

Coaching for Leadership, by Karla Reiss, Consultant, Professional Coach and Founder, The Change Place

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EXECUTIVE COACHING PROVIDES CONFIDENTIAL, ONGOING SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS, HELPING THEM REACH THEIR GOALS AND MAKE THE CHANGES THEY DESIRE.

COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP

He was stunned. And angry. Two years ago, he moved from a small district to one of the largest in the county. He had years of experience and positive relationships with colleagues. In his new district, Jim, director of language arts, felt welcome - in most buildings. In one, the principal seemed to keep him at a distance. Two years later, he was out of a job. He hadn't a clue why he was let go.

For months, Elaine, director of curriculum in a small suburban district, vented about unfair treatment by a new boss. Her first two years had gone well, and she received positive feedback from her boss. Along came a new boss. Suddenly things weren't going so well. Half way through the school year, Elaine was informed she wouldn't be receiving tenure. She felt unfairly treated. Five months of stagnation followed while she struggled to survive until June in a hostile environment.

It happens all the time. It's more common than we care to admit. No one talks about it. But let's face the truth. With higher demands, shrinking budgets and fewer people entering leadership roles, we must provide improved support to ensure the success of current and new leaders.

Inertia occurs whenever a leader leaves a district, whatever the reason. Often, several leaders leave during the same year. The cost, both financial and in lost human energy, is great. We can prevent administrator turnover by confronting the causes and offering support for solutions. Executive coaching provides confidential, ongoing support for leaders, ensuring that they perform at their peak and bring out the best in their staff

After almost 20 years of developing professional development programs for educators in a regional education service center in New York, I realized something was missing - support for leadership. No matter what time of day, it was impossible to bring leaders together for continued learning. I felt I was operating in a broken system. The system needed a change - but how? How could busy school leaders who could barely find time to leave their buildings become engaged in ongoing professional learning? I knew there had to be a better way. Leadership Coaching for School Change was developed to fit the needs of busy school leaders and complete the school improvement system.

Rationale for leadership coaching

We talk about continuous improvement for schools - and provide cartloads of professional development opportunities for teachers - so our students, and their test scores, improve. Budgets exist for teachers to learn new instructional strategies, but not often for school leaders.

Although little research exists on executive coaching as a model of professional development in education, the business world offers encouraging information. In a 2001 study of 100 executives, mostly from Fortune 1000 companies, Manchester Inc. found that the average return on investment was almost six times the cost of coaching.

Participants report rich learning environments and improvements in decision making, team performance and motivation, and highly recommended coaching. Companies were more likely to retain executives who were coached.

Executive coaching is a common leadership development practice among business leaders. Given the pressure and challenges facing today's school leaders, I believe all school systems would be stronger organizations, and reach higher levels of performance, if leaders had the benefits of coaching.

An ongoing partnership

Working with a coach is much like developing your school improvement plan. You explore your values and create a vision for yourself, your career, and all aspects of your life. You set goals and commit to weekly action steps.

The International Coach Federation defines coaching as "an ongoing partnership that helps clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives.

Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance and enhance the quality of life." A highly trained coach is skilled in the process of change - helping people make the changes they want for themselves and their organizations. A coach helps you look at challenges and create new patterns of thinking. A coach is trained to "hear" between the lines - to listen for fears, self-doubts and limiting beliefs that get in the way of success. A coach will brainstorm possible approaches to your weekly challenges, challenge you to step out of your comfort zone and hold you accountable.

A coach is adept at dozens of specific skills, such as acknowledging, validating, clarifying, focusing, championing, empowering, questioning, prioritizing, thinking outside the box and reframing.

A GOOD COACH. . .

1. Challenges and supports people in achieving high levels of performance.
2. Is trained in specific skills to help a client overcome obstacles and challenges.
3. Does not need to have expertise in the client's field.
4. Helps clients achieve specific goals or improve their life/career.
5. Has expertise in the process of change.
6. Holds clients accountable for their goals and actions.
7. Has a confidential relationship with each client.
8. Produces increased performance, change or results for an individual and his or her organization.

The model defined

The Long Island School Leadership Center, funded by New York State Education Department, co-sponsored an initial project for Leadership Coaching for School Change by inviting interested educators to participate in a four-month pilot.

All participants met for an initial session. Follow-up sessions were conducted on the telephone. Alternating between individual calls of 30 to 45 minutes and group calls of one hour, each participant engaged in weekly coaching sessions. Each participant had his or her own goals - no two were alike. Feedback was enthusiastic.

Since the initial pilot in 2002, Leadership Coaching for School Change has expanded, and integrated the use of leadership assessment as a baseline for developing strong leaders in our schools. We've learned that individual and small-group coaching truly has the capacity to transform how we think and what we can accomplish.

How coaching helps schools improve

People come to coaching, and can be helped by the process, for a variety of reasons. Usually they are open-minded professionals who wish to improve their personal and professional lives. Here are some examples of how educators have benefited from the coaching process.

Coaching for skills

Gina was a first-time principal, and felt confident about her relationships with staff, parents and students. But she was concerned about the speech she was going to make for graduation day. Gina had never made a speech before, and wanted to come across as confident and leave her students with a meaningful message. Over the course of several weeks, we coached specifically about the upcoming speech. Her action steps included exploring the Internet for well-written speeches, attending a Toastmaster meeting and observing skilled speakers, then joining Toastmasters and writing (several) drafts of her

speech. Within a few weeks, Gina wrote and delivered, with confidence, her first graduation speech.

Coaching for development

Karen was a guidance director for a large district. When we began coaching, she had set goals to obtain a position as assistant superintendent for instruction by the next school year, complete her doctorate and lose 25 pounds.

First, she created a clear sense of her values, her vision of what she wanted to accomplish in a new and needy district, and a personal mission statement. As we discussed her ideas and plans for the future, she realized she needed more information about the role of assistant superintendent. She stepped out of her comfort zone and called a stranger already in that role. By the next week, she had an in-person, two-hour meeting with him, gaining an ally and mentor as well as valuable information. Further actions included several communications with the superintendent in the aspired district.

Because she was crystal clear about her vision of education and could articulate it, she was hired in the district of her choice.

She completed her doctorate, hired a personal trainer and continues to work on her physical health goal. The energy she derives from success propels her in her work.

Coaching for performance

Mary was applying for her first principalship. She'd been in a leadership role for years as a teacher leader helping teachers incorporate technology into their classrooms. She felt ready to take on an elementary building. To get a glimpse of her leadership skills, Mary took an assessment that identifies 18 leadership characteristics - strengths and areas for development.

As we reviewed Mary's report, it was clear she had several strengths that would serve her as a building leader. However, the report also demonstrated she needed growth in the areas of self confidence and comfort with visibility. The assessment also uncovered her preference for the "tried and true" vs. creative approaches to problems. Mary admitted she needed work here in order to be highly effective as a principal.

Her goals for our coaching work are to increase her confidence. Action steps include clearly stating her opinion at each upcoming meeting, including more "I" statements when conversing with colleagues ("I feel, I think"). When Mary begins a principal role, she will do so with a greater chance of success.

Life coaching

Coaches, when working with a client, work with the whole person, not just their professional lives. Because coaching is a confidential partnership, clients can share everything about their lives. When one area of your life is draining your energy, a coach helps you manage or improve that area.

Kate, a leader of a professional development center, was dealing with a rebellious daughter. Her professional goals to expand and strengthen her center were impeded by feelings of ineptness in dealing with her daughter's problems. By developing strategies to more effectively communicate with her daughter, she freed some energy, and developed skills and confidence to more effectively communicate with her superintendent.

Typical coaching session

Coaching begins with a "get to know you" session. The coach learns about you, your goals, challenges and the people in your life. Follow-up sessions, always confidential, debrief the week's events, set actions and predict obstacles that could impede you from completing an action. Often the conversation addresses inner thoughts and beliefs. A skilled coach, using effective questioning techniques, can help you to reframe your thoughts to expand your thinking. When you can view a situation as an opportunity instead of a problem, a whole new world of possibilities opens up.

Coaching sessions are arranged to meet the client's needs. They focus on the client's goals, and are held at the client's convenience. They are usually weekly, for 30 to 60 minutes, in person or on the telephone. Having a coach to whom you are accountable for accomplishing the actions you promised is key to reaching goals and (finally) making the changes you wish.

It's possible to engage in coaching with no out-of-district time at all. Participants are surprised how effective telephone coaching is. In a 30-minute session, a skilled coach can zoom directly into the important issues. Clients leave each session with actions for the following week.

"I can do anything now"

Leadership Coaching for School Change is a flexible model of executive coaching that is designed around the principles of effective professional development. By incorporating assessments of leadership skills, participants have a set of goals and actions targeting their needs and areas of growth. The positive changes that people have made have demonstrated leadership coaching as needed and effective.

"I feel I can do anything now" is a common comment. If all leaders, staff and students showed up to work each day with that attitude, I am certain we would achieve the goals we have for our school systems across the country. .

The International Coach Federation certifies training institutes to offer coach training. A coach certified by the ICF has graduated from a professional, certified program. For more information, see www.icf.org.

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