

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP COACHING: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?*

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1 Introduction

1.1

"Having the opportunity to collaborate and share ideas and experiences has had the greatest effect because principals do not have the opportunity to share and reflect with each other."

- An elementary principal in her second year reflects on her experience with coaching

No one can dispute the fact that a school leader's job has become progressively more complex and difficult. With the increased accountability in our schools, addressing the diverse needs of our students, ensuring equity for all students, and a plethora of other issues, the challenges facing the principal of the past bear little resemblance to what educational leaders face today (Bossi, 2007, O'Donnell & White, 2005; Fullan, 2003, Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2009).

It is becoming increasingly evident that previous models and styles of management no longer provide principals with the necessary leadership skills needed to adapt to rapidly changing situations which have never been seen previously in the profession. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) capture the essence of this dilemma when they wrote of the difference between technical and adaptive leadership, in which leaders can no longer rely merely on technical expertise to solve problems, but on seeking solutions that are "... adaptive because

*Version 1.1: Feb 2, 2010 3:29 pm US/Central

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they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community” (p. 13).

Simply stated, in the dynamics of rapid educational change, principals are often not prepared for the multiple and dynamic issues that they face. With these challenges, principals need support to be successful. Leadership coaching is increasingly viewed as a means to support principals and others in leadership positions to meet the increased demands placed upon them (Knight, 2008; Lovely, 2004; Moore, 2009; Reeves & Ellison, 2009; Robertson, 2009).

Leadership coaching and/or mentoring in California is provided by several organizations including Pivot Learning Systems, the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) employing the CLASS model developed by the New Teacher Center of The University of California Santa Cruz, several county offices of education throughout the state, the California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators (CALSA), and WestEd. Additionally, other organizations and individuals, both public and private, offer coaching and/or mentoring support to principals and other educators in leadership positions. It has been estimated that over 500 school leaders currently receive some type of coaching support in the state (ACSA, 2009).

With the collaboration of Pivot Learning Partners (formerly Springboard Schools), ACSA, and the New Teacher Center, a survey instrument that addressed aspects of leadership coaching was developed, reviewed for validity by several coaching experts, and then sent to 319 school leaders who were reported to have received coaching in the past year. A broad research question guided the study: What does leadership coaching look like? A total of 94 usable responses were received for a 29.4% response rate. The responses paint a broad picture of current leadership coaching.

2 Who’s Receiving Coaching and What Does it Look Like?

Of the 94 respondents, 63.8% (60) were female, 36.2% (34) were male and the average age was 47.0 years with 4.5 years in their present position. Principals represented 83% (78) of the respondents, with 10.6% (10) serving as vice-principals or learning directors, and 6.4% (6) in other positions of leadership. The respondents represented a total of 89 schools in 51 school districts throughout California. The respondents worked in elementary schools: 61.7% (58), K-8 schools: 2.1% (2), middle/intermediate schools: 13.8% (13), high schools: 17.0% (16), and district or county office: 5.3% (5). Respondents indicated an average of 1.7 years of receiving coaching.

The frequency of the coaching sessions varied somewhat with one half of the respondents indicating that coaching sessions take place twice a month. Approximately 30% indicated that the sessions take place once a week. Slightly less than 20% indicated that coaching sessions take place once a month or less. Table 1 provides details of the responses.

How often do coaching sessions take place?

Frequency of Coaching Sessions	Percent of Respondents	N
Usually once a week	30.2%	26
Usually twice a month	52.3%	45
Usually once a month	17.4%	15

Table 1

NOTE: Responses may not total 100% due to rounding.

Participants of the survey indicated that almost 75% of the coaching sessions are from one to two hours in length, while approximately 20% of the sessions are 2-3 hours or longer. Less than 10% of the respondents indicated that coaching sessions were less than one hour. Four participants indicated “and/or whenever

needed”. This variation in responses may indicate that the frequency and duration is linked to the particular needs of the client. Table 2 provides details of the responses.

Length of time of each coaching session

Length of Coaching Sessions	Percent of respondents	N
Less than 1 hour	7.6%	7
1-2 hours	73.9%	68
2-3 hours	18.5%	17

Table 2

According to the survey results, the respondents indicated coaching sessions almost always take place at the school site of the administrator receiving coaching. However, about two-thirds of the respondents indicated that telephone or email contact also took place. The survey question was designed to provide percentages in several categories which can be observed in Table 3.

Where does the coaching take place?

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never	N of Row
School Site	46.7% (42)	47.8% (43)	4.4% (4)	1.1% (1)	90
Telephone	1.7% (1)	6.9% (4)	82.8% (48)	8.6% (5)	58
Email	7.5% (5)	19.4% (13)	62.7% (42)	10.4% (7)	67

Table 3

NOTE: N of Row values represent the total number of responses for a given location of coaching. Respondents could respond to more than one location.

Approximately one-fourth of the respondents indicated that the coach also works with other persons within their school. In a few cases, the school site coach also worked with district office personnel.

As a broad synthesis of the responses, the study found that leadership coaching generally takes place with a principal who has been in the position from 1-6 years, and the coaching has taken place less than 2 years. Coaching sessions generally take place at the school site, once or twice a month, for 1-2 hours each visit with only the principal and coach present, but telephone and email communication is also common.

3 What Happens During a Coaching Session?

The respondents were asked in an open-ended format what occurs during a coaching session. The responses provided a generalized portrait of content discussed during the coaching sessions.

3.1 The Importance of Confidentiality

Besides setting a time and location for coaching sessions and going over general procedures for the sessions, confidentiality was almost always one of the first guidelines discussed by the coach and client. The coaches often stated in the very first meeting that the specifics of what occurs in the coaching session would remain confidential with the understanding that the coach is required to report to the district (which usually contracts the coaches) on the areas of overall goals set by the district for the coaching. The importance of the confidentiality of the coaching relationship was noted by many respondents. A comment written

by a middle school principal underscores this importance, “The greatest aspect of the coaching for me has been the opportunity to debrief about my own frustrations and concerns with someone who will listen and maintain the confidentiality of the situation.” Another respondent, an elementary school principal, also noted the importance of confidentiality, “The most important aspect of coaching is the personal and confidential relationship that I have. I know that I can tell my coach anything.”

However, trust will not develop in the relationship if the client believes that the coach will report to her/his supervisors details about the coaching conversations. Only two respondents of the 94 surveys returned noted a lack of confidentiality and these were from the same district, possibly referring to the same coach. One respondent noted, “I feel that it is inappropriate for a confidential coach of site administrators to also coach the superintendent or district office personnel.” Another respondent from the same district wrote simply, “Trust is lacking.” From these and many other comments, it is clear that confidentiality is a key aspect to developing a successful coaching relationship and is generally dealt with at the beginning of the coaching relationship.

3.2 Setting Goals

Coaches often spent time within the first few sessions setting specific goals with the client. Generally, the district had stated goals related to increasing student achievement. One respondent wrote about the regular conversations with the coach regarding progress towards goals, “I enjoyed having the coach come regularly to discuss my progress, goals and impact upon students and staff.” A middle school principal referred to a specific district initiative regarding instruction that was a goal discussed in the coaching session, “We regularly discuss our work with Explicit Direct Instruction and our progress in implementation.” Another principal responded to the prompt by referring to a school initiative, “Setting goals with a coach and discussing the positive and negative affects helps to secure confidence and meaningful direction for our professional learning communities.”

3.3 Debriefing Recent Situations and Issues

Other responses indicated that the coach often begins a session by asking the client to debrief recent events and issues. The coach will then ask further questions of the client regarding specific aspects of the situations or issues. Several respondents, including the middle school principal quoted earlier regarding confidentiality, noted the importance of debriefing and discussing issues. An elementary superintendent/principal wrote, “Being able to reflect with someone who has a vast amount of educational knowledge has helped me see the other side of the coin...” Another superintendent/principal of a small district noted how the debriefing has lead to valuable feedback, “Open dialogue has led to my participation in developing a vision for our district and ongoing debriefs have given me constant and immediate feedback on specific situations.”

3.4 Pushing the Client with Probing Questions

A number of responses indicated that the coaching relationship was based on trust and understanding and that the coach would often push the client to think and act in new ways. A middle school principal wrote, “My coach is an extremely effective listener and is especially good at asking probing questions that require me to question my practice, but in a way that allows me to grow professionally.” An elementary principal provided insight into the skill of the coach in pushing the client as well as the shared commitment that has been built between coach and client, “. . .knows when to push me and under what conditions. The commitment to developing a professional relationship to improve student learning is the foundation for what we do with our time.” A high school assistant principal wrote, “I really appreciated her questioning techniques and ability to push us towards our vision and goals.”

3.5 Knowledge and Experience of the Coach

While a primary role of a coach is to ask questions that help the client think deeply and to explore new ways of thinking, the coach is often a seasoned expert who has knowledge and experience in key areas. A number of responses referred to the knowledge and experience of the coach as positive aspects of the coaching relationship. A high school principal wrote, “My coach has an incredible knowledge base and has an uncanny ability to provide, share, and instill these understandings.” An elementary principal referred to his coach’s knowledge of school reform, “The ability to openly discuss areas of concern and to be able to bounce ideas off someone who is knowledgeable in school reform.” A veteran elementary principal noted that even an experienced principal can benefit from the knowledge and experience of the coach, “Since I am a veteran principal, the best effect was a knowledgeable coach who I can discuss ideas with and come up with action strategies that work.” Another high school principal noted the value of experience, “The connection and insights of a veteran administrator. I feel confident that my coach is current in the field and lends accurate information. This knowledge base has been instrumental in guiding me as I lead and cultivate plans for the school’s future.” Finally, an elementary principal referred to the value of having a coach bring ideas from other schools, “My coach brings forth personal, current experience along with examples and models from other schools that he has been visiting. As we collaborate, he shares simple, manageable, ideas for implementation.”

3.6 Best Practices

A few respondents noted that their coaches had specific knowledge with regard to educational best practices that influence student achievement. An elementary principal wrote of the role of the coach in providing both the principal and the staff with information about best practices, “Our coach has been instrumental in guiding administration and teachers with best practices.” A superintendent/principal referred to the best practices research brought by the coach, “Best Practices are a meaningful tool by ensuring that focus of all stakeholders on the practices that will have a deep impact on student learning.” A high school principal noted the value of, “. . .time for collaboration with an educated colleague who is current on best practices and recent research.” Another high school principal wrote, “My coach has offered a great amount of information and support for identifying and implementing best practices.”

3.7 Inspiration

The responses from the 94 participants in the study were overwhelmingly positive about having a coach to reflect with, who asked probing questions, and who had a sound knowledge base. Several respondents referred to the inspiration they felt when working with their coach. In the words of a high school principal, “The greatest aspect of coaching for me is to better understand what it is to become an effective leader. My coach has inspired me to be the best possible leader I can be. He has given me the tools that I need to achieve and become successful. Every time that we have a session together, I am inspired to become the best leader not only to my staff, but to my students and community as well. I have grown so much this year with the help of my coach and it is a direct reflection of how the culture of my school has developed.”

3.7.1

NOTE: Donald Wise is an Associate Professor of Education Administration at CSU Fresno and a leadership coach for Pivot Learning Systems. The author wishes to thank Pivot Learning Systems, the Association for California School Administrators, and the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz for their assistance with this research.

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²<http://www.acsa.org/MainMenuCategories/ProfessionalLearning/>