively, and at times drawing on mindfulness training to do that. Having set times so that there is an expectation.
- Using coaching-type questions to break down the large goals that team members initially set. e.g. what would be happening in your class if you were achieving that goal?
- Being mentally prepared – having evidence to add to the person's 'reality' (this is in an expert/novice situation.)
- refamiliarising with the coaching questions when preparing for a coaching conversation.
- Being on an equal footing with the coachee.
- Using the 'options' phase well - lots of listening time, and asking 'what else?'

The last phase of the interview focused on some 'small actions'. '*Find what works and do more of it.....stop doing what isn't working and do something different*' (Jackson & McKergow, 2014, pp 103 &104)¹⁸. While these can be seen as 'next steps' that will lead, incrementally, to the 'future perfect' outlined previously, they are not small, and

¹⁸ Jackson, P. & McKergow, M. (2014). *The solutions focus: Making coaching & change SIMPLE*. Nicholas Brealey International: London

would therefore need to be further broken down into smaller actions. They can be seen as the 'steps to change' in a 'theory of change' (Lofthouse, 2016, p.15).¹⁹

Systems and organisation were seen to be important to supporting a solutions focused 'way of being' throughout the school, and there was some consideration given to how more staff could learn to understand and use solutions focused coaching as part of their practice.

- Timetabling – non-negotiable times, because they are deemed to be important
- resourcing to support the time needed for coaching in a variety of situations
- developing this across the school so that people see the value of the process and all can use it
- using it more - familiarising with the approach, the questions, and trialling it in different situations not just for appraisal
- Having a third person in each conversation so that the skills are modelled and developed.
- developing relationships and trust with the team members at the start of the year

Small Actions (*Do more of what works; the first small signs that we are on our way.*)

Finally, what first small steps will I take to build on what is already working, and progress the vision?

1. A Professional Practice meeting (staff meeting) will focus on coaching: the rationale, and the GROWTH framework of coaching.

¹⁹ Lofthouse, R. (2016) *Teacher coaching: A series of think-pieces about professional development and leadership through teacher coaching*. Research Centre for Teaching and Learning: Newcastle University.

2. All teachers will then be offered a peer coaching option. Two PD sessions will be provided to those pairs of teachers in term two. One will focus on the GROWTH coaching framework, and one on a solution's focus.
3. Peer coaching will start in term three.
4. The senior leadership team will plan ahead to timetable release for those teachers who are early adopters to observe and coach each other. Initially this might just be once a term for those teachers.

'When you coach you are adding value in a different way.....you've decided the benefits of developing people's thought processes for themselves is more valuable to you than a 'fast fix'. That's what we mean by 'teaching a hungry man to fish'.'
(Starr, 2012, p182.)²⁰

²⁰ Starr, J. (2012). Brilliant coaching: How to be a brilliant coach in your workplace (2nd ed.). Pearson: Edinburgh Gate.