

# Coaching teachers for school transformation

School principals can use 'leadership coaching' in their brief daily interactions with staff to develop and sustain collaborative networks of people, and thereby transform the culture of their school.

I RECENTLY asked three secondary principals to keep track of the number of people they interact with in one week. Although most secondary principals say there is no such thing as a 'typical day', on average these principals had no less than 45 face-to-face interactions each day. Many of those encounters were of the 'Do you have a minute?' variety, where what transpired was a significant but brief conversation about a pertinent issue related to students, curriculum, teaching or the learning environment. Often these types of conversations derail the momentum of principals. After all, principals are busy people and most of these interactions take place in corridors and doorways when they are walking to meetings or other activities. But what if principals treated these interactions, no matter how brief, as opportunities for building and sustaining initiatives for change? What would become possible if every interaction created efficacy and empowerment for both parties? What if each conversation strengthened networks of teachers who were committed to positive change? What if secondary principals became known for the remarkable way they interact with others?

## The power of non-linear networks

In the May 2006 edition of *Education Leadership*, Dr Douglas Reeves writes about 'islands of excellence'. He says that these 'islands' are the enthusiastic teachers and administrators who are implementing change initiatives but who go unnoticed by the sanctioned hierarchy of most organisations. He says, 'Their isolation is the reason that more than two-thirds of reform initiatives fail'. Reeves offers the view that change is created and sustained - not through top-down dissemination of messages - but through non-linear networks of people who communicate through connected hubs of colleagues. The networks described by Reeves have the capacity to strengthen school-wide initiatives and generate new ideas.

Informed by her unique perspective in the new science of living systems and complexity theory, Margaret

Wheatley also points us in the directions of networks. She says the natural world is comprised of delicately balanced, inter-connected networks where small disturbances can create disorder and chaos, but can also support the emergence of new order. She says, 'Everywhere, life organises as networks of interdependent relationships. When individuals discover a common interest or passion, they organize themselves and figure out how to make things happen'.

Katie Haycock, of the Education Trust Foundation, in Washington DC, also suggests that networks are important to significant school change. Commenting on the Education Trust report titled *The power to change: high schools that help all students achieve*, she said, 'High school level educators are eager for concrete ideas on what to do differently. The question is how to build a network among those who are trying to get even better' (2006). So how can busy secondary principals use every interaction with staff as a pathway to develop and support these networks? Becoming a coaching leader offers one answer.

## The coaching school leader

In recent years, leadership coaching has simultaneously emerged along side, but has not been explicitly connected to, the practice of creating and sustaining organisational change. This is because most leadership coaching programs provide one-on-one support for leaders to help them improve leadership skills and attitudes. Due to the personal nature of coaching, it is often seen as a separate and private experience between the coach and the leader and not a tool to impact the entire organisation. But in my work as a coach and coach trainer at the Leadership and Learning Center, I've noticed that leaders who receive coaching also learn the tools of coaching, and begin to use them in their interactions with others. Others begin to notice and pick up these same skills and play them forward in their interactions. This effect has the wonderfully surprising benefit of passing communication enhancing coaching skills forward through networks of people who, in turn, use them to reach others outside the networks. Coaching is a reciprocal process that can ripple positively in many different directions. School principals who learn coaching skills and mindsets can apply them in daily conversations as a way of interacting with others on a regular basis. These tools can be specifically used to

develop, sustain and connect networks of people to implement positive change, and even transform school cultures.

## How to support networks of change

**Understand and acknowledge just how much you mean to people.** It may feel strange to acknowledge that you are important to other people. But to not acknowledge this truth is to miss out on making a difference to others. Principals hold respected roles. Even when conflict exists between principals and teachers or parents, support from the principal is sought and is necessary for most decisions made in a school. Principals who are aware of how much they mean to others realise that every conversation matters. They realise that every interaction they have can add value to other people and help them develop. They understand that, most of the time, people just want to be heard and acknowledged.

**Resonate hope, compassion, and mindfulness.** Do you know someone who is really great to be around? Someone who brings out the best in you? In their book *Resonant leadership* (2005), Boyatzis and McKee say that these are people who have resonance. When leaders of organisations have resonance, the people around them feel inspired. Fear and despair, which are symptoms of dissonance, are replaced with hope and compassion. Both resonance and dissonance are contagious, say Boyatzis and McKee, so leaders must be mindful about their own emotions and how they are impacting on themselves and others. Resonant leaders take care to balance the demands of the job with care for themselves, which helps to keep problems in perspective and emotions from running away with them. This allows the leader to focus every conversation on the belief that all students can learn and achieve – a belief that is resonated throughout the network and has the potential to create wisdom and even a greater good.

**Listen - really listen.** The most important skill of a coaching leader is listening with nothing added, nothing resisted, and nothing changed. Most people listen to 'reload', to come back with a comment or story about what they think and feel. Principals who want to cultivate collaborative networks listen to understand the perspectives of others. When principals listen, they invite others to push past their initial thoughts and arrive at deeper insights and true wisdom. In networks where learning together is a priority, listening invites reflection that leads to breakthrough thinking.

**Ask questions to mediate thinking.** Coaching leaders frequently ask questions that mediate thinking in the other person. Mediating questions are open-ended and are asked to stimulate different perspectives, surface motives, question certainty, and generate creativity.

Mediating questions can be about the vision, building relationships, moving a project forward or brainstorming options to a puzzling dilemma. Examples are:

- What have you previously learned about what works?
- Which indicators do you think we should watch?
- How will you know when we have a good result?
- 'If your only job was to do this, how would you start?'
- What will be possible in our school if this is accomplished?
- What obstacles do you see that might have to be managed?
- What would take this idea to another level?
- What relationship or conversation do you see missing?

**Be guided by data.** In addition to listening well and asking thought-provoking questions, a coaching leader also helps people face hard truths. Great coaches use data to confront assumptions, bear out hunches, and relate cause and effect. Coaching leaders activate this skill, not only in formal data meetings, but in every conversation where assumptions are standing in for reality.

## Coaching for principals and leadership coaching

Embedded in the call for coaching techniques to support networks and change the way people interact with each other is also a call for leadership coaching to support principals. At a time when many principals feel overwhelmed by responsibilities and the stress of their position, every initiative – including coaching – must result in a significant return on their investment of time and dollars. If coaching is to have an impact on schools, we must embrace the idea that coaching is more than a personal development process for the principal and seek leadership coaching that develops leaders, organisations and the powerful networks within school.

\* A detailed list of references is available from the author.

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