

# HOW LEADERSHIP COACHING HAS ENRICHED OUR TEACHING\*

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## Abstract

Two university professors share how their involvement in leadership coaching has influenced their teaching practices. They stated that as university students, they learned about leading, but were not taught how to lead. As new professors, they realized that they were utilizing similar teaching strategies as their own teachers, with a minimum of hands-on, practical experiences. Once they were trained as leadership coaches through Springboard Schools and began to spend time at school and district sites coaching principals and superintendents, they found that their teaching strategies changed dramatically. They brought in more current research with examples of practical application in local schools and modeled professional development strategies in their courses. Above all, they found that they connect the worlds of theory and practice on a daily basis.



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As university professors of education administration whose task is preparing future leaders, we both brought a broad background of experience as school and district leaders to the job. However, as we began our new jobs in the university, we became more separated from the day-to-day work of educational leaders who work in a challenging and dynamic environment. We realized how very important it was to keep our work relevant and meaningful, that we establish and maintain close connections with schools and school leaders. We knew that without this we would become increasingly isolated from the real issues of schools.

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As professors, we see our work as providing mental models to candidates for leadership positions that will prepare them to approach issues from a strong grounding of theory and practice. We strive to provide them a framework for understanding the work of administration and their potential roles. We try to help them understand the process of change and the skills needed for facilitating change. We hope to instill a belief system grounded in values that will encourage each student's passion for education to emerge in the context of administrative leadership.

Our histories, though different in many ways, had some interesting similarities. We began teaching at the university level at different times. For both of us, it was relatively easy to merely imitate the models of those who taught us at this level, that is, to simply teach the way that we were taught. When each of us studied at our respective undergraduate and graduate institutions, a predominant number of our own instructors were quite good at presenting theory and information in an engaging manner. Lecture mode was the prevalent instructional strategy we experienced. We found that we were similar in that we took copious notes, memorized processes and details, and wrote our examinations out longhand. We also had similar experience in our own education where we had a few instructors who engaged us in activities, such as bringing in practitioners as guest speakers, having us discuss problems we encountered in our administrative field experiences, or role playing an interview for our first position, that enhanced our understanding of particular topics and/or issues. However, this interactive model of teaching was not the norm in our own education. We completed our preparation programs with an emphasis on knowledge, but far less in usable skills.

When we began our administrative careers in completely different locations, each of us quickly realized that most of what we did in our work on a daily basis was never taught to us by our instructors. This is not because our instructors did not teach us. Indeed, we were well educated in educational foundations, law, finance, personnel, and the steps of the clinical supervision process. However, we were not taught how to create a shared overarching vision of student achievement, to muster the resources of the faculty and community toward that end, and to collect and use data to guide a process of continual improvement. As students, we learned *about* leading, but we were not taught *how to lead*. As professors, we could all too easily follow that same model.

From our experience as educational leaders, we realized that our students needed a much stronger practical base than either of us received in our own preparation. In this article, we discuss how becoming coaches of current educational leaders has enriched our own knowledge base and informed our teaching of future leaders.

We have both served as school principals and superintendents. However, the challenges confronting educational leaders have evolved rapidly in the past few years, especially in this era of high stakes accountability, so much so that the role and responsibilities of educational leaders look quite different than they did just a few years ago. How do we, as professors, keep up with the evolving needs of our students and provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to provide all students with schools that are nurturing while at the same time providing high student achievement?

Both of us became involved with leadership coaching through a highly regarded school/district consulting organization, Springboard Schools (2009). Based in California, Springboard was initially an Annenberg and Hewlett Packard funded organization that supported student achievement and closing the achievement gap in Northern California. Having grown rapidly and now providing services throughout California, Springboard's primary work is providing professional development and coaching for school leaders looking at systems and best practices to raise achievement for all students. Our first introduction to this work was through a series of trainings including their emerging research base on best practices, case studies in teaching and leadership, the skills of effective coaching, and the contextual environment of state and national accountability measures that schools face.

Coaching has been quite common in the world of business and the public sector for some time. A number of studies indicate that coaching has great impact on developing new leaders and improving current leadership behaviors (Gladis, 2007; Olivero, Bane & Kopelman, 1997). In education, leadership coaching is rapidly becoming more common. The websites of the three largest national organizations for educational leaders, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the National Association of Elementary

School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association for Secondary Schools Principals (NASSP), all contain numerous publications regarding mentoring and coaching.

Mentoring and coaching are sometimes used to represent the same set of skills and processes. In the literature, mentoring is often defined as an experienced person providing guidance to someone younger and or inexperienced, while coaching means to transport a valued colleague from where he or she is to where he or she wants or needs to be (Evered & Selman, 1989). However, we do not delineate our work into either mentoring or coaching. They are often blended together. When working with an inexperienced leader, we may spend more time mentoring than coaching. The new leader often has a great need for knowledge about the way things work and simply telling and/or showing what is necessary is sufficient. They often just want advice based on the coach's experiences. However, with an experienced leader, our time may be spent with much more of an emphasis on coaching, where we ask open-ended questions that help stretch the leader to think in new ways and address their most challenging problems. As a coach we approach issues with the belief that the coachee usually has the answers within them and our mission is to help them discover those answers.

We have had different experiences through our coaching. One of us has been a coach for a number of superintendents in a large urban area, while the other is a coach for a number of principals from elementary to high school in four different urban and rural districts in a very different region of California. However, we have found that we share related understandings of the needs of new and experienced leaders.

In our university courses, we spend a great deal of time helping our students understand and practice the processes necessary to build a culture and establish the value systems to make inquiry a central practice in schools. More than ever, we design activities in our course syllabi and classroom assignments around the development of school and district cultures, with the goal of creating professional learning communities where teachers and leaders engage in an ongoing cycle of inquiry that includes looking deeply at data, creating instructional improvement plans and interventions, assessing progress through multiple assessments, revising and refining teacher work and instructional lessons and creating a culture where dialogue and reflection about improving student learning is institutionalized and valued. Our purpose is to teach our students the leverage points that are essential to raising student achievement. We also understand the need to enhance current systems of instructional supervision into powerful vehicles for continuous improvement. We find an overarching framework of all our work and our teaching is within the context of change processes.

As an example of activities in our courses, a typical class session may involve a carefully planned simulation where the class is divided into professional learning communities (PLC). Each PLC is given sample student achievement data for their particular grade level or subject and is given the charge to determine student learning needs from the data. Then the PLCs report out to the faculty (class) as a whole and the faculty determines next steps as a school to improve student learning. In other courses students are given case studies that require them to apply their understandings in areas such as law, finance, personnel, motivation and problem solving in real school and district issues. A debrief after these PLC activities helps deepen the students' understanding of the processes utilized throughout the simulation and the specific leadership skills necessary to facilitate and guide the groups through the various stages.

In our teaching, we now attempt to model the very processes that we use in our coaching. We strive to be careful listeners, to pose questions that provoke deeper reflection by our students, to provide some guidance from the sidelines to allow our students to learn through activities that emulate the situations they will encounter when we are no longer on the sidelines. In short, we endeavor to coach our students to higher levels of understanding and practice of leadership.

In order to be certified leadership coaches, we currently attend one or more multi-day statewide professional development conferences, plus several additional regional trainings each year. The purpose of these trainings is to keep current on best practices and to learn about emerging research in our field while honing our coaching skills. As a basis for our coaching work, we have focused on Robert Hargrove's book, *Masterful Coaching* (2003), as a central resource. During our professional development, we are afforded ample opportunity to share with fellow coaches, in order to provide meaningful context to our learning.

During a typical coaching session with our own clients, we ask for an update on current events and issues in the school or district. We find that it is important to provide this opportunity for contextual issues as part

of our coaching conversation. As trust and the coaching relationship develop we often find our clients anxious to immediately share issues that are currently on their mind. We then review our coaching agreements and possible homework. At the beginning of our coaching, we establish basic norms with our clients and find it useful to review them periodically. One norm, which we have found to be universal among our coaching colleagues, is that of maintaining confidentiality of the specifics of coaching conversations. This is essential to the coaching relationship and allows our clients to share important problems, challenges and needs. As for homework, we have found that many of the most productive coaching occurs when we close a session with a mutually agreed upon assignment for the next session. Most of the rest of the time during our session deals with a discussion of issues and planning, with our goal of framing powerful questions during the conversation to push our client to deeper understandings of her/his own beliefs, actions, and next steps necessary. Our ultimate goal in all cases is the client's success within a context of improving their school or district and the performance of staff and students. All of this ideally takes place within an environment of support—while being a critical friend, a thinking partner and providing honest feedback in the role of coach, mentor, advisor and sometimes trainer or teacher.

Our work in coaching principals and superintendents involves us assisting these leaders to discover new ways of thinking and acting. Hargrove (2003) describes the work of coaches as follows: “Leadership coaching is about inspiring, empowering, and enabling leaders to create an Impossible Future, which they can passionately engage in” (p. 85). We do so with an arsenal of listening and questioning skills, with knowledge of research-based best practices (Just for the Kids, 2009), and a number of tools that we utilize such as rubrics to determine current reality and next steps needed.

On occasion we may share with our clients key articles from educational research or samples of documents that address their current issues, such as a rubric of instructional best practices. At their request, we may observe them in a variety of leadership roles and settings such as staff, parent, or board meetings to provide confidential, supportive feedback for their continuous improvement. In the incredibly busy lives of school leaders, coaching sessions provide them with a time for reflection and planning that they otherwise would not take. Many students speak of the opportunity to focus on what is essential during the hour or two of our sessions. We provide them the honest, supportive feedback that no one else can provide and do so in a context far different from that of their supervisor (or board of education). One veteran high school principal put it in precise terms: “My coach helps to hold me accountable! It is far too easy to let the job of being an instructional leader be overtaken by being a school manager. Having a coach helps keep the focus on students and instruction rather than all the innumerable tasks that take up my time!” (Wise, 2008, p. 8).

What does all of this lead to in our university classrooms? We both find that we now utilize many more anecdotes, case studies, and real-life examples (without violating confidentiality) during our courses. Our work in the field allows us to provide a theoretical background from the course readings and take it immediately to the real life of school and district leaders. We develop activities to help our students learn basic coaching skills, we emphasis problem-solving and tested communication practices, and we have our students participate in activities in our classrooms and at their sites utilizing knowledge of research-based best practices. Working with principals and superintendents “in the trenches” keeps us current with the issues, requirements and skills emerging leaders will face. We help them understand new legislation and accountability requirements from the state and federal government and how those requirements affect their work. We also know the issues current administrators are facing and the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions they will need to be successful now and in the future. However, most of all, we help our students understand ways in which they can create school and district cultures of change and improvement committed to each and every student.

We do not consider ourselves exemplary professors by any means. If there is anything we have learned, it is that as professors, we must be continually learning alongside our students. We must be “professor learners” to do an effective job of preparing our “student learners”. We cannot consider ourselves as sages or mentors, but as facilitators, coaches, and life-long learners, modeling the behaviors that we believe will contribute to our students' own journey to become successful leaders.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.springboardschools.org/>