

# KENT Coaching and Mentoring

## Leadership coaching in Medway LEA - a case study

*"...the second component is coaching, which is probably the most powerful learning strategy for developing leadership potential. Coaching is THE essential learning relationship....."*

*(Building leadership capacity - helping leaders learn, NCSL, 2005)*

It is a conundrum that those at the heart of learning in schools are often least able, from pressure of work, to make adequate plans for their own learning. It is also the case that when work pressures are at their highest the ability to stand back, review priorities and refine the way ahead is one of the first things to be compromised. And pressure on school leaders is undoubtedly high, and having a negative impact via absences, poor work/life balance and the shortage of candidates for top posts.

In Medway LEA, senior advisers were keen to find a way to support school leaders through a particularly tough period of change, and after discussions with headteachers and representatives from Kent Coaching and Mentoring, a unique project was put together. The programme, which rolled out in November, had two linked parts - a full day accredited Work-Life Balance workshop, run under licence from Coaching and Mentoring International, and an optional, part-funded programme of 6 follow on coaching sessions undertaken by a small group of qualified life coaches from KCM.

Twenty-seven headteachers took part in the two workshops. Given the pre-Christmas timing, this was a good take-up and the evaluations underlined just how timely and valued the sessions were. One Head commented

*"The day was full of pertinent insights into the causes of stress and practical strategies for dealing with them, all delivered with enthusiasm and humour. I have finished with renewed resolve and commitment ...[this course].. will change the way I think and act."*

For many, the chance to reflect on core values and review their priorities against them was the key to making small but transformational changes to their personal and professional lives. The decision to step back from the flood of work by attending for the day was in its own right a key first step for all in addressing balance. The second was in turning discussion into action.

Following the workshops, a small group of heads took up the offer of follow on coaching, as either phone based or face-to-face sessions. For all involved this was a first experience of coaching (coaching as opposed to mentoring remains relatively unknown in schools) but all soon settled into the confidential, "client led" structures. The novelty of talking around important professional issues in an entirely confidential setting away from the LEA and governors was the most striking benefit of the programme for the headteachers, giving them valuable space to problem solve and re-centre themselves. For this to work, confidentiality and dedicated time slots are vital. In the one case where the coaching proved less successful it was clear that the commitment to uninterrupted time (45 to 60 minutes) was being compromised. Some initial doubts about working with coaches from outside the world of schools were soon dispelled once the sessions were underway and the nature of the coaching process was experienced: findings that echo those of the NCSL-

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***"There was a strong consensus that coaches require expert skills rather than profound educational knowledge. Indeed, coaches from outside education can offer valuable, generic coaching skills to headteachers"***

*(New Approaches to Leadership Development, NCSL, 2005)*

In a world where success is perhaps too often sought in terms of numbers and performance indicators the benefits of the programme to the headteachers is not so readily measured but early feedback suggests that all have indeed benefited and the gains are many:

- an enhanced work/life balance
- better management of work load
- improved motivation levels
- raised self esteem
- greater clarity and sense of purpose (ref:values)
- better time management

One thing is very clear, there is enormous potential for coaching within education - for heads, for leadership teams, for staff, parents and pupils too. The College of School Leadership recognises this. It recently published a highly readable and positive report, promoting the role of coaching in school change management processes. Entitled "Leading Coaching in Schools" the key focus of the report can be summed up in one of the sections - "How can we infuse schools with coaching conversations?"

It is too early yet to know the full impact of the programme and how it will be sustained. There is no doubt that with school finances under pressure, the availability of some LEA funding was important in encouraging take-up, but the strength of feedback also suggests that the programme was highly effective in enhancing the work of the school leaders involved and beginning this important "coaching conversation".

Building on this success will depend crucially on how the coaching message can be promoted widely amongst school leaders, and how more can be encouraged to give themselves permission to invest both time and money in self care. Yet, if they do not take their own well-being seriously their role in looking after the nations' learners will be seriously compromised by increasing pressure and workloads. Coaching has a key role to play here.

## ***Martin Garwood, 2006***

*The schools involved in the coaching sessions:*

*Abbey Court Special*

*Deanwood Primary*

*Cuxton Primary,*

*Horsted Infants*

*Elaine Avenue,*

*Thamesview Juniors*

*St Nicholas Infant*

*Sherwin Knight Juniors*

*St.Thomas Moore RCP.*