

e-Leading

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Coaching in education – can one size fit all?

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I recently wrote an article about conversations in which I said:

“In recent years there has been a significant move towards coaching in schools. In business, the role of the coach or business mentor has long been regarded as valuable and it would be the norm rather than the exception for a successful business leader to have someone with whom he or she meets regularly to talk. For the executive, the reasons for engaging with a coach are several. Ultimately, however, the aim is to help the business leader achieve his or her full potential, both professionally and personally. We are now recognising that the same arguments that apply for business apply for educators, be they school leaders or classroom teachers. Coaching helps the individual achieve his or her full potential. For the teacher, if his or her full potential is realised, then the learning outcomes of the students will by extension, be optimised.”

I subsequently came across two further articles,

both by Chris Munro, and both exploring the role of coaching in education. The first, *Implementing Coaching: Choices and Considerations*, published by Growth Coaching International, and the second, *Coaching in Education: an introduction* published in ACEL’s *e-Leading* 27 (2016). The latter I thought was a terrific article that explained succinctly the rudiments of coaching and why teachers might consider either becoming a coach or partnering with a coach.

The first form of coaching in education I came across was ‘GROW Coaching’. When I explored further I came across Instructional Coaching and then, of course, found all manner of information available on Challenge Coaching, Collegial Coaching, Cognitive Coaching, GROWTH coaching, Leadership Coaching, Peer Coaching and Technical Coaching.

Having accepted that coaching has a valid place in education and that a coaching approach can bring a richness to many of the relationships that exist in

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a school, the question remains as to which coaching model is the right model for a school. Before one can begin to answer that question, an understanding of the differences between the models would seem essential, hence this article. I have chosen to focus on those modes of coaching that seem, at least to me, to be the most prevalent in schools.

I should declare at the outset that I am not an expert in coaching. Rather, I am committed to looking for ways to help teachers and school leaders improve their practice and thereby improve the learning experience for students. In saying that I want to help teachers improve their practice, I want to make it clear that I do not want, in any way, to suggest that teaching needs to be fixed. There is much that happens in our classrooms that is excellent and needs to be celebrated. In the words of Marc Prensky (2012):

"We have in the main, a group of highly dedicated people who have chosen education as their life's work. My goal is not to waste or destroy this precious resource, but to support it and make the most of it."

To this end, just as we expect our students to seek to do their best, as teachers and school leaders we too should be seeking to do our best and this surely means that we must be willing to reflect on our practice and be willing to be challenged to improve it.

I said the first model of coaching I came into contact with was GROW Coaching. It is widely accepted that the GROW model was developed by Alexander Graham, Sir John Whitmore, *et al.* in the mid- to late-1980s with parallels to the Inner Game developed by tennis coach Timothy Gallwey. GROW was first published in 1992 by Whitmore in his book *Coaching for Performance*.

GROW is an acronym standing for Goals, Reality, Options, Will, although over time, there have been minor adjustments with the O now accepted to represent both Obstacles and Options and the W more commonly representing the Way forward.

The GROW model is probably the most commonly used coaching model and is renowned as a powerful tool to help individuals improve problem solving and goal setting. It can be applied not only to workplace practice (in the case of teachers, to classroom practice), but also to career advancement and personal relationships. The GROW coach does not simply provide the way forward to the client (teacher, school leader, etc.), but rather asks a series of open questions designed to heighten the client's awareness of the situation and thereby assist the client in determining what strategies could be employed in order to achieve the desired outcome. This mode of coaching revolves around the principle that the person being coached has the capacity to discover the solution to their problems for himself or herself. The coach is a facilitator in the process.

Based on research by Peter Gollwitzer around how goals and plans affect cognition, emotion and behaviour, the GROWTH coaching model evolved by extending the GROW acronym to include a 'T' and an 'H'. These represent Tactics and Habits. Two of the international authorities in GROWTH

coaching are Australia's John Campbell, founding fellow of the Institute of Coaching and Dr Christian van Nieuwerburgh, Editor in Chief of *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, a leading, peer-reviewed academic journal. Having determined in the conversation what needs to be done, the growth coaching model seeks to help the client determine how this can be done by putting into place specific tactics (plans for action) with a fixed and realistic timeline, and then to determine what changes in habit will be needed to ensure that the change is sustainable.

The GROW and GROWTH acronyms both include 'O' which I said earlier has come to represent Obstacles and Options. There is an increasingly popular variant/application of GROW and GROWTH known as Solution Focus, where the focus is not on identifying the obstacles, but rather on identifying one's strengths and using them as the basis on which to explore the Options, and thereby to decide what needs to be done (the 'T' and 'H') to get the desired improvement in practice and learning outcomes. Bannink and Jackson (2011) describe the Solution Focus approach as one:

"...interested in describing and utilising strengths, resources, exceptions to problems, finding what works rather than focusing on what's not working and focusing on what is right rather than what is wrong."

Peer coaching is a process whereby two colleagues work together to reflect on their current practices. I think it is fair to say that it is the equality of the two participants in peer coaching that makes it unique, rather than any special methodology or technique. As with GROW coaching, the peer coach does not advise or tell. He or she asks questions and supports the collaborating teacher to find his or her own answers. Whilst peer coaching can be a two-way process, it does not have to be so. It is, however, a structured process that encourages reflecting and learning from each other. Participants in peer coaching share ideas and whilst there is ample evidence to show its success across the curriculum, peer coaching is particularly prevalent in the ICT space where teachers help each other to integrate information and communication technologies into their classes.

Leadership coaching involves a working relationship between a coach and anyone in a leadership or management role. In schools we are also seeing leadership coaching being offered to aspiring leaders. Leadership coaching has, for too long, been reserved only for those already in the roles of principal or deputy-principal in schools. Increasingly there is a growing awareness that helping middle managers (year level coordinators and subject area leaders) develop their leadership skills before they take on the most senior of roles in a school can lead to greater success when they eventually assume these roles. Like peer coaching, leadership coaching, whilst focussing on the core business of leadership and work, might also extend to personal life, as a healthy balance between work and life is fundamental to successful leadership.

It is difficult to find a universally accepted definition of instructional coaching, but I think it is safe to say that it is that which is focussed on what happens within the confines of a classroom. Whilst a GROW coach might be more holistic in his or her work with an individual, an instructional coach is very much focussed on what happens in the classroom and not with whether or not the individual has leadership aspirations or other personal goals. That is not to say that these are not important, merely that the primary focus of this mode of coaching is to improve classroom practice and thereby to improve students' achievement.

There are those who would argue that as the core work of a school is teaching and learning, the most logical coaching model would, therefore, be instructional coaching. Others would argue, quite reasonably, that instructional coaching should be but one of the elements of a good coaching strategy for a school.

Jim Knight (2007), the pre-eminent researcher and author on instructional coaching says that the instructional coach:

“collaborates with teachers so they can choose and implement research-based interventions to help students learn more effectively.”

Cognitive coaching was developed by Art Costa and Robert Garmston during the late 20th century and is based on a belief that if the teacher improves his or her own (higher order) thinking, then instructional effectiveness will be enhanced. In other words, by enhancing a teacher's intellectual growth, we can enhance classroom practice. The aim of cognitive coaching is to help the teacher self-monitor and self-analyse his or her classroom practice.

Cognitive coaching involves a very structured three-phase cycle. The first of these is a pre-conference during which the teacher is invited to articulate the learning goals and how, during the lesson, he or she will determine whether or not the students are learning the intended material. The second phase is an observation of the lesson, during which the coach gathers the information (data) that the teacher identified during the preconference would help in an analysis of his or her classroom practice.

The third and final stage is the post-conference during which the teacher is invited to self-reflect on the lesson and then engage in a conversation about what change or modification is called for in light of the evidence collected during the lesson.

The one point that was common in all my investigations of coaching models was the value and relational nature of the partnership between the coach and the client. In all cases the success or otherwise of coaching relies heavily on a relationship of trust and confidentiality. If I do not have complete trust that my coach is acting in my best interests, then I will not lay myself open by sharing my experiences and inviting feedback. As Knight says in *Better Conversations*, criticising how one teaches is like criticising how one parents. It is deeply personal. To engage in the kinds of conversations needed in any coaching situation, both parties need to demonstrate empathy, make a genuine effort to

listen to each other, avoid making judgments and make an emotional connection. If coaching is to be successful, it is not so much whether it is peer coaching or cognitive coaching that is important as it is that the relationship is built on trust and a genuine interest in helping each other achieve the common goal.

So, I return to where I began, asking if any one model of coaching in education can fit all needs. Is there one model that I can say is right for your school?

Should our intention be to improve classroom practice? Absolutely. But does this mean that instructional coaching is superior to cognitive coaching or that peer coaching is the answer?

Should we be holistic and care about the personal aspirations of teachers and our future leaders? Indeed. So does this mean that Leadership coaching is the answer for all schools?

Can we, as some schools have done, incorporate a coaching approach to our pastoral care programs and thereby help our students unpack their aspirations and/or see more clearly what their educational goals are and what obstructions are standing in the way? Of course.

Can we take students on a richer learning journey if we ourselves use higher order thinking to review and enhance our practice? Definitely.

What does all this mean? I think it means that there are elements of each of the coaching methodologies considered here that can and should have a place in any school. There is no 'one size that fits all' when it comes to coaching. If I had to pick one above all others, I would turn my attention to GROWTH coaching for no other reason than that I believe each of the other modes of coaching can be, at least to some extent, a subset of GROWTH coaching.

Further reading

- Munro, C *Implementing Coaching: Choices and Considerations*, 2016 available at <http://www.growthcoaching.com.au/articles-new/implementing-coaching-choices-and-considerations>
- Munro, C 2016, *Coaching in Education: an introduction*, available at <http://www.growthcoaching.com.au/PDF/e-leading-chris-munro.pdf>
- Bannink, F, Jackson, PZ 2011, 'Positive Psychology and Solution Focus – looking at similarities and differences in InterAction', *The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 8–20.
- Barkley, S 2010 *Quality teaching in a culture of coaching*, Rowman and Littlefield Education, NY.
- Costa, AL, Garmston, R J 2002, *Cognitive coaching: A foundation for renaissance schools*, (2nd ed.), Christopher-Gordon, Norwood, MA.
- Knight, J 2016, *Better Conversations Coaching ourselves and each other to be more credible, caring and connected*, Corwin Press, California.
- Knight, J 2007, *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction*, Corwin Press, California.
- Knight, J 2011, *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction*, Corwin Press, California
- Prensky, M 2012, *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom*, Hawker Brownlow (Aust) and Corwin (USA).

Can we take students on a richer learning journey if we ourselves use higher order thinking to review and enhance our practice? Definitely
