

Coaching as a Capacity Building Strategy for School Leaders

By: Denese Belchetz, Ed.D

Abstract

Increasingly, school leaders are appointed to positions of school leadership with fewer years of experience in the classroom. To support these newly appointed leaders and build their capacity to lead in these changing times, coaching is one strategy being implemented for all school leaders in the York Regions District School Board. Coaching is a non-evaluative process that supports reflective and reciprocal dialogue about the individual's practice as a leader. A coach uses skilled questioning and interactive strategies to encourage and support dialogue about the issues under discussion. In this approach, the structured interchange becomes the springboard to providing new insights and awareness.

Background

In its efforts to maximize the impact of principal and vice-principal leadership on the teaching and learning culture in schools, the York Region District School Board has expanded its focused leadership strategy to provide all newly appointed vice-principals and principals with coaching support. While the information about the success of this initiative is preliminary and still anecdotal at this time, this paper documents the promise of the coaching work carried out to date with a view to having this information provide the foundation for further reflection and data analysis.

The York Region District School Board has refined its literacy strategy to better bring coherence and alignment between and among the many components involved in the process. Key to the strategy is the need for school administrators to understand and reflect upon the impact that their leadership is having on their school. In so doing, they must build and sustain the school's vision for improved student achievement and success, build relationships effectively, serve as instructional leader in their school and further develop the school as part of the overall organization. These competencies are clearly defined in the board's '*Leadership Competencies for School Administrators*' document. What this means is that to be an effective leader, not only must administrators be able to manage the day to day demands of running their school and its community, they must be clear about the strategic vision they will develop and sustain in their school; they must be knowledgeable about the teaching and learning process itself and the manner in which teaching practice impacts on the learning of every student in their school; they must be focused on building a culture of teaching and learning in the school and build supportive and collaborative relationships with all key partners in the process. Finally, they must nurture the leadership of others in their schools while encouraging and empowering those who aspire to experience leadership opportunities in the school.

The Changing Leadership Role in our Schools

It is clear that this role is not an easy one. It is especially demanding for those newly appointed administrators who do not have the luxury of time to hone their craft as a leader. This is certainly different from what was previously the norm. 'It is increasingly evident that leadership practices in our schools are under escalating pressure to adapt to the complexities and heightened accountability demands of the emerging change process while responding to increased expectations for improved student achievement and success, high stakes testing, target setting, greater parental involvement, evolving technology developments, teacher efficacy, safe schools, community partnerships and an onslaught of new legislation governing the process' (Belchetz, 2004). Those who are successful in this process will help identify and implement forms of teaching and learning that are appropriate and effective for the population they serve. These leaders 'promote teaching that is culturally responsive by demonstrating the teaching themselves in their interactions with parents, teachers and students. They also make the appropriate changes that promote equity and excellence for all students'. (Leithwood and Steinbach, 2002)

Coaching Support as a Strategy to Support Leaders

It has been our experience that our principals are working hard to rise to this challenge and there is no question that many are making a positive impact on the achievement of their school's students. It is a high priority for our school district that principals recognize that they are not alone in their leadership journey and they are encouraged to avail themselves of the many supports and learning opportunities that have been introduced through the work of our district's leadership development strategy. Additionally, there are new and innovative ways that we can further support our school's hard working leaders. It is exactly this point that coaching serves to address. "To become a principal, one must think like a principal. It is not just what principals do that makes them exceptional, it is the knowledge, perceptions, cognition and decisions that inform what they do' (Ellison and Hayes, 2006). Joyce and Showers (2002) have shown that these skills can be developed in a coaching relationship. In their research involving teachers, these authors found that those who are coached retained and increased their skill over time while those who were not coached, did not.

The process we have used in our school district has evolved over the past two years spurred on by a need to bring increasingly less experienced appointees into the school leadership role. We began the coaching process by retaining retired administrators who were interested in providing this support. Initially a brief two hour training session for these administrators was provided to orient them to a manual that had been produced by our district's Leadership Development Team. The manual *Coaching Support for School Administrators* outlines the fundamental points that these retired administrators needed to be aware of. They came to understand that coaching was NOT about evaluation, collaboration or consultation. In fact, as Goddard, Hey and Hey (2000) point out 'these roles must be set aside in a coaching relationship'. Coaching is about the individual being coached. In the process, coaches do not share experiences or expertise or personal stories. The coaching process is about developing skills in the other person. The coach must 'facilitate the thinking of the person they are coaching. Coaching helps people get to the heart of what they do in their work'. (Goddard, Hey and Hey, 2000)

More recently, we have expanded our strategy in our district in order to focus on the strategies and approaches involved in the cognitive coaching approaches as originally conceptualized by Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston in the 1980's. As conceived by these authors, cognitive coaching is designed to enhance cognitive processes. It is an approach that 'enables people to modify their capacity to modify themselves'. Cognitive Coaching™ 'does not change overt behaviors. Instead it attends to the internal thought processes as a way to improve learning' (Costa and Garmston, 2007). The process is based on four key assumptions:

1. Thought and perception produce all behaviour
2. Teaching is constant decision making
3. To learn something new requires engagement and alteration in thought
4. Humans continue to grow cognitively

Three conversations lend themselves particularly well to a coaching conversation – Planning, reflecting and problem solving. Costa and Garmston point out that the intention of cognitive coaching is to deliberately slow down the conversation to give the person time to think and reflect on their practice. In planning, the coaching goal is to support clarity; in reflecting the

coaching goal is to construct meaning; in problem solving, the coaching goal is to help the person access his or her internal resources.

The Coach must be mindful of five important tools that are part of the process. First, rapport must be established. This is key as the relationship must be a trusting one that is open and invitational. Second, the coach must listen empathically which, involves ‘taking the time to really understand a problem’ (Covey, 2008); third, paraphrasing skills must capture what is being said in a way that coaches the thinking and not the content and encourages the thinking to go to the next level; fourth, the coach must pause periodically to allow for time to process and reflect and fifth, invitational questioning allows for probing to focus thinking or for further inquiry to broaden thinking.

Conclusion

At this early stage of implementation in our district, all newly appointed school principals receive coaching support. Feedback to date has been extremely encouraging although not without its challenges. Where the support is regularly scheduled and given high priority over the many demands of the day-to-day role, anecdotal reports indicate that the support is seen to make a difference. Where the time is cancelled in favour of apparently ‘more pressing’ needs, the newly appointed principal feels increasingly alienated and overwhelmed by the demands of the role and often become discouraged requiring more intensive intervention.

A further challenge has been in ensuring that the retired administrator coaches took their responsibilities seriously. Where they were diligent about building the relationship (as most were), the process proved to be highly effective. However, there were a few situations where, for many reasons, the relationship did not thrive and therefore, coaching was not successful. This was an important part of our learning. Currently, the district is engaged in building a cadre of coaches from within the organization. External coaches generally do not have the same vested interest as those currently in the role. In addition, there is a growing interest from among practicing administrators to take on this coaching role. From a system perspective, this is seen to be a more sustainable and viable approach to building capacity for the long term. While coaching support has previously been offered to first year principal appointees only, it is now

being expanded to enable all principals to receive coaching support during their first two years in the role.

This past year, a need was identified to have newly appointed vice-principals also receive coaching. The feedback from this group in particular has indicated this support to be 'invaluable'. Not only has it made an impact on developing the leadership skills of these very young leaders, often with limited years in the classroom, it has also had an interesting additional and unexpected impact in that it has served to build the mentoring relationship with the principal.

This year is our first year of data collection regarding the impact of this initiative. We anticipate that, once the data is available for this cohort of newly appointed administrators, this paper will be expanded to include this data and the resulting implications for further work in this regard

References

Belchetz, D. (2004) *Successful leadership practices in an accountable policy context: Influence on student achievement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.

Costa, A.L. and Garmston, R. J. (revised by Ellison and Hayes 2007) *Cognitive Coaching Foundation Seminar Learning Guide*. Seventh Edition. Centre for Cognitive Coaching. Highlands Ranch. Co

Ellison, J. and Hayes, C. (2006). *Effective school leadership: Developing principals through cognitive coaching*. Christopher – Gordon Publishers Inc. Norwood, MA

Joyce, B. and Showers, B (2002) *Student achievement through staff development*. National College for School Leadership.

Leithwood, K. and Steinbach, R. (2002) *Successful leadership for especially challenging schools*. In B. Davies and J. West-Burnham (Eds.) *Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management*. London. Pearson Publishers.

York Region District School Board Documents:

1. Leadership Competencies for Administrators
2. Leadership Development Framework

3. Coaching Support for School Administrators Manual