Creating a Coaching Culture in Schools

Subjects: Education & Educational Research

Contributor: Paul Butler

Coaching has emerged as a significant development intervention in schools across such countries as Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA and is used to help develop principals, teachers, and students while also supporting school improvement and development. Many school leaders are committed to providing coaching to teachers and have endeavoured to promote a culture of coaching in their schools, but many obstacles have emerged.

coaching   culture   leadership

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a major reform in educational leadership with a more business-focused accountability evident and performativity at the core of what school success entails [1][2][3]. With the rapid development of economies and the continuous updating of information, organisations are continuously reorganising, resulting in an increased quality of employee [4]. Within this new environment, a new type of leadership is required with coaching leadership being suggested as a suitable approach for 'improvement and development of employee capabilities' [4] (p. 92). Kegan and Lahey [5] call this a re-authoring process of how organisations should be run, and schools as organisations are no different.

School principals play an important role in ensuring both the smooth running of schools and in addition effective teaching and learning outcomes [6][7]. However, they now find themselves facing a myriad of new emerging responsibilities that require this business/performance style of leadership [8][9]. Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2015, the Department of Education and Skills recognised the need for the upskilling of school principals and offered coaching support to school principals through the setting up of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL). The aim of coaching was to upskill Irish school principals to become a 'more in-depth talented leader' [10] (p. 1).

2. Coaching as a Leadership Style

In recent years, coaching has emerged as a significant development intervention in schools across such countries as Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA and is used to help develop principals, teachers, and students while also supporting school improvement and development. While it is often seen in the corporate world as an executive leadership development approach, in schools, it is being used in a range of different conversational contexts [11][12][13]. Internationally, many organisations including schools have aimed to demonstrate the positive impact coaching can have on enhanced leadership performance. However, for Irish educational leadership, coaching as a leadership approach is relatively unknown. While it may still be an approach under question [14][15], further empirical evidence is required to assess its impact.

3. Coaching Definition

Coaching has become a multi-billion-dollar industry worldwide [16][17], with many studies demonstrating its positive impact on leadership and company performance [18][19][20][21][22]. Coaching in leadership entails a one-to-one relationship between a coach and a coachee, where one-to-one conversations take place. These conversations 'facilitate development for a leader' [23] (p. 582) and are designed to be an empowering process. Coaches use skills such as effective listening and the use of probing questions with the aim to motivate the coachee to take responsibility for action. A further aim of coaching is to draw out solutions to problems from within the coachee, thus enabling the coachee to draw out suitable solutions to issues they are

presented with [24] that are best suited to the person's own environment and experience. Thus, the coachee takes ownership [25] of the problem they are dealing with, using their own skill set and resources. Coaching normally uses a framework or model such as the GROW model which stands for Goal, Reality, Options and Way forward/wrap-up [21].

While there are many empirical studies that suggest that coaching can impact positively on the performance and self-development of staff [22][23][24][25][26][27][28], leadership coaching is still gaining traction and may not be considered a leadership style by and of itself. However, it may have merit as an approach to be used within a leadership style. Fay [29] suggests that coaching is a significant strategy for bringing about change with Robinson [30] positing that many of the models of leadership such as distributed leadership are at an early stage and therefore often lack an effective framework for delivering such a model of change effectively. Leadership coaching can help manage such change in organisations and supports the building of such leadership styles, for example helping to "deliver a co-operative approach to distributed leadership" [31] (p. 38). While for some it may not be considered an independent model of leadership in its own right, it may compliment models of leadership through the blending of coaching skills, within an overarching model such as distributed leadership or transformational leadership models. Anthony [24] highlights how coaching contributes toward a more transformational type of leadership, highlighting that coaching builds leadership capacity through the effective distribution of tasks. Thus, coaching when used in a blended capacity with other leadership styles can be effective.

Berg and Karlsen [32] view coaching as a leadership style within the model of situational leadership and suggest that while there may be many leadership styles and theories, in a coaching leadership style (CLS), the leader uses coaching skills as the main method with which to achieve the desired results. This is similar to coaching in sports, where a coach enables an athlete to transform physical and psychological strengths into improvements in performance. In a similar way in leadership, the leader can coach the employee through empowerment and towards a type of self-leadership, building on their own personal strengths. Coaching as a leadership style involves a "mutual partnership in learning" built on trust and relationships, adjusting goals and constantly learning from the process [32] (p. 3). While there are debates of where leadership coaching sits within the wider styles of leadership style, its application may support the implementation of various leadership styles.

Peterson (2011) [21] suggests however that there are some limitations on how coaching can be delivered effectively. These include certain personalities that may make coaching difficult, such as staff who may have a fixed mindset and be resistant to change, with others perhaps feeling they are being forced into coaching against their will, thus thinking the process lacks trust and openness and the possibility that they may perceive coaching as a process that may be about manipulating staff towards more output. He also posits that people with emotional and mental issues may pose a problem for a coach, resulting in people refusing to engage in coaching and those who do not wish to be forced "to change in ways that others want them to change" [21] (p. 547). While he also posits that often such people are the people who need coaching the most, it still leaves a challenge for leaders to implement a coaching approach to leadership.

4. Creating a Coaching Culture in Schools

Culture has its roots in the corporate environment, often providing a notion of direction that would make an organisation more efficient or a more stable learning environment [33]. While as a general concept an organisational culture can be viewed as the way we do things here [34], often set in rituals or symbols or historical processes, it can also include such things as values and beliefs, and for schools, it often lies in 'the commonly held beliefs of teachers, students and principals' [35] (p. 2). Organisational culture stems from both espoused and enacted values and practices that are part of daily life [34].

According to Dewitt [36], schools are complex organisations, and leadership within a school is a complex one in itself. School principals have a very important part to play in influencing school culture, and they need to be supported in strategically letting go of the leadership by focusing on the development of school culture and in doing so support professional learning [37]. Bush [6] posits that the role of a school principal is vital for school success generally even including building a culture of well-being in a school. Factors that influence a school culture include environment, personalities, values, beliefs, and the ontological

viewpoint of many stakeholders resulting in many behavioural outcomes. Mc Govern [38] suggests that leadership theory does not always translate into leadership practice and that a culture of collegial respect and mutual trust is required for leadership practices to work. Thus, building a culture of leadership coaching in Irish school is a challenging one.

To compound this challenge, the field of education has no clear definition of what school culture looks like, often referring to such things as ethos or climate. Despite this, effective school leaders help develop school cultures that embody shared values and beliefs and promote caring and trust among all members [39]. If culture is about 'the way we do things around here' [34] (p. 3), then building a coaching culture is about embedding a conversational culture that contributes to a learning environment, focused on constant improvement, where everyone feels confident and motivated in their roles [40].

Stolp [33] suggests that there is much empirical research to support the notion that culture correlates strongly with increased student motivation and achievement and also impacts teachers' productivity and satisfaction. Therefore, culture is an important aspect of what happens in any school setting, as it sets a scene of how things are handled and also how they contribute to school successes. It also suggests that in order to change a school culture, it involves understanding the current culture, relationships and systems, which is an important precursor to looking at any potential change. It is also important that the school vision would influence and impact any future change in the systems that make a school culture. These include rituals, ceremonies, and routines with the suggestion that the school principal should develop such a vision, conscious of current practices, but rooted in history [34], values and beliefs of what the school should be [33]. Thus, seeking to promote such a new initiative as coaching in schools, something that may not be rooted in school history, rituals, or systems, may present with quite a challenge.

It is difficult to improve schools significantly; however, research has attempted to put forward ideas that do work. A system that combines them successfully is complex with educators often disagreeing about how best to approach it [41].

The strategies suggested that do work and that help the concept of school culture of how people work together and make them work better include the following:

- The human resource approach rooted in psychology focused on the skills of educators (coaching as a process would be in this category);

- Formal structures and operations of schools rooted in sociology;

- Political relationships amongst the school community;

- Market mechanisms or economics based on school choice and monopoly;

- School culture a concept rooted in anthropology [41].

According to Deal and Peterson [41], principals are at the core of any culture change, and considering implementing a change without considering staff needs, goals and roles and the power of conflict and skills will have limited effect. In addition, trying to embed a culture of coaching in schools where staff have limited understanding of coaching can certainly impact the successful development of a coaching culture in schools.

For Van Nieuwerburgh [42], there are several issues and challenges for implementing a coaching culture:

(1)The closed-door culture that exists in some schools resulting in a defensive approach from teachers about what happens in their classrooms. In this circumstance, a coach–coachee relationship has not been formally established despite the use of coaching skills having potential (active listening, well-structured questions, presence, empathy, in other words using a 'coaching approach').

(2) The relationship of coaching is well set out in training programmes such as those endorsed by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) or the Institute of Coaching (AOC) with particular emphasis on ethical considerations to ensure a referral on to qualified specialists should issues arise during the process. However, while these may be considered adequate in most situations, they have a larger impact in school settings, especially where students may be involved. Careful thought needs to be considered in an education setting to allow the development of staff and students in an empowering way rather than through a means of control. Robinson [30] explains this as the careful management of the dynamics of power and control, such as force, coercion and manipulation and that leaders should create conditions where staff can think and act differently through empowerment rather than through a controlling environment.

(3) There are critical skills involved in effective coaching and coaching skills development. Significant training and intentional reflection is required in order to build an appropriate skill set amongst educational leaders. Such skills need to be raised beyond the introduction to coaching that is often happening with university postgraduate programmes.

(4) Positive psychology and coaching in education have some overlap. There is much to be gained from exploring how both contexts could be integrated to encourage human flourishing and well-being.

(5) Coaching culture in schools has emerged to describe how coaching is being implemented across an organisation. There is an implicit assumption this is a positive development, but there is a lack of clarity about what a coaching culture actually entails, especially in schools. Further research would be of considerable benefit to educators in order to develop a plan to take coaching beyond the initial successful steps that have begun to emerge.

Many school leaders are committed to providing coaching to teachers and have endeavoured to promote a culture of coaching in their schools, but many obstacles have emerged. Often, this is because they have not taken the time to communicate a clear definition of coaching to the school and, especially, set up a clear structure for a coaching program. Aguilar, [43] an education consultant and respected author on coaching, describes the 10 elements leaders who want coaching to be effective and embedded in their school's culture need to decide about: (1) a definition of coaching and vision statement, (2) the context for coaching, (3) a coaching model, (4) goals, (5) the qualities of coaches to hire, (6) the coaching relationship, (7) the coaching work, (8) communication, (9) evaluation of coaches, and (10) professional development for coaches. Aligning these elements and communicating clearly the schoolwide decisions about how each element will function in the school's coaching effort is essential also.

However, in the Irish context, many of these aspects are missing from what is necessary in order to embed such a coaching context [31]. Training with school principals is somewhat ad hoc with a lack of accredited training and development for principals. Coaching as an approach to school development is somewhat referenced in school documents such as the six-step process for school evaluation and for school development and is a core remit within the Droichead training framework for new teachers (from which a small number of teachers are training up in schools). However, a coaching approach from a human resources management perspective [41] is something that school staff do not either understand or consider as an approach to school management.

References

1. Machin, D. Professional educator or professional manager? The contested role of the for profit international school Principal. J. Res. Int. Educ. 2014, 13, 9–29.

2. Stynes, M. Walk a mile in my shoes: A case study of the everyday lives and work experiences of a group of Irish primary school Principals. Ph.D. Thesis, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, 2014.

3. Ball, S.J. The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. J. Educ. Policy 2003, 18, 215.

4. Dong, X. Research on the Influence of Coaching Leadership on Employees' Work Performance. Acad. J. Bus. Manag. 2021, 3, 9–98.

5. Kegan, R.; Lahey, L. Immunity to Change. In How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organisation; Harvard Business Press, Centre for Public Leadership: Boston, MA, USA, 2009.

6. Bush, T. Educational Leadership and Management: Theory, policy and practice. South Afr. J. Educ. 2007, 27, 391–406.

7. Day, C. What Being a Successful Principal Really Means: An International Perspective; University of Nottingham: Nottingham, UK, 2007.

8. Sugrue, C. Performing leadership:Professional responsibility in a climate of accountability. In Unmasking School Leadership; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2015; pp. 201–225.

9. Oplatka, I. Principal workload: Components, determinants and coping strategies in an era of standardization and accountability. J. Educ. Adm. 2017, 55, 552–568.

10. Centre for School Leadership (CSL). A Professional Learning Continuum for School Leadership in the Irish Context; Consultation Paper; CSL: Ennis, Ireland, 2015; Available online: https://cslireland.ie/images/downloads/A_Professional_Learning_Continuum_for_School_Leadership_in_the_Irish_Cont (accessed on 2 August 2023).

11. Knight, J. Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction; Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2007.

12. Anthony, D.P.; Van Nieuwerburgh, C.J. A thematic analysis of the experience of educational leaders introducing coaching into schools. Int. J. Mentor. Coach. Educ. 2018, 7, 343–356.

13. Reiss, K. Leadership Coaching for Educators: Bringing Out the Best in School Administrators; Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2007.

14. Bonaiuto, M.; De Gregorio, E.; Sarrecchia, A.; Gentile, D. The evaluation of Executive Coaching Effectiveness: Theory, research and critical issues. Boll. Psicol. Appl. 2008, 254, 3–17.

15. Passmore, J.; Fillery-Travis, A. A critical review of executive coaching research: A decade of progress and what's to come. Coach. Int. J. Theory Res. Pract. 2011, 4, 70–88.

16. Sherman, S.; Freas, A. The Wild West of executive coaching. Harv. Bus. Rev. 2004, 82, 82–90.

17. International Coaching Federation. 2012. Available online: http://www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/overview/ (accessed on 16 May 2012).

18. Dawdy, G.N. Executive Coaching: A Comparative Design Exploring the Perceived Effectiveness of Coaching and Methods. Ph.D. Thesis, School of Education, Capella University, Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2004.

19. Joyce, B.R.; Showers, B. Student Achievement through Staff Development, 3rd ed.; Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development: Alexandria, VA, USA, 2002.

20. Ogilvy, H.; Ellam-Dyson, V. Line management involvement in coaching: Help or hindrance? A content analysis study. Int. Coach. Psychol. Rev. 2012, 7, 39–54.

21. Peterson, D. Executive Coaching: A critical review and recommendation for advancing the practice. In APA Handbook of Industrial and Organisational Psychology; Zedeck, S., Ed.; American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, USA, 2010; Volume 2, pp. 527–566.

22. Beere, J.; Broughton, T. The Perfect Coach; Independent Thinking Press: Carmarthen, UK, 2013.

23. Sonesh, S.C.; Coultas, C.W.; Lacerenza, C.N.; Marlow, S.L.; Benishek, L.E.; Salas, E. The power of coaching: A meta-analytic investigation. Coach. Int. J. Theory Res. Pract. 2015, 8, 73–95.

24. Anthony, E.L. The impact of leadership coaching on leadership behaviours. J. Manag. Dev. 2017, 36, 930–939.

25. Bernard, M.E. Coaching High Workplace Performance. In Coaching for Rational Living; Bernard, M., David, O., Eds.; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2018; pp. 295–324.

26. Gavin, C. The Impact of Leadership Development Using Coaching. J. Pract. Consult. 2018, 6, 137–147.

27. Trujillo, C. Effective Leadership Attributes and Coaching Models for Principals. Ph.D. Thesis, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA, 2018.

28. Earley, P. Surviving, thriving and reviving in leadership: The personal and professional development needs of educational leaders. Manag. Educ. 2020, 34, 117–121.

29. Fay, B. Critical Social Science:Liberation and Its Limits; Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, USA, 1987.

30. Robinson, V. Forging the links between distributed leadership and educational outcomes. J. Educ. Adm. 2008, 46, 241–256.

31. Butler, P. The impact of leadership coaching in building a model of distributed leadership in schools. Ir. Teach. J. 2023, 11, 25–42.

32. Berg, M.; Karlsen, J. Coaching leadership style: A learning process. Int. J. Knowl. Learn. 2020, 13, 356.

33. Stolp, S. Leadership for School Culture, ERIC Digest 1994, Number 91. University of Oregon, USA. Available online: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED370198.pdf (accessed on 5 August 2023).

34. Mannix-McNamara, P.; Hickey, N.; Mac Curtain, S.; Blom, N. The Dark Side of School Culture. Societies 2021, 11, 87.

35. Heckman, P. School Restructuring in Practice: Reckoning with the Culture of School. Int. J. Educ. Reform 1993, 2, 263–272.

36. Dewitt, P. Coach It Further. Using the Art of Coaching to Improve School Leadership; Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2018.

37. Murphy, G.; Brennan, T. Enacting distributed leadership in the Republic of Ireland: Assessing primary school principals' developmental needs using constructive development theory. Educ. Manag. Leadersh. 2022, 17411432221086850.

38. McGovern, E. From Aspiration to Succession and Transition: An Exploratory Study of the Fundamental Principles of Sustainable Leadership from the Perspectives of Newly Appointed Principals in Irish Primary Education. Ph.D. Thesis, St Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, 2015.

39. Leithwood, K.; Riehl, C. What We Know about Successful School Leadership; Labatory for Student Success, Temple University: Philadelphia, PA, USA; Available online: http://olms.ctejhu.org/data/ck/file/What_we_know_about_SchoolLeadership.pdf (accessed on 23 February 2023).

40. Needham, K. Mentoring and coaching: Transformational leadership: Building a coaching culture in your school. Aust. Educ. Lead. 2009, 31, 32–33. Available online: https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/ielapa.804538562936629 (accessed on 28 February 2023).

41. Deal, T.; Peterson, K. The Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture; US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement: Washington, DC, USA, 1990.

42. Van Nieuwerburgh, C. (Ed.) The importance of understanding professional contexts. In Coaching in Professional Contexts; Sage: London, UK, 2016; pp. 1–10.

43. Aguilar, E. You Can't Have a Coaching Culture without a Structure. Educ. Leadersh. 2019, 77, 22–28.