

Value of Coaching in Building Leadership Capacity of Principals in Urban Schools

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Anita R. Farver

Little Rock School District

Carleton R. Holt

University of Arkansas

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how coaching support structures enabled and sustained leadership practices of urban principals. The study investigated how the intervention of coaching for academic leaders can serve as evidence based professional development for building leadership capacity. The central focus was on principals' perceptions of coaching engagements over time to identify recurring themes and essential elements of the coach-to-client relationship. With a goal of meeting 21st century school accountability requirements of standards and assessments, the urban district in this study implemented coaching for academic leaders who were selected to participate in the coaching intervention as job-embedded professional development. The district assigned a cadre of trained coach leaders to building principals with the primary goal of coaching academic leaders to attain desired goals. The district's director of professional development was a certified coach leader and had the responsibility of screening applications from principals and assigning coaches. The data collection process included in-depth interviews, direct observations, and review of archival documents. Holistic analysis captured recurring themes and assertions. Essentials of participants' perceptions of coaching were collected through semi-structured interviews, analysis of textual content, coding, and categorizing by themes. The significant themes revealed the perceptions of coaching as: (1) Supportive Environment, (2) Relationship Built on Trust, (3) Confidential Conversations, (4) Leadership Support, (5) Significance of Reflection, (6) Benefits of Coaching Language in Communication, (7) Co-Constructor, (8) Thinking Partner, and (9) Trust.

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Introduction

The growing issues faced by principals to meet 21st century education standards of accountability for student achievement have continued to spiral with demands for greater productivity. One of the reasons for conducting this study was to highlight how schools are organizations that are ever-evolving and this evolution necessitates equipping principals with the skills to successfully lead 21st learning organizations. Grant (2012) suggested education leaders have historically used a diagnostic approach for decision making. He further offered that leaders instead should shift to solution construction which is a component utilized in leadership coaching (2012).

Leadership Development

School administrators are engaged in an array of roles, varying from educational visionaries and change agents to leaders of instruction, curriculum and assessment specialists, budget forecasters, facility supervisors, special programs directors, and community planners (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Effective principals work persistently to generate safe and orderly environments for learning, establish clear instructional objectives, anticipate lofty performance through increased time on tasks commencing with teachers to students, and build positive home-school relationships (Jacobson & Bezzina, 2008).

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) conducted the largest in-depth study in the US to date on education leadership (p. 11). Reported findings from in depth case studies and extensive quantitative analysis reinforced the empirical link between school leadership and student achievement (Louis et al., 2010, p. 57).

Robinson's Leadership Dimensions (2007)	
Leadership Dimensions	Effect Size Estimate
1. "Establishing Goals and Expectations;	Average ES = 0.35
2. Strategic Resourcing;	Average ES = 0.34
3. Planning, Coordinating and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum;	Average ES = 0.42
4. Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development; and	Average ES = 0.84
5. Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment" (Robinson, 2007, p. 8).	Average ES = 0.27

Figure 1. These dimensions can serve as evidence-based data to prioritize school improvement planning, professional learning team agendas, and professional development support for teachers and administrators. Robinson (2007) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why* (p. 8). Effect size is a simple way of quantifying the difference between two groups that has many advantages over the use of tests of statistical significance alone. Effect size emphasizes the size of the difference rather than confounding this with sample size. In the figure above, number four is significantly higher than the other dimensions.

Coaching in the Education Setting

Leadership support and capacity building for impacting students and organizational outcomes can occur over time during coaching conversations. Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris, and

Shuster (2010) explained, while coaching presence is ever present in coaching conversations, there are other competencies at work in the coaching zone...including the following:

- Coaching agreements;
- Committed listening;
- Intentional language;
- Powerful questions;
- Create awareness;
- Plan for action;
- Design action; and
- Manage progress. (p. 60)

Brock (2008) stated over the past decade coaching had been defined as a learning process. According to Sherman and Freas (2004), executives of fast-moving leaner organizations are recognizing the following understated set of competencies: the interpersonal skills and communication skills essential for influencing employees, the ability for rapid change, and respect for individuals from diverse cultures. B. Tschannen-Moran and M. Tschannen-Moran (2011) offered utilization of the simultaneity principle, which highlights affirmative lines of inquiry to facilitate favorable change. According to Reiss (2004), a well-trained coach is accomplished in the change process, supporting a course of action while individuals create their desired changes for themselves and the organization. Leadership coaching has been referred to as a supportive model for systems learning by district administrators and principals.

Goleman (2006) argued that the innovative field of social neuroscience presents why a personable leadership style shows promise. Ashcroft and Kirk (2001) stated, emotions can either enhance or inhibit the brain's capability to learn based on the existence of neural wiring connecting the thinking and emotional centers of the brain. Goleman (2006) asserted, as students, teachers, and school leaders take steps to boost their emotional self-awareness and social intelligence, a dominant climate for learning will occur. The leader's most customary style of interacting can either rejuvenate or collapse people in their organization (Goleman, 2006).

Significance

Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) suggested there is no documented evidence to support that achieving schools can accomplish this status without a successful leader. Coaching offers an applied skill used to construct a functional path to innovative performance, enhanced skills, and transformation leadership. When an organization experiences change and instability utilization of a constructive style of thinking can be beneficial (Cavanagh and Lane, 2012). Reiss (2004) stated during the forward-thinking and reframing process for individuals, coaches will acknowledge, question, empower, clarify, focus, validate, champion, and prioritize to skillfully support the leader for goal attainment. Grant (2013) offered, "...it is important to clearly define the main focus of the coaching intervention and to ensure that those issues are in fact within the sphere of influence or control of the coachee." Hargrove (2000) suggested the primary responsibility of a coach is to broaden the capacity of the individual's and/or group's capacity to achieve expected outcomes and to facilitate development.

Findings and Recommendations

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential (International Coach Federation, 2009, cited in Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris, & Shuster, 2010). This case study investigated principals' perception of the value of coaching in building leadership capacity in urban schools. The study examined the professional practice of three urban school principals in the school context as a result of them having been coached by an executive leader coach. Conclusions and recommendations of synthesized data to address the purpose of the study and research questions were completed. From the summaries, importance of leadership coaching was addressed and recommendations for future research were presented.

The researcher explored principals' perceptions of one-on-one coaching and the impact of coaching on building leadership capacity for school effectiveness and improved student achievement. The interview process included two elementary school principals, one middle school principal, and three executive coaches participating in an urban district's coaching program. This is a possible limitation to the sample because all principals were from the same school district and may have been hesitant to share negative views. Another possible limitation was that the researcher was also an employee of the district. Delimitations, on the other hand, included the selection of an urban district, identification of principals based on participation in the coaching intervention, and the use of interviews as a data collection process. Philosophical underpinning for this study was based on the constructivist paradigm. Constructivist researchers, according to Creswell, "focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants" (2007, p. 21). The propositions guiding the purpose, focus, data collection/analysis, scope of the study, and framework (Stake, 1995) were derived from the literature review with specific attention to effective leadership dimensions and practices.

Data were collected through five face-to-face recorded interviews and one recorded telephone interview. Data were also collected from documents and observations. Through analysis of data, the following nine major themes were confirmed: (1) Supportive Environment, (2) Relationship Built on Trust, (3) Confidential Conversations, (4) Leadership Support, (5) Significance of Reflection, (6) Benefits of Coaching Language in Communication, (7) Co-Constructor, (8) Thinking Partner, and (9) Trust. These nine themes steadily emerged from the data into three selective codes: (a) Leadership Support; (b) Relationship Built on Trust; and (c) Confidential Conversations. The selected codes emerged through in-depth interviews and through the transcription process completed by the researcher with the aid of Dragon Dictation software. The three selective codes from the data offered insight and clarity into the perceptions of principals on the value of coaching for impacting leadership practices. The preceding section offers discussions on the how, when, where, and why of coaching.

Theme: Leadership Support

Research Question: What were principals' perceptions of coaching engagements in supporting and sustaining leadership practices?

The first theme to emerge in the study was Leadership Support. Leadership was supported by four open codes: (a) professional, (b) coach, (c) growth, and (d) solutions. The

analyzed data indicated all three principals had positive experiences with their executive coach. Data also suggested participants were afforded professional growth opportunities which changed the way communication and interactions occurred with teachers, staff, parents, and colleagues. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins summarized findings from empirical studies concerning “four core leadership qualities and practices...building vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning programme” (2008, p. 6). These core leadership qualities and practices were supported during the executive coaching process.

Morel and Cushman (2012) offered, the sociocultural learning theory formulated by Vygotsky (1978) and others is as applicable to the professional learning of teachers as to the educational learning of children. The way to maximize the capacity of teachers to meet student needs is to embed professional learning in the cultural and social life of the school. (p. 2)

According to the participants in this study, coaching facilitated professional and personal growth. The support of an assigned executive coach was beneficial in having a thinking partner available for goal-planning, action-planning, or solution-focused planning. Coaching provided avenues for the principal to support teachers by embedding professional learning in the culture and social life of schooling.

Solution focused coaching conversations were beneficial for the instructional leaders, so much so, these same strategies supported teachers in finding solutions to their problems, rather than the principal providing the solution to the teacher. Once teachers inferred coaching language and skills their conversations, questioning, feedback, committed listening, and reflection were improved in the areas of planning, teaching, and commitment to student achievement. After experiencing leadership coaching, principals understood that the best solution for teachers was for them to determine the answer with a co-thinking partner, in doing so, teachers would own the answer and they would be committed and dedicated to the solution. Through this commitment and dedication, teachers were better able to carry out their plan and get the desired results of improving achievement.

As related to professional growth, participants in this study described leadership coaching as helping tremendously because it was job embedded work. The principal was not doing extra work. The principal applied research-based strategies to job duties on a daily basis. Executive coaching enabled principals to assess situations through different lenses, as well as, assess the various practices employed, and reflect on the outcomes as aligned to goal attainment.

In supporting principals, executive coaches through conversations, examined the leaders' gifts and abilities and then coached the principals for maximum potential. Using their identified skill sets, principals had more confidence in thinking, planning, and problem solving. For example, the leadership strategy employed by the principal was to be proactive with issues by identifying solutions for problems, and listening to recommendations from employees, rather than concentrating on the barrier to success. Coaching developed confidence and a renewed mindset for leaders. The principals were more confident and interactive with teachers and staff after having an assigned coach. Executive coaching fostered better communication, such as, committed listening, paraphrasing, and feedback.

Theme: Relationship Built on Trust

The second theme to emerge in the study was relationship built upon trust. Relationship built upon trust was supported by four open codes: (a) facilitative, (b) confidential, (c) reciprocal, and (d) trust. Building principals said school leadership was lonely territory. Principals also voiced that they were cautious with sharing and discussing information. Executive coaching offered principals a supportive and confidential thinking partner. The coach was a facilitator on a journey of helping another person to develop their maximum potential both as a leader and as an individual.

The data revealed executive coaches were active, trusted, and reciprocal thinking partners supporting leaders to become problem solvers. They were also supporters of leaders in thinking through possibilities for solutions. An executive coach was a confidential, trustworthy colleague who partnered with school leaders. Thus, allowing school leaders to present ideas, concerns, and plans of action knowing that all judgment was being reserved. Coaching afforded principals a trusted space and support for leaders who many times were very isolated in lonely positions. Two of the three principals commented that they were reluctant to share with colleagues because there was a feeling of competition verses collaboration (Building Principal 1/1; Building Principal 2/1).

“The nature of relationship among the adults with a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else” (Barth, 2003, p.8). These adult relationships were formed across the school community with the principal, teachers, instructional coaches, parents, support staff, bus drivers, crossing guards, and collaborative partners. The relationships fostered a sense of commitment to the mission and vision of the school. There was a common thread of commitment to goal attainment. Gladwell (2002) explained to achieve the goal of fundamental change in employee’s beliefs and behavior, you must build an organization in which those beliefs are “practiced and expressed and natured” (p. 173). The building principals in this study have incorporated coaching language, such as, committed listening, paraphrasing, and feedback in daily staff conversations, leadership team meetings, parent conferences, administrative meetings, community forums, and personal conversations. Relationships built upon trust ignited beliefs and behaviors for impacting school performance and student achievement.

Committed listening was one of the traits exhibited by executive coaches. This trait fostered trust in the coach-client relationship. All three principals said their executive coach was a confidential committed listener. The coach paraphrased the principal’s response before commenting or asking a clarifying question. This technique confirmed that the coach was a fully present committed listener for the client. At the beginning of each coaching conversation, the coach and client established the agreement on the topic for the coaching conversation. The agreement informed the type of questions asked by the coach, which may include, planning-focused, goal-focused, solution-focused, or reflection-focused or a combination. The executive coach received extensive training in how to proceed with the conversation after confirming the agreement with the client. Throughout the conversation the executive coach provided value statements to the client to acknowledge their shift in thinking. Value statements were also offered to the client during the action planning process.

Theme: Confidential Conversations

The third theme to emerge in the study was confidential conversations. Confidential conversations were supported by five open codes: (a) feedback, (b) listening, (c) discussion, (d) questioning, and (e) engaging. Leadership coaching was a partnership of equals. The goal was to support the principal's development, both professionally and personally, in order for the principal to become a more effective leader. The data revealed all three principals indicated coaching caused them to be more self-aware and more reflective. Many times at the end of the coaching session the client was asked how the conversation supported their thinking. The responses included: (1) I do not think that there were negative consequences with executive coaching. If the standards were upheld on both ends [executive coach and building principal] there were not any consequences because all conversations are confidential (BP2); (2) The coach allowed me to share and voice my concerns without feeling intimidated or that the discussion would be shared (BP3); and (3) In personal relationships and positive interactions, teachers don't always come looking for answers, but to have conversation for answers (BP/1).

Executive coaches provided unbiased committed listening, and they were comfortable with silence while allowing principals to reflect and think. The coaching goal for an executive coach was to coach the client based on the establish agreement. Executive coaches spent a great deal of time perfecting the skills of committed listening, paraphrasing, and providing feedback. The executive coaches also asked open-ended questions initiating the client to think deeper. Coaches asked clients questions and helped them discover the treasures and talents that lie within.

Research Question

The researcher's inquiry for question one focused on principals' perceptions of coaching engagements in supporting and sustaining leadership practices; and the sub-question centered on how leader practices promoted professional teachers practices. Executive coaching was perceived by principals as a valued leadership support as related to point-in-time authentic leadership situations. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) asserts leader's individual values, paths, and priorities are authentically articulated from a confident emotional course, whereby effective leaders shift people in constructive emotional paths because they are aware of their feelings and in turn create resonance (p. 38). Coaching engagements helped leaders to tap into the emotional intelligence paths within the cultural context to promote "relationship-management, self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness" (p. 38). According to Baron and Morin (2010), self-efficacy and management skills of leaders have improved with the intervention of leadership coaching. The building principals (BP1, BP2, and BP3) were better equipped to empower teachers and leadership teams to accomplish the school's vision, mission, and goals because the leader clarified expectations, nurtured social awareness, and managed relationships.

Robinson (2007) offered "planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum" as one of the... "leadership dimensions derived from 11 studies of effects of leadership on student outcomes" (p. 8). Executive coaching for leaders afforded time to discuss topics, such as, teacher observations, professional learning communities, classroom walk-through, and school improvement goals. Formative and summative feedback on teacher planning and instructional strategies were enhanced by the coaching competency committed listening. The principals in this study agreed that committed listening was a valuable coaching

strategy for providing authentic feedback. Through committed listening the principals (building principals 1, 2, and 3) were able to paraphrase and offer feedback, which in many cases the feedback, included the language spoken by teachers. Committed listening created awareness for teachers that the principal really heard what was said and specific feedback was provided. Reported findings by Robinson (2007) suggested leaders effect students outcomes as they “promote and participate in teacher learning and development” in their quest for reaching school improvement goals (p. 8). Judge and Piccolo (2004) offered the transformational leadership factor “individual consideration” where the leader attends to each follower’s needs, works as a mentor or coach, and commits to listening to the follower’s needs (p. 755), thus providing authentic leadership support.

Through confidential trusting conversations, principals in this study had facilitative conversations with the executive coach for support of leadership effectiveness. At a time when federal and state accountability mandates have made data analysis a fact of school life, effective principals know how to make the best use of data, learning to ask useful questions of it, and taking advantage of it for collaborative inquiry among teachers and helpful feedback to students (Portin, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman, Russell, Samuelson, et al., 2009). The significance of establishing and sustaining a trusting relationship allowed the client (principal) to release apprehensions of judgment and appraisal, and lift up their best thinking and planning for effective leadership. Principals (building principals 1, 2, and 3) welcomed the coaching support and valued the opportunity to communicate in a trusting and non-threatening environment. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moren (2011) suggested, “Trust matters most in situations of interdependence where people must depend on one another to achieve desired outcomes” (p. 438). According to Morel and Cushman (2012) trust is a significant component in collaborative conversations.

Contribution to the Field of Leadership

Job-embedded professional development for system-leaders was a valuable tool. While districts and policy makers identify effective strategies and allocate resources to support short-term and long-term goals, executive coaching can serve as targeted support for district leaders, principals, directors, content specialist, and central office administrators. The value of executive coaching was unveiled through the individualized support of effective leadership practices such as: (1) establishing vision and mission; (2) building trusting relationships; and (3) goal attainment. As leaders participate in executive coaching valuable skills were developed or enhanced. These skills include enhanced listening, improved problem solving, productive goal planning, and promotion of solution focused leadership.

Executive coaches in this study offered urban leaders a unique opportunity to engage in confidential conversations, solution focused planning with a thinking partner, facilitative conversations using effective questioning, and leadership support for accomplishing predetermined organizational goals. Findings from this qualitative case study suggested that leadership was a lonely place, and in many cases there was no one for the leader to confide in on issues that impacted success within the organization. Executive coaching helped fill this void. Additionally, executive coaches established trusting relationships that fostered open dialogue and genuine conversations to get at the heart of the matter. Leaders were better equipped to accomplish goals and model effective strategies for others to learn from and put into practice. Trusting relationships were paramount to the success of executive coaching.

The principals in this study spoke their truths regarding the conditions and support necessary to lead effective schools. Principals valued leadership coaching in building leadership capacity and supporting leader practices. Leadership coaching for principals served as targeted support in a safe, trusting, and confidential environment. These findings from principals in an urban district provided data for a relatively new area of research on building leadership capacity through leadership coaching.

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