



# Towards a coaching culture

In the sixth of this series of articles on coaching, **Nick Austin and Richard Churches** outline some factors that should be considered in developing a coaching culture in your school

**B**eing a leader is not just about the tasks you give people to do: it is also about the way you go about it. It's also becoming more and more clear from education research and neuroscience that the affective and emotional side of learning organisations is just as important as the management and administration. This has to be about changing behaviour, not just understanding, and requires leaders to be a model of the behaviours that they want others to use – as well as being highly skilled in applying those behaviours.

In our work and research helping schools to develop their coaching cultures and meet this challenge head on, three things have become clear. Coaching behaviours (in particular, questioning, challenging, listening and empowering) are not only a nice addition to a functioning school: they are essential leadership behaviours for the 21st century. However, these sort of changes can't simply be put

into place through an edict or the writing of a policy. They must be grounded in personal behaviours and changes in attitudes and belief.

Ask yourself: do you believe that people have all the internal resources they need to solve their own problems (where that problem is part of their job)? Are you taking on other people's problems or do you recognise that your staff own both the problem and the solution in most cases, and that you as leader (and coach) really can only own the process? These are the sorts of questions that seeking to implement a coaching approach in a school challenges leaders to address.

Secondly, our growing knowledge of the way the brain works shows us that learning (both at an organisational level and at a local level in the classroom) is a process rooted in emotions and feelings. Parallel research in an organisational context shows that emotions are contagious. Negative

emotional contagion closes down effective neurological functioning where learning is concerned and, in a leadership context, can easily make staff feel punished into taking responsibility and solving problems on their own. Effective questioning ensures that people think more effectively but it can also help you as a leader to avoid squashing good ideas when they are still at the seedling stage of growth.

(By the way, we don't mean a sort of Spanish Inquisition approach to questioning in which you ask questions, the answers to which you probably already know. Rather, effective leadership questioning is insightful, motivating and genuine – as we discussed in our earlier articles.)

Thirdly, it is an often-quoted idea that the meaning of your communication is the response you get. If this is so then the meaning of your leadership is the behaviour of your followers. Again, if this is also true, then to implement a coaching culture effectively the focus must be on the behaviour of the school leaders themselves, rather than just on their followers. In this sense the effectiveness of your leadership must be grounded in personal effectiveness and in the personal effectiveness of the other leaders who you work with.

### Basic coaching principles

If you are thinking about implementing a coaching culture across your school then you have probably already begun some of the following. You may already be coaching and being coached in your school with a staff colleague, and may have begun to acknowledge the benefits for yourself and others. Knowing this, the next step is probably to want others in your school to reap the same benefits, so you might have thought: 'Wouldn't it be good to widen the approach to embed it across the whole school?' But what does a coaching culture look like, what are people saying who have done it, what does it feel like, what are people doing and what approaches are they adopting?

It's a significant step to take coaching from being a way to empower an individual member of staff to work more effectively with their learners to a whole-school approach and entitlement for all. Developing a school culture – the way we do things around here – with a coaching approach means living the key principles of coaching in our daily interactions with staff and children, and bringing them into all aspects of school development. These principles include encouraging all to accept and take responsibility for their thoughts and actions, to believe that people have the answers to their problems within them and to believe that self-awareness improves performance.

There also needs to be an understanding in coaching that the coach should be non-judgmental and non-critical – that mistakes are part of the process of learning and that we should respect and value everyone's view of their world. The school that lives and breathes these principles in its everyday work is likely to welcome and nurture a coaching culture as its key operating system in promoting

improvement through developing all its people. This is one of the reasons that coaching has become so important for executive development in the private sector. Those who use a coaching approach in the classroom and with their colleagues regularly will recognise these principles in their own work, and immediately see the benefits of an organisation adopting them across all aspects of its work.

In our research, one headteacher was struggling with being seen as the chief problem solver in the organisation. Each time a teacher had a problem they would knock on the headteacher's door and unload it. In a coaching culture (with



the principles above to the fore), each time a teacher had a problem, they might only knock on the door if they had also come with at least three possible solutions. These could then become the focus of the discussion, leaving the teacher with the responsibility for taking the actions and solving the problem. The teacher in this case remains the owner of the problem and the solution. Don't misunderstand us: this can be a big step for most headteachers to make – but the rewards can be enormous.

Fundamental questions that may be posed at this first stage of the journey could include questions like:

- What do you really want?

- What would be the benefits of developing a coaching culture in your school?
- What do schools with a coaching culture do that's different?
- What would a coaching culture bring you that you haven't got already?

### What are the benefits?

There are many possible benefits of having a coaching culture embedded in a school. Perhaps the most fundamental one is that the school becomes a learning community for staff as well as young people. Clearly, however, this works best when the aim is the educational 'bottom line' and the focus of any coaching session is related to improving teaching and learning and developing skills and strategies to enable learners to learn better (whether directly related to classroom practice or through better management or communication skills with colleagues).



Embedding a coaching culture can also help to ensure that any training and new strategies that the school undertakes are more likely to become effective because there is a mechanism in place that ensure challenge, change and review within an ongoing process. With right coaching processes, Inset days may no longer be seen as events in themselves but as starters towards real change. We all know that we can be enthused by an inspirational training day speaker and we rush back to work the following week ready to give it another go, but six months later what has actually changed in terms of behaviours and practice? The old ed-entertainment syndrome! But let's not shoot the messenger. Ask yourself: what did you do with learning that you last had on a training day when you felt inspired? What stopped you when you went back in to school or the classroom?

Where coaching is focused on how individual teachers set themselves goals and what steps they commit to doing to make changes, this can help to make new ideas from training much more likely to happen. Also, teachers say that they feel empowered to make the changes work for them in their own contexts instead of having them imposed, and can encourage a more reflective practitioner

approach to school improvement.

Schools have also described benefits in relation to promoting a more collaborative leadership style (as we mentioned above) and improving succession planning by supporting people to seek new challenges and so that they are ready to step up to take greater whole school responsibilities and further their career goals.

There are some clearly defined steps that schools need to go through in embedding a coaching culture. Some steps can be addressed quickly, while others will take time and skill to tackle, but it is important to be clear about the key steps before embarking on this and prepare accordingly. This will include who will lead at each stage, and laying out an action plan for embedding the culture. These five steps are as follows.

#### 1. Whole school vision

Many schools have found it helpful to train a core group of teachers and leaders first who then become the advocates for the changes and spokespeople for the benefits. This group can then help to develop a whole school vision that will include how coaching fits into it. Staff won't buy into it unless they understand this and what coaching can do for them, nor will they support a vision that they have had no input in forming and shaping. That means that everyone needs a shared understanding of what coaching is, what the principles of coaching are, and how they can benefit from it. Governors may also want to be able to discuss this from a strategic point of view.

#### 2. Developing coaching skills for all

Ideally everyone will need to have a basic structure of coaching to work with, and some skills and understanding to be able to coach someone competently. This may mean a whole school coaching training programme – one day training followed by some practice, and a follow-up day of more coaching skills. A model where some go to training and then 'cascade' training to all can be successful but may well depend on the skills of the person who is required to disseminate it. Often in our experience, people go on courses and engage fully in the training, but also miss some of the training skills and strategies that are crucial to maximising the learning experience of delegates – so make sure you consider this aspect in your implementation plan. Ultimately, behaviour change is not as simple as changing knowledge.

#### 3. Developing a whole school model

At this stage, you need to be clear about how your organisation is going to take on coaching strategies. Will it be in the classroom through better questioning, with peer coaching groups (including both teaching and support staff) as part of a performance management approach? Or will it be to improve the quality and 'stickiness' of innovation? At this stage, decisions about who will coach, what time will be

set aside for coaching, where the coaching will take place, how long the sessions will last and how frequently, and how this will be financed all need to be taken.

#### 4. Embedding coaching across the school

Like any other skills, coaching needs to be practised and people need to have feedback on their practice. As your people become more skilled, learn new tools and become more effective in their coaching, so they are able to support their coachees to be more effective in their work. Coaching can even be built into staff meetings to solve collective problems and into departmental meetings to challenge and raise the attainment of learners. But remember that you will need to revisit learning to raise the skills of your people. Executive coaches in business frequently write about the lifelong challenge of becoming an effective coach. If you expect to be able to do this in a few training days then you will be disappointed.

#### 5. Sustaining coaching

One challenge in coaching is to demonstrate through data and analysis that coaching has an impact on pupils' outcomes and attainment – the same challenge that

businesses face in discussing the bottom-line benefits to boards of directors and shareholders. As implied above, you will need to give some thought to the collection of data (test results, attendance and data on behaviour), but also information about how teaching and learning have improved in terms of attitudes to learning, confidence of learners, and their interpersonal skills. Ultimately, if coaching does not have a positive impact on the core purpose of schools, then that coaching is not being effective.

We will discuss approaches to the measurement of coaching impact in our next article.

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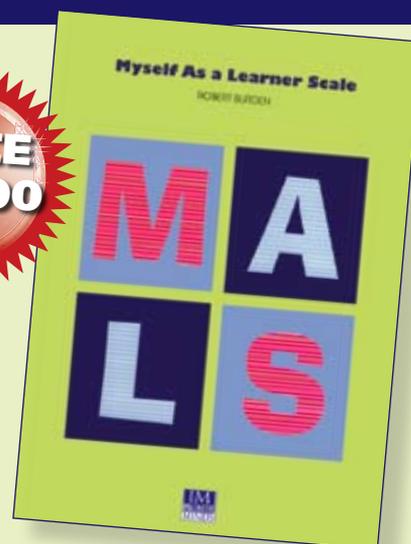
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