

Bringing Science to the Art of Coaching in Education

by Heather Knight, Kathleen Stinnett and Jack Zenger

Coaching as a method of professional support for teachers and leaders is sweeping Washington State. This should come as no surprise considering that 10 out of 10 school districts in the Effective Districts Study use coaching (Abbott, Baker, & Stroh, 2004).

We define leaders broadly in this article as teacher leaders, principals, TOSAs, and instructional coaches who work with staff to transform student learning. We examine research that supports the impact of coaching in organizations, and discuss effective research-based practices common to all coaching models.

The definition of coaching blurs with many other helping roles in our field—

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mentoring, training, consulting; these are all relevant forms of support, but the purpose and process utilized is fundamentally different from that of coaching. The essential difference lies in who takes ownership for the learning of the individual. The primary purpose of the coaching relationship is to empower adult learners to take the actions needed to achieve in their own professional growth goals.

Coaching is an empowering tool that puts the coachee squarely in charge of his or her own growth. The coach supports the coachee in developing his or her expertise then develops meaningful attainable action plans. The action plans are then monitored and measured for results; perhaps through training, professional reading, seeking the advice or input of colleagues and professional organizations.

Coaching is relatively new to the education community, thus few studies exist compared to other disciplines. However, careful analysis of those few studies, as well as analysis of studies from other fields, lead to the belief that coaching, done properly, enhances the structure of organizations and their attainment of desired goals.

This paper attempts to reach out and tap into the relevant research that addresses our key questions and issues. Specifically, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the research-based benefits of coaching?
2. What are the essential coaching strategies and skills needed to maximize coaching effectiveness?
3. How can the coaching process be more consistent?

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Q1: What are the research-based benefits of coaching?

We look first at research conducted by Zenger-Folkman (ZF) (2007). Using a 360-degree-feedback process, ZF works within corporations and public agencies to calculate effectiveness of leaders who act as coaches for those they supervise. Analysis of hundreds of thousands of these 360-degree-feedback instruments sheds light on the effectiveness of coaching.

Analysis of leaders who were most effective in coaching resulted in a clear correlation between a leader's coaching effectiveness and his or her impact on the performance of those they supervised. Consistently, the data also show strong correlations between a leader's coaching effectiveness and the measurement of employee commitment and engagement.

ZF's conclusions about the impact of coaching are significant to answering the challenge of raising student achievement. They found:

- Effective coaching increases employee satisfaction.
- Employees feel they matter in their work and are more connected to their leaders.
- Employees are willing to go the extra mile to meet goals of their organization.
- Employees are more aligned with their organization's goals.

Another compelling reason to use coaching comes from the Joyce and Showers research (1996). They examined the effectiveness of professional development in terms of its actual impact on changing behavior and student learning. They found that participants who received coaching support and follow-up implemented the new skills at a rate of 80–90%. Conversely, in trainings where coaching and follow-up were not provided, implementation rates fell to below 20%. Thus, concluding that coaching dramatically increases the likelihood that new skills will be applied on the job.

Q2: What are the essential coaching strategies and skills needed to maximize coaching effectiveness?

To answer this we turn to the work of counselors and therapists. However, we are not suggesting in any way that educational coaches perform the same role as therapists.

The differences between the therapist and the coach are enormous. However, both seek to transform human behavior.

Research from the world of counseling and therapy suggest that two important actions can have a significant impact effectiveness:

1. Asking the client what he or she would like to discuss.
2. Asking the client for feedback at the end of each session.

The first action implies that the coach should talk about things that are of greatest interest and value to the person being coached. While this concept seems obvious, our experience is that most leaders feel it is their responsibility to set the agenda in coaching conversations.

Allowing the person being coached to select from a variety of choices—choices they feel are important—increases the likelihood that they will take action and continue to work with that coach. To this end, a checklist may ensure that the conversation is focused on topics most important to those being coached. The coachee should review the topics on that list, and come to the first scheduled coaching session with four or five selected topics. By doing this, the coach sends several important messages to the coachee:

- The coach wants the person being coached to feel secure in the process.
- The coach respects their wishes.
- This is not just an isolated event, but the beginning of a long-term coaching relationship designed to benefit the coachee.

We are not suggesting that the coach should never suggest a topic; indeed, we recommend it strongly. However, when topics discussed are selected by the person being coached, success rates goes up.

The second action, asking for feedback demonstrates that when immediate feedback is asked for and received, attrition rates were cut in half, and effectiveness increased Duncan and Miller (2008).

In addition to providing indispensable reflection on the work at hand, asking for feedback communicates that the coach is vested in a collaborative process, and that input is valued and essential. Feedback may also reveal issues that would not have otherwise been uncovered.

The implication is that when coaches open themselves to personal feedback, more effective coaching discussions result and people are more likely to seek them out for coaching in the future. Thus stronger relationships are built and become a foundation of long term success.

When these two relatively simple actions are implemented the likelihood increases that the client will take action and also continue working with in the relationship (Duncan and Miller, 2008).

Q3: How can the process of coaching be more consistent?

Due to the nascent nature of coaching in education, there are inconsistencies in the quality and effectiveness of coaches. The field is attracting people at a rapid rate, with varying levels of training and experiences specific to the role of coaching.

In order to guarantee effective coaching, coaches need training and opportunities to practice facilitating effective coaching conversations. Good coach training aligns with the standards of the ICF (International Coaching Federation), and focuses on effective questioning and listening skills in order to thoroughly discover the situation from the coachee's point of view.

Additionally, educational leaders should be provided with a clear framework of fundamental elements that can be addressed in each coaching conversation. This framework may be as simple as the following:

1. **Focus the Conversation**, explain what is hoped for in terms of outcomes, issues of confidentiality, and what role each person will play.
2. **See and Explore the Current State**, clarify the current situation as seen by the person being coached.
3. **Bridge to the Desired Outcomes**, the coach helps the person to think about what ideally would occur from that person's point of view.

4. **Form Clear Commitments and Action Steps**, lay out a clear, specific, doable plan with completion dates, that will enable the person being coached to achieve his or her goal.
5. **Monitoring for Results and Accountability**, check in to see how things are going. Establish how success will be measured and tracked—then measure it!

By using a framework, the coach creates ideal conditions for success.

CONCLUSION

Coaching, like the broader disciplines of leadership, will always contain many characteristics of an art form. No two people will practice it in exactly the same way. However, through careful examination of existing research on the impact of successful coaching, it is possible to formulate specific frameworks to increase the consistency and quality of coaching in the educational setting.

The world of coaching in education can gain a great deal from embracing good ideas and practices from many sources, including the helping professions. In this way coaching in education may contribute to the educational community.

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