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What Is Coaching?

“Coaching” is one of those words that is commonly understood but only vaguely defined. The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes more than a page to the word coach, first used in the 15th century to describe a four-wheeled covered wagon used by royalty. In the 17th century the word morphed from a noun describing a carriage into one denoting “a private tutor who prepares a candidate for an examination.”

A coach is someone who (1) sees what others may not see through the high quality of his or her attention or listening, (2) is in the position to step back (or invite participants to step back) from the situation so that they have enough distance from it to get some perspective, (3) helps people see the difference between their intentions and their thinking or actions, and (4) helps people cut through patterns of illusion and self-deception caused by defensive thinking and behavior.

Robert Hargrove, author of *Masterful Coaching*

Today we coach teams, we coach players, we coach our kids, and we coach our employees. There are birth coaches, executive coaches, and life coaches. In fact, tens of thousands of groups and individuals offer coaching services. Hundreds of organizations will train you to be a coach, and dozens more will certify you once you’re trained. You can find many titles related to coaching at your local bookstore, including *Coaching and Mentoring for Dummies* (Brounstein, 2000). Coaching is all the rage, yet it enjoys no common definition, and little research has been done on its efficacy.

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There are, however, commonalities that apply across the many and varied approaches to coaching, even as it is considered from a number of different viewpoints.

The coach's main role deals with expanding the ability to see contexts, rather than supplying content. The person being coached then sees new ways to utilize existing skills.

Julio Olalla, coach and trainer

The most effective way to forge a winning team is to call on the players' need to connect with something larger than themselves. . . . I've discovered that when you free players to use all their resources—mental, physical, and spiritual—an interesting shift in awareness occurs. When players practice what is known as mindfulness—simply paying attention to what's actually happening—not only do they play better and win more, they also become more attuned with each other.

Phil Jackson, basketball coach and author of *Sacred Hoops*

Start measuring your work by the optimism and self-sufficiency you leave behind.

Peter Block, author of *Flawless Consulting*

A coach is someone who tells you what you don't want to hear so that you can see what you don't want to see so that you can be what you've always wanted to be.

Tom Landry, football coach

What coaching does is to expand the space of possibilities that someone is—an expansion that requires an external intervention (coaching) to take place. Coaching allows the coachee to observe oneself as a self, to acknowledge the narrowness and limitations of that self, and to expand that self beyond its boundaries, beyond the horizon of possibilities available to the coachee's own intervention.

Rafael Echeverría, author of *The Art of Ontological Coaching*

Reflection: Based on the quotes you've encountered in this section, what would you say are the key elements of coaching? What knowledge and skills would a leadership coach need to possess?

We consider coaching to be *the practice of providing deliberate support to another individual to help him/her to clarify and/or to achieve goals*. This generic definition applies in many different settings—and in some of them, the label “coach” is never used!

REFLECTING ON THE FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR AS “COACH”

I learned to fly airplanes a few years ago. In many ways, this was the toughest learning challenge I have ever taken on. The learning process had many dimensions. There were the cognitive challenges of learning a new set of theories, rules, and procedures. There were the physical challenges of mastering a new set of motor and perceptual skills. There were the emotional challenges of overcoming the stress and fear I often experienced while at the controls of a small plane.

The cognitive aspects of flying were easy for me to learn and were mostly self-taught. To get a pilot’s license you have to master airspace regulations, navigation, weather, and many other things, some vital, some trivial. In order to prepare for the Federal Aviation Administration written examination, I studied a text, listened to audiotapes, and practiced with test preparation software. I scored 98 percent on the written exam. As proud as this 40-something was of his score, he was far short of being a pilot.

The real work of learning to fly takes place in the company of a Certified Flight Instructor (CFI). This is a one-on-one relationship. From the first lesson, the student sits in the pilot’s seat, the CFI alongside. A CFI draws upon a variety of strategies. Typically, new maneuvers are explained by the CFI, sometimes demonstrated, and then attempted by the student with the CFI ever ready to intervene. The CFI draws the student’s attention to the indicators, the data sources that measure successful completion of the maneuver. For example, in completing a steep turn, a pilot is expected to maintain a bank angle of approximately 45°, not gain or lose altitude, and roll out of the 360° turn flying in the same direction as when the turn was started. The first time a student makes a steep turn, the CFI talks the student through the maneuver, telling him when to pull or push on the yoke and when to roll out of the turn. After a few rounds of “guided practice,” a student should know the effects of his inputs and should be able to identify, on his own, the reasons for an unwanted altitude gain or a failure to maintain heading. Establish trust, demonstrate competence, observe the student pilot, and provide feedback—this is the work of a CFI.

But it is not this simple. Flying is a high-stakes business; small mistakes can lead to fatal consequences. When a CFI certifies that a student is ready to take the practical flight test, he or she is attesting to that student’s capacity to take friends and family safely aloft, alone, into the wild blue yonder in a flimsy assembly of aluminum and steel.

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When I had a panic attack early in my flight instruction and wanted to get on the ground immediately, my flight instructor complied. He also insisted, after a bitter cup of hours-old coffee, that we go up again. He asked that I relax while he ran through a series of stalls, killed the engine, and brought the plane down to a safe and quiet landing.

When I forgot to retract the plane's flaps at takeoff, resulting in a dangerously sluggish performance, he did not say a thing. When I turned to him and asked if something might be wrong, he suggested that I look at the plane's controls. I never attempted to take off again without checking the flap lever.

When, in my CFI's judgment, I was ready to fly solo, he stepped out of the plane and sent me off, linked to him only by a scratchy radio. When I was ready to fly my first cross-country flight, he reviewed my planning and released me for the trip. He was at the other end of the phone when I called to announce that I had made it back alive.

My experience learning to fly has shaped my conception of adult coaching. I suggest that we think of the Certified Flight Instructor as we develop a model of coaching. Here are some of the characteristics of the CFI's role and practice that also apply to leadership coaching:

- The CFI's job is goal-oriented: to prepare pilots to meet a set of well-articulated performance standards.
- The CFI works one-on-one with students, designing lessons and activities around individual needs.
- At times, the CFI provides direct instruction, explaining, demonstrating, and walking students through maneuvers.
- At times, the CFI observes while a student completes maneuvers independently, for the purpose of gathering data and proving feedback and to assess and build the student's capacity to complete maneuvers without a CFI alongside.
- A CFI seeks assurance that a new pilot is able to make high-stakes decisions and can respond to unexpected events safely and independently. To this end, CFIs use both simulations and the observation of performance in real situations as coaching and assessment tools.
- CFIs attend not only to skill but also to perception and emotion. They teach pilots which instruments and feelings to trust, and which to ignore. They help pilots learn to "fly the plane," ignoring distraction and emotion. They attend to the stress and fear that often accompany flight instruction.

I don't know which is more high stakes or unforgiving, flying a small plane or leading a school. I know that in both cases, the support of a CFI—or a coach—can make the difference between going places or "crashing and burning" when you're in that pilot's seat—or occupying the principal's chair—alone.

OUR DEFINITION OF COACHING

Coaching has been embraced by the private sector because it is a proven strategy for increasing the productivity and effectiveness of managers and executive leaders. As a means of providing deliberate support to clarify and achieve goals, coaching is also well suited to the needs of adult learners in the public sector. In *Why Can't We Get it Right?: Professional Development in Our Schools*, Marsha Speck and Carroll Knipe outline a number of research findings regarding adult learning that help to explain the success of coaching:

Adults will commit to learning when they believe that the objectives are realistic and important for their personal and professional needs. They need to see that what they learn through professional development is applicable to their day-to-day activities and problems.

Adults want to be the origin of their own learning and should therefore have some control over the what, who, how, why, when, and where of their learning.

Adults need direct, concrete experiences for applying what they have learned to their work.

Adult learners do not automatically transfer learning into daily practice. Coaching and other kinds of follow-up support are needed so that the learning is sustained.

Adults need feedback on the results of their efforts.

Adult learners come to the learning process with self-direction and a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, interests, and competencies. (p. 109)

Direct, job-embedded coaching on a one-to-one basis responds to each of these characteristics of adult learners, whether they lead schools or private enterprises. Effective leadership coaching incorporates a number of key elements:

The coach constructs a relationship based upon trust and permission. True coaching cannot take place in the absence of a trusting relationship. The coachee must be willing to participate in the process—to learn, to grow, and to change in fundamental ways—and feel safe enough to open up and show vulnerability around the most sensitive issues of professional practice. It is the coach's responsibility to encourage this by working continually to build trust and permission. While these dynamic characteristics of the coaching relationship may fluctuate from one instance to the next, they should deepen and strengthen over time.

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The coach serves as a different observer of the coachee and the context.

One of the most important assets brought by a coach to the coaching relationship is fresh perspective. A coach provides the coachee with data and feedback about the coachee's behavior and the specific situation that may lead to new ways of acting. A golf pro, for example, may help a client make major improvements by pointing out what seem to be minor distinctions in the way the client holds a club. A leadership coach might use a 360° survey instrument to help a principal recognize that he or she is perceived as unfair because of the ways in which he or she interacts with some staff members.

The coach and coachee recognize that problems and needs are valued learning opportunities. It was Michael Fullan who penned the words, "problems are our friends" (1993, p. 21). Every problem presents an opportunity to learn and to grow by recognizing systemic issues that, if addressed, can lead to significant improvements. In the coaching process, problems and needs are sought out and embraced. This concept is at the heart of most coaching interactions.

The coach must be prepared to apply a variety of coaching skills as appropriate to the context and needs of the coachee. Effective coaches must master a number of fundamental skills, including listening, paraphrasing, questioning, and assessing the specific needs and contexts of the coachee.

The coach must be prepared to apply a variety of coaching strategies as appropriate to the context and needs of the coachee. Effective coaches often use multiple strategies during the course of any given coaching session. The coach may play a *facilitative* role, guiding the coachee to learning through the use of feedback and reflective questions. At other times, the coach might play an *instructional* role and provide expert information, advice, and resources. We call this approach *Blended Coaching Strategies* and believe its use is the foundation of an effective leadership coaching practice.

The coach is fully present for and committed to the coachee. A coaching relationship is unlike most other human relationships in the degree to which the coach attends to the coachee. Some coaches describe coaching as entering an altered state, a unique place where all of their experience, skill, and awareness is focused upon one other human being. The coaching relationship is all about the coachee and helping the coachee achieve specific goals. If you watch a videotape of a coaching session with the sound turned off, you will have no trouble distinguishing the coach from the coachee. A skilled coach directs all attention to the coachee and listens on multiple levels.

The coach provides emotional support to the coachee. Many leadership positions—including those of school leaders—are isolated and emotionally challenging. It is an important role of the coach to provide emotional support, offer encouragement, and help the leader maintain motivation and focus.

The coach maintains a fundamental commitment to organizational goals as agreed to by the coachee, and appropriately pushes the coachee to attain them. Although it results in more positive feelings about oneself and one's position, coaching is not intended merely to make leaders feel good, or help them be popular, or ensure that they survive in their jobs. Coaching instead is directed to the attainment of consensual goals. In the case of school leaders, this means helping them make a positive difference for the students at their sites. An effective coach always looks beyond and beneath any presenting problem, issue, or need, in order to find opportunities for growth and action that will help the coachee establish goals and make plans to achieve them. The coach also holds the coachee accountable to move forward with those plans.

The coach practices in an ethical manner. Professional ethics are critically important in coaching. Careers often hang in the balance, and high-stakes, rough-and-tumble politics sometimes come into play. Coaches must commit to confidentiality. They must carefully and explicitly negotiate their relationships with their coachees' supervisors. They must also be sensitive to and disclose promptly any personal biases, relationships, and histories that might impact their coaching, and they must comply with their agreements with their coachees and other clients.

WHAT COACHING ISN'T

In order to clarify the concept of coaching, it's useful to consider what coaching is *not*, and to review some of the practices that are sometimes confused with it.

Coaching is not training. Coaching addresses the needs of the individual rather than conveying a particular curriculum. While coaching can and often does support training activities, training is top-down and centered on content. Coaching, by contrast, is centered on context and designed to respond to the needs of the individual learner.

Coaching is not mentoring, although effective mentors use coaching skills and strategies. The terms *coach* and *mentor* are sometimes used interchangeably. For the purposes of our work, however, we define a mentor as an organizational insider who is a senior expert and supports a novice.

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A coach is typically from outside the organization and is not necessarily senior—in age or depth of related professional experience—to the coachee. In our experience, novice principals benefit from having both a mentor *and* a coach. A mentor might be that veteran principal across town whom a novice can call to find out what procedures to follow to get her building painted, or how to work productively with the union representative, or whether she really needs to attend the upcoming meeting at the district office. Mentors can show newcomers the ropes in a number of situations. A coach, on the other hand, provides continuing support that is safe and confidential and has as its goal the nurturing of significant personal, professional, and institutional growth through a process that unfolds over time. A coach brings an outside perspective and has no stake in the status quo in an organization. Coaching is a professional practice; mentoring is typically voluntary and informal.

Coaching is not supervision, but effective supervisors coach a lot. There are distinct differences between the roles of coach and supervisor. A supervisor has the authority to give direction; a coach does not. A supervisor has an explicit role in determining a subordinate's employment status; a coach does not. A supervisor may be obliged to report on an individual's progress and problems to a superintendent or school board, while a coach can assure a coachee of confidentiality. A supervisor may have influence over the context an individual works in and the resources available to that individual; a coach does not. However, effective supervisors use coaching skills and strategies most of the time with their supervisees (and therefore have something to gain by applying the strategies and skills outlined in this book) and understand that most of the time their role is the same as that of a coach: to nurture growth in their subordinates.

Coaching is not therapy. An effective coach uses many of the same skills and strategies used by therapists. However, therapy focuses on the individual's psychological function, while coaching focuses on the accomplishment of professional goals. Therapy involves understanding an individual's past; coaching helps the individual change an organization's future. Therapy often treats issues of individual dysfunction or pathology; coaching occurs within the boundaries of normal professional issues. It is important that coaches be aware of these boundaries; while they do not aspire to the role of therapist, coaches should be prepared to suggest that coachees seek additional help if personal situations warrant.

LEADERSHIP COACHING FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Effective school leadership coaching derives from consideration and thoughtful application of each of these elements: what coaching is, and what it is not.

School leaders are accomplished individual adult learners who are goal oriented and have very diverse needs. They are often expert in pedagogy and tend to resent and reject poorly designed and delivered professional development. However, they are likely to embrace effective coaching.

In our work around the country, we have asked hundreds of principals how they acquired the many skills and the broad knowledge essential to their jobs: in the teaching role, in preservice and inservice programs, through life experience, or on the job? They report that their most important learning takes place on the job—and note that preservice programs are among the *least* significant sources of preparation for the principalship. This is supported by a recent survey conducted by Public Agenda, in which 80 percent of superintendents and 69 percent of principals reported that graduate programs do not meet the needs of today's school leaders (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001). This may be attributable more to the complex nature of the principalship than to the quality of preservice programs.

It's hard out there in the landscape of school leadership. It can be brutal and lonely work. Principals often feel vulnerable and insecure. Our research tells us that their outlook and attitudes about their profession run through cycles ranging from desperation to optimism. It is no surprise, then, that principals frequently turn to their coaches for empathy and reassurance in addition to professional support.

We do not believe that coaches should serve their coachees simply as unquestioning cheerleaders. However, the coaching relationship will be strengthened if the coach communicates confidence in the coachee and if the coach recognizes that an appropriate element of her role is to convey enthusiasm for the coachee, for the coaching process, and for the work of school leadership.

Because a successful coaching relationship is based on trust and rapport, coachees believe in and respect their coaches. When a coach expresses confidence in a coachee, it has a significant impact on the coachee's outlook and performance—an impact that should not be underestimated. Indeed, an important part of the coach's role is to help coachees build and maintain self-confidence and commitment to their jobs. There are times when the most helpful thing a coach can do is lead the coachee through an inventory of the things that are going right and make note of the coachee's strengths. On some occasions, a coach can provide a great service by simply pointing out that the coachee's problems are not unique and offering assurances that they will be overcome. This, of course, is accomplished without a trace of dismissiveness or discounting the nature or seriousness of the problem.

Implicit in the relationship between a coach and coachee is the agreement by which the pair has set goals and in which each party has given certain permissions to the other. We suggest that fairly early in the relationship, as trust and rapport are being built, the coach and coachee have a conversation in which each outlines his or her expectations. Included in the conversation should be considerations such as:

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- Developing a shared understanding of coaching
- Clarifying specific goals and focus areas for the coachee's professional growth
- Confirming confidentiality
- Establishing frequency of meetings
- Identifying means of communication
- Affirming commitments to openness
- Outlining activities to be observed and mechanisms for data gathering
- Discussing relationships and communication with supervisors
- Devising mechanisms for reevaluating and revising the relationship

Resource B at the end of this book contains an information sheet titled *Making the Most of Coaching*, developed to provide new coachees with a straightforward explanation of the coaching process. Also included is a sample agreement spelling out basic expectations, to be signed by all parties in a coaching relationship.