

# e-Leading

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

## Coaching in education: an introduction

Coaching conversations are intentionally *managed* conversations that employ active listening, skillful questioning and other coaching skills tempered with high levels of emotional intelligence, in order to raise awareness and encourage responsibility in the coachee



The concept of coaching in education has been gaining momentum for some years now and has reached a point where most school leaders, if not teachers, will have at least heard the term used in an educational context.

So what's this coaching thing about? Is it just like mentoring? Is it like sports coaching? Is it just another passing fad or 'jargonisation' of what we already know and do? Will it eventually drift away into the ether of educational interventions past? Let's consider some of these questions.

### What is coaching?

Coaching is a *partnership* to support individuals in meeting their goals. Coaching conversations are intentionally *managed* conversations that employ active listening, skillful questioning and other coaching skills tempered with high levels of emotional intelligence, in order to raise awareness and encourage *responsibility* in the coachee. The process involves clarifying goals, examining reality, exploring options, agreeing on actions and implementing and reviewing them. For educators, coaching can be a highly personalised form of professional learning that enhances learning within classrooms, teams, leadership, and even towards career progression.

### Is it just like sports coaching?

Coaching in education can be similar, in *some*

Directive	Non Directive
<b>Mentoring</b>	<b>Coaching</b>
Informing	Discovery
Instructing	Listening to understand
Giving advice	Ask questions
Tell	Clarify
Provide guidance	Empathise
Inform	
Share opinions	

Ref: van Nieuwerburgh 2014, *An Introduction to Coaching Skills – A Practical Guide*.

situations, to *some* forms of sports coaching but this is generally not a very helpful comparison to make. If we are envisaging the kind of coaching typically given to school or junior league sports teams – directing strategy and attempting to influence play from the sidelines by giving instructions – then we are most likely not talking about the same kind of coaching. The closest parallel in sport could be individual coaching aimed at improving particular aspects of performance in a sport such as tennis. This kind of coaching addresses what Harvard scholar and tennis expert Timothy Gallwey called 'the inner game' and inspired one of the most frequently cited definitions of coaching by Whitmore (2009, p.10):

*“Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them learn rather than teaching them.”*

### What's the difference between coaching and mentoring?

The terms coaching and mentoring are often conjoined and their meaning conflated. A useful way to distinguish between these two forms of 'helping intervention' is to place them on a conversational continuum (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p.16) as shown in the table above.

The key difference between coaching and mentoring is one of intent – what is expected, invited or solicited when entering into each of

e-Leading August 2016 (27) – researched and prepared for ACEL by Chris Munro, Dean of Professional Practice at St Kevin's College, Toorak, Melbourne and Consultant Coach with Growth Coaching International (GCI) Personal Blog: <https://chrisreflects.wordpress.com/> Twitter @CMunroOz LinkedIn: <https://au.linkedin.com/in/chris-munro-b13a6792> E-mail: [cmunro@growthcoaching.com.au](mailto:cmunro@growthcoaching.com.au)

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The experience of being coached could be described as professional ‘me time’

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these collaborative engagements. Mentoring tends to be a relationship between an expert and a novice, or at least a less experienced individual. Whilst a coach may occasionally move to a mentoring role, the majority of time is devoted to collaborative problem solving stimulated by effective questioning.

## What’s in it for teachers and leaders?

The experience of being coached could be described as professional ‘me time’. It is an opportunity to have focused, non-judgmental conversations aimed at identifying goals and working out ways forward in order to inspire enhanced levels of practice. As a result, professional learning activity can become much more personalised, discerning, collaborative and purposeful, and ultimately has a more sustained impact on practice. The best coaching conversations are empowering, respectful and professionalising – they increase teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and, over time, begin to positively influence the nature of conversations across the school.

## Why do I/we need to improve?

We could argue that a core component of teacher professionalism is a commitment to life-long-learning and continuous improvement within our field. Some teachers, leaders, and even schools, might feel as though they are ‘at the top of their game’. In this scenario coaching can provide a vehicle to enhance or maintain a high level of performance; shine a light on blind-spots; or explore new avenues for professional challenge and growth. In an ideal learning culture, coaching would be seen as a welcome service or gift that enriches the school community and ultimately benefits students. Knight (2013) describes the effects of striving for our ‘personal bests’ as teachers:

*“The rewards of challenging ourselves are enormous. When we pursue excellence, we gain deeper understanding of our purpose, a fuller knowledge of the contribution we make, and the satisfaction that comes from doing work that makes us proud. When teachers strive to be the best they can be, they have a more positive impact on the lives of children, and their actions encourage their students to start their own journey – to strive for their own personal bests.”*

## Is coaching just another form of appraisal in disguise?

This question alludes to the sensitivities and vulnerability of teachers in opening up their practice to scrutiny by someone else, in this case a coach. It also draws our attention to one of the core tensions in developing teacher coaching (Lofthouse et al, 2010). In a formal coaching scenario the content of the conversation remains confidential between coach and coachee. This is critical to maintaining trust in both the process and the coach but could be seen as being at odds with the traditional accountability processes normally associated with teacher review and feedback. Lofthouse et al (ibid) suggest this distinction:

*“An alternative way to understand coaching is as a means to construct new knowledge and*

*practices in the context of the school. Recognising coaching as a creative lever rather than an accountability tool helps to distinguish it from other organisational procedures. Promoting coaching as a means to celebrate and share good practice, rather than simply adopting it in deficit scenarios is also critical. However this can involve a significant mind-shift on the parts of school leaders and participants.”*

Having said this, many schools that have embarked on the development of coaching in their contexts have realised the benefits of their leaders utilising coaching *approaches* in performance and review conversations. This approach has the potential to enhance the quality of these conversations by making them more growth oriented and less adversarial or punitive in nature. Coaching conversations can also sit *alongside* review processes as a supplement for teacher development rather than remediation for under-performance.

## Is coaching just another example of the latest initiative or fad?

As with any proposed new way of working, those that stick around tend to be the ones that resonate most with the people expected to adopt them in their context. Campbell (2016, p.131) suggests that the essential role of conversation in educational settings is a fundamental reason why coaching resonates so strongly with educators.

Further, when coaching is implemented strategically in the context of a whole school approach to professional learning, it can be the vital link between teacher goals, professional learning, student outcomes and evidence. Done well, it is a highly effective catalyst for professional learning.

One final factor that perhaps distinguishes coaching and coaching approaches from ‘interventions past’ in schools is its influence on the individual and organisational ‘way of being’ (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p.12). An individual may begin by ‘doing’ coaching, and developing a range of conversational skills, but the lasting impact of coaching comes from the emergence of a coaching way of being. This way of being is demonstrated in our attitudes and habits when interacting with others. Similarly, coaching in one educational context often leads to the identification of alternative contexts where coaching approaches could make a positive difference. Formal coaching cycles, leaders using coaching approaches and other informal coaching-style conversations become *normalised* as ‘the way we do things round here’ (van Nieuwerburgh, 2016, p.232).

## So where do we start?

Much of this article has been written from the point of view of coaching teachers on aspects of their professional practice. The Global Framework for Coaching in Education proposed by van Nieuwerburgh & Campbell (2015) presents a broader range of conversational contexts or “portals” for the introduction of coaching in education.

As we have seen, entering through



van Nieuwerburgh, C, Campbell, J 2015, 'A global framework for coaching in education', *CoachEd: The Teaching Leaders Coaching Journal*, February, pp. 2-5.

the Professional Practice portal could mean a focus on classroom teaching, with a desire to create a safe space for dialogue about the reality of what is happening in teachers' classes leading to more discerning and personalised professional learning. Entering through the Educational Leadership portal could be about focusing on the nature of performance and development conversations that leaders have with their teams with a desire to both improve the leadership capacity of the leaders themselves *and* make these conversations more developmental in nature. Approaching coaching through the Student Success and Wellbeing portal could be about employing coaching approaches with students, or between students, in order to enable them to better articulate their learning and to set goals and identify strategies to help move them forward. Just as with school leaders, equipping students with coaching skills might also develop their leadership capacity. The Community Engagement portal invites us to consider broadening the application of coaching approaches further still to include parents, carers and other community partners involved in learning and development conversations.

So, to conclude with a coaching question, *what's clearer now?*

How do the descriptions here sit with your understanding and/or application of coaching in your context and culture?

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The coach is not a problem solver, a teacher, an adviser, an instructor or even an expert; he or she is a sounding board, facilitator... who raises awareness and responsibility

**John Whitmore**

Conversation is the fundamental unit of change. If you change the conversation, then there's every chance you'll change everything that surrounds it.

**P Jackson and J Waldman** in *Positively Speaking: The art of constructive conversations with a solutions focus*

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