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Educational Leadership Coaching as Professional Development

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Introduction

As the burden of school leadership continues to increase in complexity, the need for reflective, collaborative leadership surges in tandem. The collaborative approach of educational leadership coaching develops school leaders and teacher leaders into meta-cognitive, reflective practitioners. Shoho, Barnett, and Martinez (2012) posited, “Many school systems are embracing coaching as a way to influence and enhance leaders’ skill development, cognitive abilities, and emotional intelligence” (p. 165). These skilled educational leaders can then seek solutions that allow for the complexity of the school systems while generating positive student outcomes, relational trust, and increased teacher efficacy.

Franklin and Franklin (2012) and Wise and Hammack (2011) framed coaching as a new approach to thinking, leading, and learning, that may help to transform education. School leaders face a daunting challenge as they lead groups of individuals toward the common goals of increased student achievement, increased skill, and knowledge development while balancing political pressure and providing differentiated professional development to the adult learners under their leadership.

When coaching is applied in the educational context, teachers, teacher leaders, and principals can begin to navigate the system with a new attitude and awareness of human potential. Franklin and Franklin (2012) explained, “In the space of little more than a decade coaching has gained a significant foothold in many areas of change management” (p. 33). According to Van Nieuwerburgh (2012), there is a “natural synergy between educational leadership and effective coaching” (p. 27).

Educational leadership coaching is a job-embedded, school-based form of professional development and an approach to transformational conversations that has the potential to change school cultures and improve student achievement (Stevenson, 2009). In this type of professional development, conversations and reflective questions guide educational leaders into metacognitive practices that transform schools. Within a coaching framework exists the potential to transform schools and create student success (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010).

Educational leadership coaching differs from instructional coaching in the sense that a sage is not leading a novice into an area of content expertise. Rather, an educational leadership coach can be a great coach without subject specific knowledge (Reiss, 2007). This is a distinction from

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mentoring where subject-specific knowledge is prized. Whitmore (2014) explained, “The effect of coaching is not dependent on an older, more experienced individual passing down his knowledge. Coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand. That is one of its great strengths” (p. 14).

Theoretical Framework

Shostack (2002) articulated the dual nature of theory in qualitative educational research as both a liberator and an inhibitor of thought. Fullan’s (2012) change theory often was a liberating force while also providing structure and a lens through which to view the studied transformational conversations. Fullan (2012) argued for change that encompasses moral purpose and the expectation that employees can sense the underlying trust and love of their leader. Change was resisted when leaders in the studied district approached teachers in conversation with the intent of creating change in classroom practice; the teacher felt manipulated and that the conversation lacked authenticity. Fullan’s (2012) change theory also encompasses teachers, principals, and central office personal learning from each other called *lateral capacity building*; this philosophy encompasses coaching beliefs and practices.

Literature Review

Coaching is a type of professional development that focuses on clarity of communication and personal empowerment (Reiss, 2009). Educational leadership coaches engage school leaders in purposeful growth conversations that will positively impact collaborative decision making, teacher leadership behaviors and classroom practice. Coaching as leadership development has the ability to transform teachers and principals into effective leaders and systems thinkers who believe in human potential, envision positive outcomes, and understand the importance of student success.

Although school leaders typically have a couple of days at the beginning of the year to devote to professional development, that time alone is insufficient to train and grow teachers. Further, staff meetings can be an excellent time to devote to introducing a new idea, but lack the time and support systems to create real change from a once-a-week check in. Educational leadership coaching offers a solution to this problem. School leaders can begin to coach their teachers, team leaders, and campus improvement teams, creating ongoing professional development through continual, purposeful conversations. Rather than a single event, the professional development becomes an incremental, daily practice. Cheliotis and Reilly (2010) explained, “During the course of a single day, school leaders have dozens of opportunities to effect change through short conversations with staff, students, parents, colleagues, supervisors, and community members” (p. 2).

These conversations, often generated by teachers themselves, allow school leaders to grow their teachers into metacognitive problem solvers. Since the coachee is leading the conversation about an area of concern, the conversation itself is differentiated by interest, expertise, and self-awareness. The ability of coaching to be differentiated and to allow each teacher to learn to solve his or her own problems makes it unique (Knight, 2009). Knight (2009) explained “Coaching is not a quick fix; it is an approach that offers time and support for teachers to reflect, converse

about, explore, and practice new ways of thinking about and doing the remarkably important and complex act, called teaching” (p. 2).

This dual approach, the tailored nature of coaching and the optimism of the process, position coaching as an excellent form professional development. Professional development suffers the same inequities as other school resources, but the importance of coaching is clear. Beneficial professional development “provides continued follow-up, support, and pressure that can only be delivered by a school-based coach” (Sweeney, 2011, p. 31). Aguilar (2013) stressed, “Coaching is a form of professional development that brings out the best in people, uncovers strengths and skills, builds effective teams, cultivates compassion, and builds emotionally resilient educators.” (p. 6)

However, schools that are looking to implement coaching as professional development lack models to guide the process (Wise & Hammack, 2011). In 2011, two studies delved into the role of the principal as coach (Loving, 2011; Stevenson, 2011). However, there is a lack of district-wide coaching in a professional development model.

In this coaching leadership style, the leader still holds the school’s goals, including student achievement, with primacy, however, the school leader encourages the development of creative choices and individual reflection as the process by which school goals are met. Cheliotis and Reilly (2010) explained new leadership practices: “In the new leadership model, the leader does not know all the answers” (p. 11). This creates a shift from the leader telling people what to do to a leader who asks questions, listens, and then responds (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010). Instead of a professional development workshop that occurs once and is an individual process, coaching is an ongoing, shared leadership exercise.

Coaching Develops Relational Trust

The metacognition and self-reflection that is required in coaching conversations aids in the development of relational trust and self-awareness. Aghili (2001) studied coaching in a business environment and found that, “without a strong sense of self-awareness and clear vision, leaders are likely to lack the commitment and the integrity associated with outstanding leadership” (p. 37). Coaching also develops alignment between organizational values and personal ones, thereby developing trust in each coaching relationship. This alignment is necessary for schools to be successful as is evident in the statement by Cheliotis and Reilly (2010): “Through ongoing, respectful coaching conversations, space is provided for personal and professional growth and change within a framework of relational trust” (p. xii).

Additionally, relational trust is key to school improvement. Payne (2008) wrote about persistent failure in urban schools and discovered through research of over 200 Chicago schools that relational trust was key to student success. This relational trust is an irreplaceable resource when aiming from school and student success. Once relational trust has developed, it is more likely that change will occur. Cheliotis and Reilly (2010) underscored this point by stating, “In other words, when coaching conversations are sincere, there is a high probability that trust will grow between the participants and that pathways for growth and change will develop” (p. xiii).

Coaching allows school leaders to build capacity by giving teachers the chance to think deeply to solve problems. Once trust is established, “coaching is a way of listening and speaking to colleagues that assumes a belief that others are whole and capable” (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010, p. 9). By utilizing coaching as way of approaching conversations, the paradigm changes from telling and dictating to reflecting and owning. Leaders often encounter resistance in their efforts to turn around areas of low performance. Coaching can be a way for leaders to positively deal with resistance from teachers. Instead of fighting resistance with resistance, a coach-leader builds on positives to create growth. Coaching offers another avenue for dealing with resistant teachers. Transition into quote “Coaching provides a methodology and skills for confronting resistance, a thorn in the side of leaders everywhere. The coaching process, done well, reveals what lies beneath resistance” (Reiss, 2009, p. 178).

Data and Methods

The setting of the study was a small suburban district in north Texas containing one elementary school, one intermediate school comprised of 4th and 5th grades, one 6th-8th middle school, and one 9-12th high school campus. The district rating was *met standard*, according to the state of Texas accountability system.

This setting has particular relevance toward coaching research focused on educational leadership. The unique coaching hybrid used by the district is comprised of professional development in the art of coaching by an outside coaching consultant, followed by an expectation to train their team in the coaching behaviors in order to create a coaching culture in the organization.

For this study, coaches who underwent formal coach training from the external coach were invited to participate. This included 20 invitees, four of whom were current administrators. All invitees who accepted the invitation to participate in the study were interviewed. The target population for the current study included teacher leaders, campus administrators, and central office personnel. All participants were current employees of the district and had participated in formal coach training with the external coach, coaching conversations with their teams, and coaching staff development.

Data collection was facilitated through the use of open-ended interview questions to answer the following research questions:

1. How do coaches perceive that coaching impacts shared leadership?
2. How do coaches perceive that coaching impacts instructional decisions?
3. What are coaches' perceptions of coaching on team member relationships?

District and campus leaders with coach training were the participants in the study. The district offered coach training to administrators, office personnel, curriculum coordinators, and team leaders. Coach training occurred in the district for six years, led by an outside coaching consultant licensed by the International Coaching Federation.

Once district coaches were trained by the outside consultant, they were expected to train their teams on the coaching behaviors they had learned. The district called this the *trainer of trainers* model. These district coaches were called on to provide coach training and modeling during professional development in addition to facilitating coaching conversations with their staffs and

teams. It is important to note that these trained coaches participated as both coaches and coachees in coaching conversations. In the current study, coaches were assigned numbers as pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

The current study addressed the research questions with a broad understanding of the complexities of the coaching implementation. The interview protocol contained 13 questions designed to understand the coaches' perceptions of the implementation, including their perceptions of the original purpose of the staff development, the training component, and their perceptions of its effects on coaches and coachees.

The participants had between two and 20 years of teaching experience. Both genders were represented in the study. Approximately one-third of the participants had earned advanced degrees and all participants had received state certification and had participated in district-initiated coach training consisting of staff development sessions, coaching conversations with the consultant, and leading coaching conversations with others.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and all interview data were entered into NVivo 10, a computer program for qualitative data analysis. Interviews were transcribed. Following data transcriptions, the coaches participated in member checks. Member checks consisted of each participant reading the transcript of the interview and clarifying their responses. With member checks, the researcher was assuring trustworthiness of the participants' responses. Word counts and other representations of these were analyzed including word and phrase frequency and co-occurring word diagrams. Each interview was read several times, and the answers were coded into nodes (themes) and connections between data were discovered.

Data were triangulated by individual interviews with the coaching consultant. The coaching consultant also shared several PowerPoint presentations she used for training. The researcher explored the original goals for the coaching implementation and compared them to coaches' perceptions of the goals for the implementation. Data were collected on the coaching consultant's views, beliefs, and experiences with the coaching implementation. Data were then analyzed for themes; and once the themes emerged, the researcher conferred with a panel of experts to review the themes discovered (Creswell, 2012).

Of the themes that emerged from the data, this article will address trust and coaching led to an increase of organizational trust and difficult conversations: the implementation of coaching allowed coaches to replace personal biases with objectivity during difficult conversation.

Findings

Data revealed that coaches perceived the critical role that trust played in their relationships. One participant related trust to the ability to find one's own way stating, "coaching makes your relationship stronger because it builds that trust with each other...because whenever you come to me or you allow me to coach, I found that answer within myself. We are stronger when we are working together." Another coach commented that shared trust builds individual strength: "as a result of coaching, the relationship between both people becomes stronger because there is a trust

that's built there...that person is there for you. They want what is best for you." Aligning with the literature, coaching's desire for mutual success was effective in developing trust and allowing deeper, more meaningful conversations (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Mrs. Smith, a veteran team leader, reiterated the concept of personal growth being empowered by a belief that the coach is acting in benevolence and stated, "Having colleagues who I trust and who I know have my best interests or I have those relationships with...probably has made the most growth for me as a teacher." This also illustrates the connections participants noted between trust and transformation. Mr. Jones, a dean at the high school, noted that, due to coaching, relationships are strengthened, "because there's a trust that's built there. I think it's going to have a ripple effect when everyone is really honest and open and willing to make changes."

Coaches saw the potential of coaching if, according to a veteran elementary principal, it is "done correctly and done without threat, it is amazing for team relationships and building rapport." Another participant emphasized the importance of relationships that "build trust...and a bond." She stressed the need for a "deeper level of trust" that had developed and shared, "I feel like we can be honest with each other because we know we are free from judgment when we are in a coaching situation. For some reason, that builds trust within."

The consultant described evidence of trust and relationships prospering, but not to their full capacity. She shared that there were key people who "became masterful at coaching and I saw their relationships improve dramatically. I saw their ability to lead improve. But...overall I'm not sure that I ever saw the communication from teacher to teacher reach the level I hoped it would." This reflection echoed the researcher's concern – the promise of coaching eluded leadership. Perhaps, the leadership failed to develop trust prior to coaching, or perhaps in their coaching behaviors, exhibited manipulative tendencies that broke trust during conversations that should have been transformative.

This was exemplified most clearly when coaches used qualifiers when expressing their support of coaching. Instead of predicted words of full support of the coaching paradigm, coaches used qualifying and conditional words during their interviews such as, "when coaching is done correctly" and "when coaching is authentic". Mrs. Jones used the phrase, "If a coach is sincere..." to convey her mistrust of some of the conversations in which she participated. These qualifiers imply that coaching conversations had undercurrents that teacher leaders sensed and responded to. It is in that nebulous space of trust and fear that coaching conversations should build strong bridges.

These instances display concerns about the sincerity and authenticity of the conversations. Participants seemed to fear the purpose of conversations and attempted to address their concerns with stipulations about how the coaching process is used. When relational threat replaced trust and conversations didn't feel authentic, these dysfunctional conversations undermined the ultimate goals of the coaching implementation. After some of the coaching conversations, the participants walked away feeling manipulated and led. They felt as if the decisions to be discussed had already been made and their opinions should not have been asked. Mrs. Gentry, teacher leader, discussed this phenomena stating, "There have been times where we have felt as though we were being led. Like the line of questioning was more like the skill a police detective might use when they're trying to get you maybe to admit to something."

Coaches had used coaching language, and told the participants it was a coaching conversation. However, the participants revealed their impression that the coaches leading the conversation already had an idea in place. This was clear when a coach that led a failed meeting was a participant in the study said, “I would have an idea for something...guiding them, asking right questions, and then we came up with the solution together.” This coach believed they were both coaching well and guiding people to an answer. This is an inherent contradiction. Although this participant was ignorant to it, a tension developed when participants felt led to preordained outcomes. When school leaders used the conversation to apply subtle pressure toward compliance, participants felt forced and manipulated. Based on participant responses, these misuses of conversation hurt relational trust.

When coaching rules were broken, conversations felt forced to the participants and created a breakdown in both trust and coaching buy in. Mrs. Gentry summarized her thoughts, stating, “The end that’s presented isn’t necessarily what your conclusion might have been, or the groups’ consensus. You feel like you’re being...moved along a predetermined path as opposed to being able to explore all of the options.” Some coaches lost trust in the coaching process when conversations had pre-ordained outcomes. This raises the concern that coaching carries potential for developing great trust, but false or manipulative or leading behaviors in conversations can abruptly end some coaches’ willingness to participate in the coaching process or their desire to create relational trust.

Relationships

The importance of relationships in coaching was accentuated by all participants. Mrs. Smith said, “When you have to have a conversation with someone about...a conflict, a change...if you do it in a coaching way versus a demanding, telling that you’re wrong way, it builds that relationship. It makes you start working stronger together.” Mrs. Central, who works at the district level agreed, “There’s a lot less drama...following the coach-leader mindset...when there’s a true issue you go to one another....If I was having an issue with you and...didn’t feel confident at that moment to go directly to you it keeps everything professional.” Strong relationships between individuals have been proven to be important to school success. Reiss (2009) found that when school and district leaders acquire and utilize coaching skills, “students, teachers, and other staff will feel acknowledged, hopeful, and positive. They will be heard and respected as they observe their own performance and results on the job and explore ways to improve them” (p. 177). When asked about team member relationships, a teacher leader commented, “The way we interact and talk to each other has definitely changed in a positive way.” An assistant principal mentioned, “it is now a safe and comfortable environment.” These improved relationships were perceived by all coaches in the study.

A department chair reflected, “When you have a team that is rich in good listeners—those who have the ability to reflect on the situation—that impacts the team in an amazing way.” Mrs. Jones articulated how her thinking changed and how she began to examine how words would impact the person: “Instead of asking, ‘Did you do that?’ I might think about it and say, ‘When you did that, did you?’ I don’t just try to be fast. Now, I’m intentional about relationships.”

Difficult Conversations

The implementation of coaching allowed the administrators and coaches to replace personal biases with objectivity during difficult conversations. Coaches perceived that, as a result of coaching, their conversations were elevated. They were able to debate while deemphasizing their personal emotions. In some cases, this allowed for the creation of a work environment that was warm and valued everyone's opinion.

Team Leaders were often asked to have difficult conversations in the teams they led. Mr. Bowman was often in the position of leading difficult meetings. Leading does not need to be, in the words of Mr. Bowman, "my way or the highway." Rather, the coach or coachee can "see the other person's side...don't just say, 'this is what it's going to be.'" Further, when coaches were willing to take on difficult conversations and invest time in addressing issues, coaches felt empowered.

Successful difficult conversations can also occur between larger groups. disclosed, "I have seen it improve relationships where maybe it's not one-on-one coaching, but maybe two people and you help them both see and understand what each other is thinking and feeling." Removing personal bias and deemphasizing oneself were important elements of the successful navigation of difficult conversations. Mr. Bowman reflected that before coaching was implemented, "I honestly thought the conversations were about *me*. What am *I* going to say next? What's *my* next thought...I was always trying to stay one step ahead of you...as to my response or my reply." Mrs. Matthew leads a team of elementary teachers and also shared the impact of coaching: "but coaching has given me tools to hear what you say and listen to what you say and not think about what *I* have to say, but think about the situation that *you're* sharing."

By removing personal bias and focusing on what the other person thinks, coaching conversations can help develop a deep relationship out of conflict or tension. Mrs. Wessex shared, "When you put that mirror in front of you sometimes you kind of want to push it away... but it feels so good that...somebody that really understands the depth of what you went through." Other coaches felt coaching through difficult conversations developed respect. An assistant principal, Mr. Ryan, posited about the importance of respect: "sometimes you're having to talk to other people about something that may be difficult for them...and you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Coaching really takes that emotion to the side and it really helps you talk about it." Mr. Jones shared, "at times you have to make yourself vulnerable because that's when we grow the most—from those awkward and uncomfortable situations. If team members can do that, it can make a huge difference for the kids."

Discussion and Implications

Coaching as professional development is a powerful vehicle for transformation of conversations, teachers, and leaders (Showers & Joyce, 1996). When the school district chosen for the study planned their coaching initiative, they envisioned a self-perpetuating change process as Joyce and Showers (1996) purported. The coaches who participated in the study did feel that the training and coaching they used created change and improved practices. When relational trust

was in place, the process became self-perpetuating because coaches had transformational conversations.

Several implications for practice can be addressed. The first implication should be a change in the amount of time devoted to coaching. Coaching is not a quick fix (Knight, 2009). Several coaches in the study mentioned the amount of time that it takes to have one on one conversations with teachers. When coaching in teams or to improve instruction, planning meetings and team conversations take time. Often, coaches are faced with the option to give a quick piece of advice rather than spend time in metacognition.

As management changes from a dictatorial to a collegial model, leaders must understand the difference in the amount of time decisions take. Administrators should provide time for additional conversations, including budget funds to cover team planning when needed.

A second implication to improve practice includes providing opportunities for teachers to interact with paid professional coaches. When coach training is only done by new coaches or by peers learning the process, the training can become somewhat filtered. By allowing teacher leaders to interact with professional coaches, coaching improvement can be made quickly. Further, using an outside coaching consultant as the main source of coach training protects the line between evaluating and coaching. When the district attempted to save money by having coaches train their peers, some of the coaching expertise and language was lost. Therefore, resources should be provided to allow a coaching consultant to directly train teachers.

The implementation of coaching allowed administrators and teachers to replace personal biases with objectivity during difficult conversations. This elevated the conversations and positively affected school climate and collegiality. Further, trust was developed between coaches and coachees during the coaching implementation.

Instructional decisions saw only a rudimentary impact. This could be improved by ensuring a stated focus for coaching of student success and instructional impact. Teacher leaders did not perceive a link between coaching as professional development and student achievement. Clarifying the link between the two would have enhanced instructional practice. Further, coaching conversations would be professionally based and focus on professional content.

Lastly, if the district requires adherence to a curriculum initiative, leaders should not pretend to *coach* through teachers' concerns. Pretending that teachers have a choice, when in fact they do not, does not create buy-in to district initiatives or encourage teachers to trust the leadership.

Conclusion

Coaching is meant to improve practice through reflective metacognition, increased organizational trust, and shared decision making. Coaching as professional development has the potential to positively affect student outcomes. In the current study, teacher leaders revealed that coach training improved trust and collegiality, but instructional improvement only occurred on a rudimentary level. Coaching professional development allowed coaches to navigate difficult conversations in a positive manner by removing emotions and personal bias. Conversations

became somewhat elevated with more positive outcomes, however, leadership practices and teaching outcomes did not obtain the standards aimed for by the coaching consultant. Although some teacher leaders perceived a shift toward greater shared leadership, most did not feel more empowered following the coaching professional development implementation.

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