

Educational Leadership

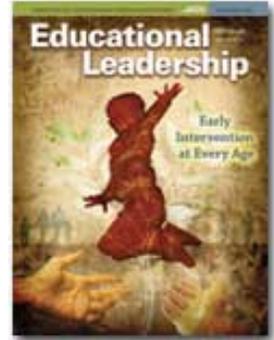
October 2007 | Volume 65 | Number 2

Early Intervention at Every Age Pages 89-90

Leading to Change / Coaching Myths and Realities

Douglas B. Reeves

Remember when the coach was the man on the sidelines wildly gesturing his team on to victory? Now the proliferation of instructional coaches, leadership coaches, and life coaches has made the term *coaching* less precise. Recent research on coaching provides some practical advice on mistakes to avoid and opportunities to pursue to get the most from a coaching relationship.



October 2007

What Is Coaching. . .

. . . and who does it? The answers vary widely. The Harvard Business School model (Luecke, 2004) suggests that managers should use coaching strategies to improve the performance of their direct reports. Goldsmith and Lyons (2006), by contrast, suggest that the coach be an independent person, not the supervisor of the person receiving coaching. In school systems around the United States, both models are at work; coaches include principals, central office administrators, and superintendents. More commonly, however, coaches in education are independent practitioners, for example, retired administrators who coach new principals, veteran teachers who coach teachers facing challenges, and consultants who provide leadership coaching.

Research on Coaching

Research supporting coaching's effectiveness is inconclusive. In their meta-analysis of research in all fields, Sherman and Freas (2004) found only 131 peer-reviewed studies since 1937; just 56 were empirical and few met standards of reliability. They commented, "Like the Wild West of yesteryear, this frontier is chaotic, largely unexplored, and fraught with risk, yet immensely promising" (p. 84). By contrast, John Birch, an executive coach in New Britain, Connecticut, says coaching has had spectacular results in business (personal communication, August 20, 2007). From having interviewed hundreds of managers from such companies as the Manchester Consulting Company and Booz, Allen, and Hamilton, he concludes that coaching improved productivity, led to better relationships, and enhanced teamwork and job satisfaction.

How do we sort out the conflicting claims about coaching? The best place to start is with greater precision in defining what coaching is and is not in the context of schools.

Two Coaching Models

Two differing definitions of the coach's role seem to predominate. In one version, the coach is a cross between a bar-stool buddy and a therapist—a trusted ally with whom you can blow off steam and who will support you in a hypercritical world. The focus of this coaching role is on the short-term emotional needs of the leader rather than the performance needs of the school or district. Because coaches are rarely licensed therapists, this coaching role may serve neither school nor individual well. Leaders suffering from stress and anxiety may need a therapeutic intervention, perhaps including appropriate medical care. Using a coach for such purposes is counterproductive.

The second version of coaching focuses on individual or school performance. Performance coaching begins with a learning agenda and includes experimentation with new leadership strategies, feedback on effectiveness, and a relentless comparison of the present to the ideal state (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). One principal in Nevada, for example, faced exceptional challenges in a chronically underperforming school. She needed advice on how to adjust the schedule, gain faculty support, and add literacy interventions. With the guidance of her coach, she created a flexible schedule, assigned strong teachers to students with the greatest needs, and communicated clearly and consistently with her district supervisor. As is the case in many large school systems, her supervisor was responsible for more than 20 schools and was focused on crises and correcting mistakes. The coach for this principal, on the other hand, was consistently available with support and practical guidance.

When Is Coaching Useful?

The first requirement of effective coaching is that the person receiving the coaching agrees that a change in performance will be useful. Throwing coaches at teachers and principals who have not agreed that improved student performance is essential will waste time and money.

The second prerequisite of effective coaching is linking learning with performance. Despite hours of formal professional development, educators often have an enormous “knowing-doing” gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) that will not be bridged by yet another seminar, book, or speech. Only with a clear commitment to action will a coaching relationship succeed.

The third requirement for coaching is feedback. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) make clear that specific, accurate, and timely feedback is the missing element in most leadership encounters.

Who Is Qualified to Coach?

My personal online search for organizations that train coaches revealed about 120. Almost all were oriented toward business and life coaching, although several were focused specifically on coaching for education. Nevertheless, just as an advanced degree alone is no guarantee of teaching competence, a certification alone is an insufficient basis on which to engage a leadership coach. One way to select an effective coach is to consider the prospective coach's response to the following key questions.

Who is the client? If the prospective coach insists that the person, rather than the school or district, is the coach's only client, it is a red flag that the personal self-esteem of the leader, not the leader's performance, will be the focus of the coaching relationship.

What are the rules of confidentiality? Although many coaches insist on complete confidentiality, some state laws explicitly limit confidentiality agreements when the safety of students is at stake. The knowledge the coach gains may create a moral obligation to the organization that transcends the bounds of confidentiality. For example, the coach may learn that the leader has a substance abuse problem or is otherwise impaired. If there is a chance that harm might come to students or employees, then the coach's promises of confidentiality may become secondary to the obligation to the client for student and staff safety. The same holds true when a coach becomes aware of behavior—for example, harassment—that may expose the organization to liability.

How will we recognize success? Although it is tempting to say, "We'll be successful when we improve student achievement," that is only part of the equation. After all, it's relatively easy to increase average test scores if you accept a higher dropout rate. Broader performance indicators might include not only organizational performance, but also improvement in specific leadership skills, such as confronting performance issues among subordinates, improving staff relationships, sharpening time management skills, and engaging in personal health practices. Performance goals must be specific and measurable, with the definition of success agreed on by district and school leadership.

When will we conclude the coaching relationship? Here the coaching profession can take a cue from the best therapists who work toward a resolution of specific issues. When coaching goes on for years without a planned conclusion, it is a sign of aimlessness and potential dependency, not the achievement of explicit performance goals. It is much more advisable to establish a time line.

Despite the enormous popularity of coaching, the jury is out on whether coaching is a good use of time and resources. Research on coaching from other fields (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2002) clearly indicates that only coaching with a performance orientation is linked to improved results. Until more education coaching meets that research-based standard, let the buyer beware.

References

- Boyatzis, R. E., & McKee, A. (2005). *Resonant leadership: Renewing yourself and connecting with others through mindfulness, hope, and compassion*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Goldsmith, M., & Lyons, L. S. (2006). *Coaching for leadership: The practice of leadership coaching from the world's greatest coaches* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Luecke, R. (2004). *Coaching and mentoring: How to develop top talent and achieve stronger performance*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Pfeffer, J., & Sutton, R. I. (2000). *The knowing-doing gap: How smart companies turn knowledge into action*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Sherman, S., & Freas, A. (2004, November). The wild west of executive coaching. *Harvard Business Review*, 82–90.

Douglas B. Reeves is Founder of the Leadership and Learning Center; 866-399-6019, ext. 512;
DReeves@LeadandLearn.com

Copyright © 2007 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2007 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development