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Research Associate Report

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Time for coaching

This study investigated how and when senior leaders used coaching and the impact it has had on the work of their schools

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Coaching now occupies a place of honour on the management stage and is destined to be the leadership approach of the twenty-first century. (Belasco 2000: foreword)

Introduction

Coaching is an approach whose time has arrived. Policy makers and national bodies (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], National College for School Leadership [NCSL], Training and Development Agency for Schools [TDA], General Teaching Council for England (GTC) and the Primary and Secondary National Strategies) are seeking ways of maximising the impact of coaching on the lives of both learners and teachers. As the use of coaching as a leadership approach gathers momentum (Creasy and Paterson 2005) it is important to be clear about what it is and how it can be used in schools.

This study sets out to investigate the impact coaching is having on six schools (referred to in this report as the focus schools). It aims to provide readers with examples of how coaching is used in some school settings, and consequently of how they, or their colleagues, might use it in their own schools.

Two senior leaders in four primary, one special and one secondary school spread across three contrasting local education authorities (LEAs) were interviewed. At least one of the interviewees in each school had attended an extended coach development programme and had a sound understanding of the coaching process. A more detailed account of the research methods used is included in the Appendix.

The interviewees were all asked the same four basic questions.

1. What is the definition of 'coaching' in your school?
2. How and when do you use coaching to get specific tasks done?
3. What impact has coaching had on the work of your school?
4. What advice would you give to schools planning to introduce a coaching approach?

Throughout this report the term 'coach' will be used to denote the person coaching and the term 'coachee' identifies the person being coached.

The definition of coaching in schools

National bodies and senior educational leaders are grappling with different understandings and definitions of coaching. This had led to different emphases and structures for undertaking the process. The challenge of coming up with a single agreed definition has proved almost impossible, as the 'Mentoring and Coaching CPD Capacity Building Project' (CUREE 2005) has shown.

The focus schools are all in the process of working out what coaching means for them in their particular setting. The literature on coaching provides a starting point. Whitmore (2002: 8) suggests a very straightforward definition:

Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.

Thomas and Smith (2004: 26) see coaching as:

A way of helping another person to reach their destinations. 'Destinations' means the goals that a person wants to achieve or needs to achieve within the institutional setting.

Powell, Chambers and Baxter (2001: 4) assert:

Coaching enables individuals and teams to develop and flourish, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to achieve their goals.

Findings

The coaching taking place in the six focus schools has echoes of the definitions given above. All the interviewees shared the view that coaching in their schools should be:

- non-directive
- non-judgemental
- client-centred.

They saw the role of the coach as being **non-directive**, helping the coachee come to their own conclusions about the plan of action emerging from the session. The coach manages the process and releases the coachee to focus on the content. The skill of the coach resides in listening below the surface, asking the right question at the right time and helping the coachee plan some action.

They emphasised the **non-judgemental** element of the coach's role, while acknowledging this is very difficult to maintain where there is a line management or performance management relationship between the two people. A number of interviewees thought coaching may work best when the coach has no vested interest in the outcome of the coachee's actions.

The **client-centredness** of coaching featured in all the interviews. It was felt very strongly that the coaching session should be driven by the coachee, both in terms of defining the focus and committing to a plan of action. In some instances the focus may already have been set by the school improvement plan or a senior leader.

All six schools were using Sir John Whitmore's (2002) four-stage GROW model as a basic structure for their coaching.

- Goal (for the session and/or project)
- Reality (the current state of play)
- Options (possible ways forward)
- Will (level of commitment to the planned action).

The GROW model was being used in flexible ways by coaches working with individuals or teams. Individuals were also using it to self-coach through challenging issues. In some schools the model was being used explicitly and in others senior leaders were using it to structure their own thinking and ways of working without explicitly mentioning GROW. One interviewee felt very strongly that having a shared coaching vocabulary among all staff expedited the process enormously.

The recurring question underlying many of the responses was 'How can we maximise the power of coaching to support the work of our school?'. All the schools felt they were at an early stage in finding a convincing answer to this question. What was apparent was that although the structures for coaching were at different stages, the underlying values base was very similar.

The schools all broadly subscribed to the following notions:

- people should be empowered to come up with their own solutions to challenging tasks
- people need support and challenge; the skill of the coach is to work out what is needed at a given time
- people will have greater commitment to an action they have shaped
- coaching will help get the jobs done effectively and will grow the coach and coachee in the process
- coaching fits well with a shared leadership approach.

Coaching is a counter-blast to the top-down approach to change that has been hard to avoid in the educational community in recent times. It is a collaborative approach that assumes competence and aids further improvement: it is based on an effectiveness model rather than a deficiency model. (Powell et al 2001: 1)

The six focus schools vary on a range of criteria – geographical location, age group of the learners, pupil numbers and the point in their development cycle. They do share common views about the nature of coaching as the following interview responses to my first question indicate:

"Coaching is a way of moving another person's thinking forward, it's a way of people actually believing in themselves and finding the answers from within. It is a very civilised way of dealing with people." (primary head)

"Coaching is a process, a methodology that you can use to assist anyone you are working with to work through a problem or issue they have." (special school head)

"It is quite hard to put a definition on it because it means different things at different times." (primary head)

"I think it is a way of helping other people to solve the problems themselves." (primary deputy)

“Coaching is allowing people to find their own way to resolve their own problems and situations in order to improve their performance.” (secondary deputy)

“Coaching is about not feeling you’ve got to have all the solutions, it’s about thinking that people can create their own solutions and you facilitate them to do that.” (primary deputy)

The recurring themes that emerged from the responses to, ‘What is coaching?’ were as follows.

- Coaching is a leadership approach that can be used flexibly to meet the needs of individuals and groups.
- The coach should focus on the goals of the individual and/or the school and use sensitive questioning to establish an agreed action plan.
- The process is based on the three core skills of deep listening, precise questioning and promoting action.
- Coaching fits best in a school culture that is predicated on shared leadership rather than a command and control, hierarchical structure.

The interviewees articulated very similar views despite the striking differences in the schools they were working in. They were all very committed to the power of the coaching process. One respondent suggested that it is something that starts slowly and evolves within the context of one’s own particular circumstances.

“Above all, it is not a soft option, because it depends upon a proper understanding of accountability. It is both supportive and challenging. It enables people to realise their potential by helping them to take responsibility for themselves, to be accountable to themselves, and to apply this to their working practices.” (secondary deputy)

The difference between ‘telling’ and ‘asking’ was highlighted in a number of interviews. Senior leaders often used a coaching approach, rather than a formal coaching session.

“Coaching is about getting people to take responsibility for themselves. It is something I use a lot because what I don’t want to be doing is imposing systems or strategies. It is support and guidance really without telling.” (primary head)

The telling–asking continuum is an interesting one in terms of the shared leadership approach described by respondents. One interviewee in a school in challenging circumstances felt strongly that given their current situation it was important to define very clearly for all staff **what** had to be done. Telling and re-telling the key priorities was an important part of the school’s action plan and the asking related to ‘how shall we get these things done?’. In this school at this time, coaching is about the **how**.

In summary, there does not appear to be a simple, generally accepted definition of coaching in schools. What is apparent is that the six schools share an underlying philosophy that sees the potential in staff and students rather than their limitations. They also share the view that coaching is a powerful tool that can be harnessed to achieve the school’s aims and develop people in the process.

How and when coaching was used to get jobs done

Kipling's serving men provide a structure for summarising the responses to this question:

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who. (Kipling R, 1902, *The Elephant's Child*, Just So Stories)

How

As indicated in the first section, all the schools were using the GROW model as a basic structure for their coaching. Sometimes the coaching was part of a formal, timetabled programme and sometimes it was an opportunistic, informal response to the demands of a particular situation.

The planned, formal sessions were usually part of a school-based programme or an element of an external programme such as the NCSL's 'Leading from the Middle' or the 'Primary Leadership Programme'. Often a series of sessions had been scheduled over a period of weeks. Both coach and coachee came to these sessions with a clear expectation that coaching was going to take place and action would be forthcoming.

The informal sessions were by definition unplanned and happened as a result of a pressing need or an 'ad hoc' conversation. The coach may have been explicit about saying, 'Now I am going into a coaching mode' and explaining the process or may have simply used the GROW model as a framework to structure their own analysis of the situation at hand.

"I will say now I am going into coaching mode and with non-coaches I will explain the process." (primary deputy)

Often these informal sessions arose in the corridor or staff room and were a response to a chance comment or question. This opportunistic coaching may have happened there and then or been followed up at a later date, depending on the nature and complexity of the issue. For example, a series of coaching sessions ensued after a primary special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) asked for advice on reviewing a school's provision for inclusion.

One interviewee shared some of her favourite questions to structure both formal and informal coaching sessions.

"What you want to get out of this session? (Goal)
How do you see your current situation? (Current reality)
What is the best way to use what you are saying to find a solution? (Options)
How committed are you to taking this action? (Will)" (primary head)

Who

The respondents identified a wide range of people who had been coached. In order of frequency the list is as follows:

- *Teachers* – senior and middle leaders, new staff, colleagues in other schools, participants on a designated programme (for example, Leading from the Middle or Fast Track).

- *Associate staff* – teaching assistants, special needs assistants and other associate staff.
- *Pupils* – children from six years of age upwards.
- *Parents* – staff employed a coaching approach to work with parents who had approached the school with a specific issue.
- *Others* – external agencies and specialist staff.

Team coaching tended to be on a planned basis and involved the following:

- *Senior leadership teams* – lunchtime or twilight sessions.
- *Whole staff teams* – school training days.
- *Year group teams* – timetabled planning, preparation and assessment time (PPA).
- *Groups of children* – that share the same issue or challenge.

What

The respondents identified a wide range of topics and challenges that had prompted coaching in their schools. These varied according to the culture of the organisation, the nature of the coachees and the stage of development of coaching in the school. The following list captures the variety and complexity of the coaching undertaken.

The construction of the school improvement plan

- Resolving a conflict between two senior colleagues.
- A coaching approach to performance management.
- Helping pupils make positive choices about playground behaviour.
- Planning the information and communications technology (ICT) curriculum.
- Remodelling the workforce – designing a new leadership structure.
- Developing the work of the school change team.
- Developing the teamwork of teachers and teaching assistants.
- Designing a new whole-school curriculum.
- Leading from the Middle – school-based projects.
- Supporting effective classroom management.
- Primary leadership programme (consultant headteacher).

When/where

This research study is entitled 'Time for coaching' because finding the time and place to undertake high-quality coaching was a key issue in the minds of the respondents. Listening is one of the core skills of effective coaching and requires an investment of energy from both the coach and the coachee. Coaching is a more time-consuming option than a command and control, directive approach.

“I moved from come to me with a problem and I will solve it, as a new head, to I will coach you through your options.” (special school head)

Complex issues require uninterrupted time and a confidential setting. The interviewees felt a formal coaching session is a high-demand activity in terms of both time and resources. 'Asking' people how they plan to move forward will take much more time than simply 'telling' the coachee or the team what to do, although it is an investment that might save a lot of time in the longer term. A shared finding was that sometimes a coaching approach will be appropriate to the demands of the situation but on other occasions a more directive style will be needed. Fitness for purpose is the key.

One interviewee firmly believed that coaching should happen as close as possible to a request for support or the emergence of the significant issue. For this reason, a primary school had endeavoured to establish a booked appointment system for staff and a training day cycle of planned team coaching.

In five of the schools, one-to-one coaching with adults happened when the people involved could fit it into their schedules. Release times, lunchtimes, after school, even at home, had all been used for planned and opportunistic coaching. One person felt very strongly that when people are prepared to commit time to the process it is an indication of their willingness to take action on the proposed way forward.

“The key to success is [that] people have to be prepared to make the change. If people don’t have the desire to change, it is futile!” (secondary deputy)

Nevertheless, successful coaching may be very quick and opportunistic.

“Staff with a problem might approach me in the corridor or in the classroom. It is afterwards that I reflect on what I said and realise it was coaching.” (primary head)

Coaching with children was similarly varied. One school was encouraging all staff to employ a coaching approach within their Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programme in order to challenge children to come up with their own solutions to issues or problems. Others were using coaching to work with a designated group or individuals on a specific subject. Some of this work was taking place during lesson time and some during breaks and lunchtimes.

Why

A manager’s task is simple – to get the job done and grow the staff. Coaching is one process that accomplishes both. (Whitmore 2002: 25)

A recurring theme found from all interviewees’ responses was that coaching builds capacity within the individual and the school. Four of the schools had emerged from challenging circumstances and coaching was seen as a way of continuing to move things forward.

“I have started using coaching with children, rather than telling them the answer to a problem, I ask a question. It’s about giving the children ownership.” (primary middle leader)

“I have faith I can help people sort out their ideas. People usually have the answers in their own heads.” (primary deputy)

“When people ask me, ‘What can I do?’ I put the question back to them ‘What do you want to do?’” (secondary middle leader)

The four headteachers all said that experience of coaching had modified their leadership styles. The biggest change was in the increased amount and quality of listening they now did.

“Using a coaching style with difficult parents has helped me develop. Now I don’t even realise I am coaching. I have completely changed my management style.” (primary head)

All the respondents (senior and middle leaders) indicated that the reason for using coaching was to achieve a better quality result – to get the job done better! The coaching approach built commitment to the action chosen and increased the level of

motivation of both children and adults. Time is a key issue and coaching is seen as an investment in building the capacity of individuals, teams and schools.

The impact of coaching on the study schools

The impact that coaching has had on each of the schools (and the individual respondents) reflects the level of investment in the process. It appears that the greater the investment of time and resources the greater the benefits that have accrued both for the individual and the organisation.

All the interviewees indicated that coaching has had a profound impact on the people who have undertaken an extended coach development programme. This may be in terms of management style.

“It has had a real impact on the way I approach people situations. It has made me aware that others also have the ability to solve problems. It also ensures the commitment of the person to taking action – more than any other strategy.” (primary head)

“It has changed my management style. I now give people the opportunity to lead in their area.” (primary head)

Changes in the way people saw their leadership role were also attributed to the coaching process.

“It has liberated me from having to know all the answers, for having all the information at my fingertips and having to make all the decisions.” (primary deputy)

“As a year team leader, I was under a lot of pressure to come up with answers. As a coach, you help your team get to a conclusion rather than providing it.” (primary middle leader)

All of the interviewees reported that they had seen the coaching process increase the level of confidence of the people involved.

“Coaching empowers people and gives them a boost, they become more confident about taking risks. It is like a light has gone on!” (primary head)

A variety of examples supplied by the respondents charted how a coachee had moved from being a person seeking a quick solution to someone prepared to work through the coaching process to achieve a positive outcome. The process made them feel they had been heard and it empowered them to take action. Coaching facilitated the communication and the key to success was seen to be the quality of the coach’s listening.

“The crucial part is listening. Mrs X is patient and quiet, she gives the person space.” (primary deputy describing her headteacher)

The coaching process empowered people to take action and also located responsibility for the outcome with them.

“Staff found it quite scary moving from expecting to be told what to do, to you’ve made the decision therefore you share the responsibility for the outcome.” (primary deputy)

It would seem that the respondents were all agreed that the coaching process increases the motivation of both the coach and the coachee. The word ‘investment’

recurred in many of the interviews and it was felt that coaching provided enormous benefits to the individuals involved.

As stated earlier, Sir John Whitmore believes coaching should impact both management outcomes and people development. Staff growth was illustrated in the examples cited in the first part of this section. It seemed less easy for the interviewees to identify the impact of coaching at the school level.

“I couldn’t say for definite the impact it has had, although I do feel ownership has increased.” (primary deputy)

“You can’t quantify the impact of coaching in a school – it’s not like SATs, it is more about increasing emotional intelligence.” (secondary deputy)

The same secondary deputy went on to say that he believed coaching is a value-for-money enterprise, but that if pressed he would find it difficult to produce hard evidence to support that judgement.

“It is time consuming to start with, but as the person becomes increasingly self-assured the investment at the beginning is worth it.” (secondary middle leader)

Thus it would seem that investment in a formal coaching programme is an act of faith, based on the belief that it will build personal and organisational capacity. The interviewees were all committed to the efficacy of coaching and therefore found it difficult to be objective. They all seemed to indicate that they had just started a coaching journey and it would take more time to evaluate its impact at the school level.

The bigger the investment in terms of time and training, the greater the impact was likely to be.

“The biggest impact was from a series of coaching sessions spread over several months.” (secondary deputy)

“It has become a bottom-up process, rather than top-down, and people are much more into solving whole-school problems.” (special school head)

One primary head came to the realisation during the interview that she had moved from ‘conscious coaching’ at her last school to ‘unconscious coaching’ at her new establishment.

“Since I’ve been here I have been coaching a lot without thinking, ‘This is coaching’. For example, on my first training day I used a coaching approach.” (primary head)

It could be argued that the division between the impact on the individual and the organisation may be a false dichotomy. Modified leadership and management styles have an effect on organisational effectiveness that is difficult to quantify precisely.

Advice to schools planning to introduce a coaching approach

The strongest suggestion from the respondents was for people to be clear about why and how they wish to introduce coaching. The particular context and circumstances of each institution had influenced the way coaching had been introduced and how it was being developed in the study schools. The ways in which coaching had been introduced could be seen as a continuum. At the formal structured end, a school had developed a systematic training programme to develop coaches, while at the other end of the continuum coaching consisted of the headteacher employing a coaching style without overtly labelling it 'coaching'.

One respondent suggested that the GROW model provides a structure for thinking through the introduction of coaching to a school.

Notwithstanding the variety of approaches, a number of clear themes emerged from the interviews and they were as follows.

a) It is important to have coaching sponsored by one or more senior leaders.

"It has to come from the Head or at least the Head has to be supportive of the initiative." (special school head)

"Coaching should be clearly supported by the senior management team and the governors and should be part of the continuing professional development policy." (secondary deputy)

"The head needs to be committed and to model a coaching style." (primary head)

b) The people leading the coaching initiative need to be trained and to have protected time for coaching.

"People need to be trained by somebody with real credibility." (primary head)

"Someone has to be trained to know how to deliver it." (secondary middle leader)

"The people need to be thoroughly trained. It is important to have clarity about where the boundaries lie." (primary head)

"If you want to incorporate coaching you will have to release time." (primary deputy)

c) Construct a whole-school process. One interviewee set out a very clear structure.

- 1) An introduction for all staff by a strong coach.
- 2) Ask who wants to be a coach and provide the relevant training.
- 3) Set up practice sessions for the trainee coaches.
- 4) Agree an entitlement structure for accessing coaching.
- 5) Maintain a rolling programme of coach development. (primary deputy)

A number of interviewees identified the importance of staff seeing a high-quality demonstration of coaching in order to understand the power of the process.

"I saw my first coaching session and immediately realised the possibilities." (secondary deputy)

"Do it for the whole school. Let them see it done." (primary head)

“Demonstrate so people can see what it is about.” (primary middle leader)

d) Understand that coaching is a long-term investment and not a quick fix. Investing in a coaching approach will get the job done and improve relationships.

“Time is an issue, although you save time in the end because you haven’t got people coming to tell you the tap is running.” (special school head)

“Coaching is important in schools in challenging circumstances. We have, in the final analysis, moved much faster because of coaching.” (primary head)

Conclusions and key findings

We are at an early stage in understanding the potential impact of coaching in schools. The six study schools may not be a representative sample as it could be argued that each school had at least one coaching devotee. The author is also passionate about the power of coaching and therefore may have experienced difficulty in maintaining research neutrality. Nevertheless, some clear findings did emerge.

1. Coaching impacts on staff and pupils and enhances the social/emotional atmosphere of the school.
2. Coaching is a generic process that can be used opportunistically with staff, pupils and parents – self-coaching, one-to-one coaching and team coaching.
3. A coaching approach could be anything from an intuitive leadership style to a structured, whole-school process.
4. A coaching strategy should be tailored to suit the organisational readiness of each school, reflecting its unique context and particular circumstances.
5. Coaching is an investment (in time and money) that produces gains for staff and pupils and builds individual and organisational capacity.
6. Coaching is most effective when coaches have had a planned development programme and peer support structures are in place.

Recommendations for those considering introducing a coaching approach in their schools are as follows:

- Be clear about how you want to use coaching in your school, taking account of its particular context and circumstances.
- The more people who undertake a coach development programme the quicker it takes root. Coaching becomes “part of the way we do things here”.
- Senior leaders need to show commitment through personal role modelling and allocating a budget for coaching to be undertaken in their school.
- Decide on how coaching can be accessed and when it will take place – time is a key issue for both the coach and the coachee.
- School-based coaches need ongoing support and encouragement from senior leaders and protected time!

It seems appropriate to leave some of the final words to the interviewees as they sum up the impact coaching has had on them and their schools.

“Understand that coaching is one strategy amongst others – the clever bit is to know when to use it.” (primary head)

“Really the essence of coaching is what has happened here. The changes in this school in one year have been monumental – the atmosphere is completely different.” (primary middle leader)

“Coaching is a model that has been quite fundamental in an understated way. Coaching is going to become more important.” (primary middle leader)

It seems reasonable to conclude that this is the time for coaching – make a start!

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Appendix 1: Gathering and making sense of the interview data

Selecting the participating schools

The six institutions were selected on the basis of knowing that each school had at least one interviewee who had participated in an extended coach development programme. Additionally, these people had indicated that they were employing coaching in some way in their school. They were also asked to identify another interviewee in their own school who had observed their coaching at close quarters and would be able to triangulate their views on what had happened.

The schools were drawn from four differing LEAs. The sample consisted of four primary schools, one special school and a secondary school. The interviewees were all senior or middle leaders. The interviews were conducted between November 2004 and March 2005.

Collecting the data

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were recorded for later analysis. During the interviews the author took handwritten notes and highlighted key themes and central ideas. The direct quotations that appear in the foregoing text were taken directly from these conversations.

The following questions provided the basic structure for each interview:

- What is the definition of 'coaching' in your school?
- How and when do you use coaching to get specific tasks done?
- What impact has coaching had on the work of your school?
- What advice would you give to schools planning to introduce a coaching approach?

The author used these questions to structure the interviews and followed key themes or areas of interest for the interviewee as they emerged.

Analysing the data

The author analysed their handwritten notes and the transcripts of the interviews to identify recurring themes. This research strategy uncovered a number key findings and imperatives for action.

These tentative conclusions were discussed by the interviewees at a recall meeting in July 2005. This was a very productive meeting that helped to shape the nature of the final report.

Constructing the final report

During the write-up phase the author was involved in two initiatives that influenced his thinking. Firstly he was invited as the headteacher representative to a Policy Makers Seminar hosted by the DfES to consider the outcomes of the CUREE Project cited earlier. Secondly, he also participated in the series of Leading Practice Seminars at NCSL that led to the publication of *Leading Coaching in Schools*. Both of these experiences broadened the author's understanding of the national policy context within which his research is located.