

## EXPERIENCING LEADERSHIP LIKE A COACH

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**ABSTRACT.** This note is a reflection on experiences as an educational leader, as well as provides a perspective on educational leadership, based on professional reading. It offers the metaphor of the coach, initiating a case for using a coaching philosophy as a model for a sustained form of leadership. It invites the reader to consider that with a game plan and a coaching mindset, a school can reach its full potential.

### EXERCER SON LEADERSHIP À LA MANIÈRE D'UN COACH

**RÉSUMÉ.** Ce texte présente une réflexion sur mon expérience en tant que leader éducationnel, ainsi que ma perspective sur le sujet, basée sur des lectures professionnelles. Utilisant la métaphore du coach, il présente l'idée d'adopter une philosophie d'entraîneur pour mettre en place une forme de leadership durable. Il encourage le lecteur à considérer l'idée qu'à l'aide d'un plan de match et d'une attitude de coach, un établissement scolaire peut atteindre son plein potentiel.

When my son, Jack, and daughter, Kate, were young and playing defence on sports teams, if the team would lose, they would be upset and feel pressure that they lost the game for the team. It took a lot of convincing and more experience playing sports to learn that winning in anything takes a team effort. What do sports teams have that schools do not? Teams have coaches.

## COACHES HAVE A GAME PLAN

I entered into the principal role thinking I had it all figured out. I did not have a game plan per se, but I had focus, I had direction, and it was good – so I thought. And because it was good, people would follow. I saw things that needed to be changed and change was going to be easy. I was going to make sure that I had answers to all questions that came my way because I was the principal – I needed to have answers and I needed to solve problems. That was what I considered my role as the leader. I would like to say that I quickly figured out that I would never have it all figured out, but it was not so quick. I wondered why teachers were sometimes baulking at my ideas and why some were disgruntled. I kept thinking, I am doing my best and doing what is right, so why can't they figure that out and follow along?

I eventually learned in my tenure as principal that I needed to develop more of a coaching relationship with teachers because a coaching relationship is built on trust and coaching addresses the needs of individuals. And in order to work towards having a successful school built on trust, I needed a team. I needed “3 Ps” as a game plan:

1. Professional learning
2. People collaboration
3. Purposeful measurement

### *Professional learning*

With subtle nudging from conferences and educational reading material, I pondered the idea of a “coach.” I came to the realization that professional learning for me as well as others in my school was imperative and I recognized that coaching supports that ongoing professional learning. As Stanley (2003) has stated, “get a coach and you will never stop improving. Become a coach and ensure the improvement of those around you” (p. 127).

Professional learning became a monthly focus, replacing the “administrivial” aspects of monthly staff meetings. Professional learning items such as cross curricular literacy and formative assessment emerged. In turn, conversations in teaching teams changed, and included phrases such as, “we have decided that the two book studies we will be doing as a team are...” and “we will prepare a lesson together on...” amongst others. Essentially, the “game plan” for meetings was teachers looking at what was needed for professional learning. Just as Hattie (2012) has pointed out, “coaching involves empowering people by facilitating self-directed learning, personal growth, and improved performance” (p. 72).

In sports, a good coach expects his/her players to be passionate about their sport and learn all they can to become better and help others learn. In education, school leaders want the same of teachers, to be passionate about their teaching and to be continuously learning, and like a coach, I wanted to help.

I learned that I needed to learn from others, as well as help others learn. Not everyone needed the same help, but I needed to listen, observe, and make decisions with them, together.

In preparation for a sports game, players learn different plays prior to meeting other teams. Players practice. In contrast, in preparation for teaching specific grade levels and differentiated student needs, teachers must learn and adapt what they do based on the “team” of students they are to teach. I sometimes overlooked the fact that teachers are not given the luxury to practice a new game play prior to their game. Their practice is encompassed through the delivery of course content. In essence, their practice is the *game of teaching*. I needed to respect and appreciate that even at the best of times, it is difficult for anyone to change what has always been done; this is even more difficult without practice. I worked on that premise when considering how I could help teachers.

And, just as a good coach models good practice, I knew I must model professional learning, model being passionate about becoming better, and offer support to teachers as they aimed to improve within the profession. This support for professional learning and developing leaders in the school included creatively arranging time for teachers to meet, plus offering the opportunity for teachers to observe lead teachers in other classes, co-teach, share best practices, co-plan lessons, and determine student interventions from assessment data. Maxwell (2005) wrote, “if you want your organization to reach its potential, if you want it to go from good to great (or even average to good), you need to develop a team of leaders, people who can fill in each others’ gaps, people who challenge and sharpen each other” (p. 306). I wanted to develop a team of leaders working together. That led to more of a focus on people collaborating.

### ***People collaborating***

A coach allocates time for players to play together and learn together. Hattie (2012) said,

within a school, we need to collaborate to build a team working together to solve the dilemmas in learning, to collectively share and critique the nature and quality of evidence that shows our impact on student learning, and to cooperate in planning and critiquing lessons, learning intentions, and success criteria on a regular basis. (p. 172)

I needed to look at how I could accommodate the collaboration process, knowing that like players, teachers must be afforded the time to work together and learn together for their “game” of teaching students. Collaboration time was therefore allocated within teachers’ schedules. Through this collaboration and conversation, teachers were becoming more like coaches, supporting and trusting one another, enhancing each other’s skill, reflecting on subject content, and setting goals and interventions based on data. Collaboration sounded

like: “we will begin the writing enrichment group next week,” “let’s create some videos on doing fractions to upload to the website,” and “everyone create a word problem for bell work so that we have a bank of them.” Teachers developed a committed focus towards student learning while I was helping to create collaborative opportunities. Gross Cheliotos and Reilly (2010) have explained, “coaching conversations encourage others to be reflective and exercise responsibility” (p. 57). That started happening! Many teachers began seeing the benefit in working together and often chiselled out even more time for the purpose of collaborating and enhancing their expertise in their field. I realized that even though I was the principal, I did not need to know the entire curriculum, or all the best teaching strategies, or all the student support mechanisms, but that I must collaborate in a way that is empowering, granting teachers freedom to figure things out. I became part of the professional meetings with teachers, sharing best practices, learning together and from each other, looking at available evidence of learning, building principles together, not recipes. Throughout, as a backdrop to this process, we recognized the importance of promoting a community of learners akin to the characteristics of an effective professional learning community (PLC): shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, pp. 25-29).

The process of collaboration in a professional learning community started to become embedded into our culture. We had grade-level teams, subject teams, a student team, a parent team, and a core leadership team consisting of administration and teacher leads from each grade and subject team. As Carr, Herman, and Harris (2005) have stated,

in a learning community, adults and children alike are learners as they experiment, give and receive feedback, and use and offer support. When these interactions are embedded in the school culture, a new synergy evolves and a shift occurs – a shift to the forward momentum of collaborative school renewal.” (p. 1)

I learned firsthand that having productive teams was more important than a checklist of classroom observations. This was cemented when reading more from DuFour and Mattos (2013) when they stated, “both research and our own expertise as principals have convinced us that this PLC process is more likely to improve instruction than classroom observations” (p. 38). Collaboration is more important than classroom observations. Indeed, this was a huge paradigm shift in leadership thinking, but which, through my own experience, I felt was completely accurate as well as appropriate.

Eventually as a staff, we started focusing on students and their part in this collaboration. We determined that students must be more part of the collaboration in the process of assessment for evaluations to clearly and accurately reflect

where students are in their learning. With student learning being our whole *modus operandi* in education, it only made sense. But we knew we needed to learn more. We investigated this question through a book study of Gregory, Cameron, and Davies (2011), whose work focused on how to involve students in their learning. The authors found that collaboration for students can happen in many forms, including students co-constructing criteria, self-assessing, setting goals, and being involved in conferencing and reporting to support the learning. Further, by way of support, Davies and Herbst (2013) said,

we have learned that successful implementation of assessment in support of learning occurs when students, teachers, school leaders, and system leaders are all involved and all engaged in using assessment to support learning – both their own learning and the learning of those around them. (p. 19)

Adults and students alike became more essential in the game plan of learning, and where measuring the learning in a more meaningful, purposeful way became even more important.

### ***Purposeful measuring***

Purposeful measuring included formative assessment, but not just adding formative assessments onto the old paradigm of grading. Stobart (2014) has explained that the ideas and concepts that stand firm in formative assessments are: finding out where the learners are, building on what they know, providing feedback that gives information, and helping students be self-regulated learners. With that in mind, more formative assessments included having rubrics for learning, with students involved in creating those rubrics. It also required changing the conversation around feedback. It was recognized by many teachers that gone were the days of assigning work to students, evaluating, and making corrections. Consideration was given to the use of feedback to students, and teachers reflecting on the quality of the feedback. More of us learned that students did not need to hear “good job”; instead, they needed more critical and informative feedback.

From our professional learning and collaboration, we learned that students wanted feedback-rich classroom settings, where there were discussions with teachers and among peers regarding assessment, just as the word *assessment* itself is defined – *sit by*<sup>1</sup> which is very different from *standing across from*, as most of us as teachers have done in our practice. Many teachers saw that when they sat next to the learner (as opposed to standing across from them), they felt it showed the learners that they were not there to judge but to sincerely help. Student assessment conversations started happening in team meetings. Meeting minutes included comments such as “as a team, we looked at our common formative assessment to see if it met our needs to assess the skills that have been worked on during class and during our interventions,” and “based on the data, these students will continue to work on this outcome.”

As a collective group, more started striving for the height of purposeful measuring, knowing where students are in their learning by holding conversations with students, gathering products from students, and observing students, as good coaches do with their teams. So with a coaching mindset, ownership and the measuring of learning started shifting.

## MOVING FORWARD

Regardless of the word used, whether it is coach, mentor, advisor, guide, or confidant, developing a coaching mindset continues to be part of our game plan for learning, collaborating, and measuring to ensure student success. Coaching allowed us to work as a team to strive more towards becoming a highly productive school based on professional learning, people collaboration, and purposeful measurement. We are a lot further along today than we were before, but it did not happen overnight, nor for all. The hardest ones to “bring along” were those who did not like change, or did not want to spend time on the game plan of professional learning, collaboration, or purposeful measurement. In the end, I had to assume that they were doing the best that they knew. I had to focus on the best way of improving what they knew and the best way of changing mindsets. Working together as a team became the key to moving forward. I figured out that more tended to move along the coaching process with help from other colleagues, along with my support rather than my dictating. So it was not seamless, nor is it still, but as John Whitmore has said, “coaches focus on future possibilities, not past mistakes” (as cited in Stanley, 2003, p. 119). With that in mind, together as a team, we continue to look at what is essential in moving forward in education for the sake of maximizing student – and teacher – learning.

## NOTES

1. Based on Latin *assidere*, (“Assess,” n.d.)

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