

Why coaching should be an integral part of professional development in schools.

A think-piece by Jan Rudge

Reality: Having had the opportunity to lead professional development for some years now and the privilege of working with aspiring middle leaders through to head teachers, one fact is abundantly clear to me, our leaders and teacher NEED and APPRECIATE time to professionally reflect and this is simply not seen as a priority in the vast majority of our schools.

Teachers are told that to enable children students to have time to process and articulate their learning is an indicator of outstanding practice, YET the same message is not being heard as a key message of professional practice.

WHY is this? And interestingly why do top businesses invest in coaching for their CEO's and yet this is not common in educational settings?

Is there not a gap between a learning profession who are not encouraged to reflect, learn and self-improve, (apart from in their personal time) yet this is what we as a teaching profession seek to impart to others?

Of course the plethora of research opportunities, self directed or part of larger studies provide some opportunity to do this, over and above daily classroom practice, but to what extent does this cover the chance to have a person's (a coaches) undivided attention focused on just your own thinking and processing? And to take this one step further, providing a neural pathway to form the mental creation of a new action or course of actions, followed by the physical creation leading to change (Stephen Covey: The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People")

In the professional development programmes I am part of, the evaluation of each programme is integral to the future development of both content and structure of our future programmes.

If we take the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit as an interesting example, it has been proven that feedback and metacognition score the highest (+8) on effective Teaching and Learning strategies. So this leads to the question if this is good for pupils/students, is it good for adults too? Does the same learning philosophy not apply?

Let's take feedback; when was the last time YOU had premium time to focus on your professional practice and improvement? Then, to what extent did that feedback lead to a paradigm shift or even a slight change in a pre-determined course of action? In other words had impact on your metacognition.

My belief is that a coaching strategy will score highly addressing both feedback on practice and metacognition.

What has led to the writing of this think-piece?

Recent evaluations of our Coaching Skills training, has shown more strongly this year than in previous reviews the lack of coaching cultures in our schools.

Compare this with the 24 schools in the English Schools Foundation in Hong Kong who are now heavily investing in creating and testing the impact of coaching in a school environment, including supervision of coaches, QA processes and impact measures. This is their number one school improvement priority and the timeline is a three-year priority.

What do we know?

- **People attend training BUT opportunities are not provided for them to practice and further develop their skills in school.** This is frustrating (learning an exciting new skill, but few people being interested enough to have a conversation about it and celebrate your learning, let alone help to further utilise and develop these new skills.)
- Many current school leaders cannot articulate the difference between coaching and mentoring and if there is a school strategy it is often spoken about as a coach goes into your classroom observes your lesson and then feedbacks and you reflect on it. Personally I believe this is mentoring or professional dialogue. In a true coaching context the coachee determines the focus of the coaching conversation and thus seeks to find solutions to their challenges. This leads to greater self awareness (as the coach poses questions to provoke deeper thinking or uncover limiting self beliefs) and greater self improvement/development
- **It will truly only work as a strategy if the HEAD believes in the power of coaching and models this, together with the SLT.**
- THEN it can be rolled out as a strategy to all staff; it NEEDS to be a whole school focus (as in Hong Kong) if it is to be most effective.
- Once a leader has attended coaching skills training they WANT to practice, to have opportunities to coach each other, but often there is no structure in school to enable this.
- Schools need to develop structures such as a coaching circles to engage learners further, to deepen their knowledge, practice and understanding, a lead practitioner can develop this in a school or in a MAT/collaborative.
- Coaching is about self-development, it needs to be NORMAL practice within school and then normal practice within our classrooms.

Problems or challenges?

- Not enough **time** to take on another strategy: REALLY? What is we could prove it aids retention of staff? Leads to less time off with stress related conditions? Aids motivation thus develops more engaged and productive staff? I really believe this is possible but sorry, I can't prove it.....yet!

- It costs **money!** Schools have the freedom to be creative; anything is possible if you believe. We all have the same hours in each day; this doesn't mean we are equally effective using them. Paying for a staff member to attend training and not using it productively in school is not good value for money.

Solution focused leadership / Courageous leadership

- Most leaders enjoy learning, in the most effective teams we know the best composition is a strengths based model of different abilities, sharing the same culture and values.
- If we combine a strengths based approach with ideal team players and add a coaching culture into the mix we have a solution focused team where each person KNOWS their contribution and delivers according to school /individual needs. It is flexible and does not spend huge amounts of time discussing strategies without execution and influence. (Interesting fact: Google meetings last a maximum of 30 minutes) It knows the importance of relationship building in the successful achievement of goals.

Reactive leadership

- It's all about the data.
NO! It's all about providing our children/students with the best education that we can, factoring in all aspects of the school's current position.
- Time to reflect is hard to measure.
"How soon can I get impact?"
"We tried coaching briefly but it didn't seem to be working."
- We need to focus on driving standards, more drop ins; book scrutinies; more focus on the negative (what you now need to improve)

Sir David Carter: National School Commissioner spoke at the West Midland School Leaders conference (May 2016) and suggested schools go through the following four stages:

1. De-clutter (the school is broken)
2. Repair (taking control from the chaos, reactive decision making, making the school feel normal)
3. Improve: Pro-active Leadership (strategies start to embed, outcomes are never as bad again)
4. Sustain: confident and innovative risk-taking re delivery of T&L

I would align with this thinking, yet at each stage of development a school needs to reflect on the strategic thinking of the SLT who must re-align with each other to ensure CLARITY of message and the over-communication of this CLEAR MESSAGE. What a leader says is not always what is heard! Test this out yourself.

OPTIONS

We can either continue to send staff on coaching skis training, develop their skills to coach and then NOT USE THESE.

Outcome: frustration and demoralised staff

We can commit to supporting staff and once trained ENSURE we provide a structure to develop their skills in their teams and wider structures in and across schools. This will include a structured school feedback conversation and the provision of at least one opportunity being created for coaching skills to be utilized.

Outcome: School cares about me as an individual and wants to help me further develop skills they have PAID for me to acquire.

We can ensure it is the remit and a requirement of each SLT member to have a coach (external or from a peer or partner school) and to have at least one session per half term with a focus on establishing a coaching culture in their schools.

Outcome: Staff at all levels will have leaders who value self-development and self awareness, who have an awareness of others and develop relationships at all levels, or to put it another way emotionally intelligent leadership.

jan_rudge@yahoo.co.uk

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