

Perspectives on coaching: What schools need to clarify

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Even the most seasoned of leaders are questioning themselves about the new demands placed on them. One of the challenges that lies ahead is how best to provide for your staff's needs; with NQTs and RQTs nationally having experienced the most challenging year in living memory, our children are not the only ones with gaps in their learning, so what can be done?

With statistical data still demonstrating the high percentage of early career teachers thinking of leaving the profession, how we support and develop the next generation of teachers and leaders is a matter of high importance. Every employer needs to be asking: What do our younger workers want from the workplace? What benefits a more experienced professional? Are we providing this?

The Gallup Organisation 2021 research "*State of the Global Workplace/Europe 2021*" shows that the number one retention factor by far is that the organisation cares about employee wellbeing. In April 2021, *The Guardian* published the findings of the National Education Union, with the sub-heading 'Workload and diminishing respect for profession are main reasons why 35% of teachers wish to leave within five years' (Weale, 2021). For schools who are concerned by such headlines, the good news is that we can rethink CPD, and coaching should be one of the major CPD considerations in order to support staff wellbeing, improve engagement and develop passionate future leaders.

However, here lies a challenge! Many leaders have the word *coaching* in their job descriptions, but surprisingly there is still no regulated coaching system and literally anyone can call themselves a coach... and many do! Training for in-school coaches often comprises half a day to maybe two days of training, with no follow up or supervision.

Let us therefore begin with exploring what we might interpret as outstanding coaching. At the World Business and Executive Coaching Summit (WBECS) 2021 (which has a worldwide membership of 33,000), world-renowned coach Andre Vermeulen explored the link between coaching and neuroscience; he described coaching as 'Helping people to re-wire their thinking', and outstanding coaching as 'Enabling a person to accurately understand their potential, to become solution focused and empowered to take action, to explore how they think and process information in order to influence, serve and inspire others'.

WBECS speaker and author Marica Reynolds says:

'As a coach you disrupt the beliefs, assumptions and patterns of thinking that control a coachee's unconscious decisions and actions. Coaching transforms their thinking, giving clarity about the possible paths forward even in uncertain times. They can step into the unknown with more confidence. It is a safe space where they can be fully themselves.'<Q>

In 2019, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) adjusted their competencies to reflect the maturity of the coaching field. Pre-2019, coaching was seen as instrumental goal-orientated tools and techniques. With advances in neuroscience and growth mindset research, the competencies now reflect a transformational and growth-orientated process, with a focus on relationships, increasing the ability of the coachee to flourish, to become more resilient, adaptable and empathetic, and to manage conflicts more effectively.

East Park Primary Academy, Wolverhampton: A journey to improvement

I had non-directive coaching in the early days of my first headship. My school was part of a local learning community, and I was participating in one of the leadership development CPD opportunities. This was my space to have a sounding board to explore my ideas and challenges. It was a diary appointment that I always looked forward to.

In the middle of the autumn term 2015, there was a game-changer as I took on my second headship of a three-form primary school that was in the process of becoming an academy. In February 2016, just weeks after taking up the post in January 2016, Ofsted came (I did call them in!) and the unsurprising special measures journey began. As a coaching advocate, I continued to have my monthly coaching sessions to unpick and recreate East Park Primary in Wolverhampton. My coaching sessions kept me sane.

I needed to have the right leaders in post and then ensure that teaching rapidly improved. My steps were unpicked month by month and translated into my future actions. The chart in **Figure 1** shows the comparisons between the 2016 Ofsted and the subsequent inspection in 2019.

East Park Primary School		East Park Academy	
Hollington Road, Wolverhampton WV1 2DS		Hollington Road, Wolverhampton, West Midlands WV1 2DS	
Inspection dates	9-10 February 2016	Inspection dates	11-12 June 2019
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate	Overall effectiveness	Outstanding
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate	Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Inadequate	Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Inadequate	Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Inadequate	Outcomes for pupils	Outstanding
Early years provision	Inadequate	Early years provision	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement	Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Over time, the school has employed many middle leaders, but has not given them any direction or training. Consequently, they have not known what to do, so have done what they think best. This lack of strategic direction from senior leaders has meant that their efforts have had no lasting impact on raising standards. On top of this, leaders have not checked on the quality of teaching. Consequently, ineffective teaching and poor pupil behaviour has gone unnoticed and unchallenged.	Leaders actively welcome challenge, seek advice and embrace coaching in order to improve. To this end, leaders make sure that everyone stays current with training, receives precise feedback about their work and has many opportunities to share ideas and learn from others. Staff clearly value the support and challenge they receive and made this clear through their responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and during a meeting with an inspector.
A new headteacher and deputy headteacher started in January 2016 and have ambitious plans, which they have started to drive through with remarkable speed and efficiency. This is a good thing because well-organised school improvement is long overdue and it is clear that strong, capable leadership is needed. However, while many staff are keen for change to happen, they are also concerned because they do not feel informed about why certain changes have been made. This is making them anxious; staff morale, which has been low for a while, is at rock bottom. This is affecting their work and senior leaders could do more to make sure that staff understand improvement plans and how they can help.	Leaders are unequivocal about the importance of staff well-being. Words transpire into action that makes a difference with high staff morale clearly visible. Staff are vocal in their praise of the value and investment in their health and well-being. Many staff champion the way leaders have provided a work-life balance, given them back a family life while also improving their practice as a teacher or a leader. Not an easy task, but one which leaders continually face head-on and another example of the excellent leadership in the school.

As the school went through its transformation, a coaching culture emerged that became significant in the process of rebuilding a broken school. In December 2018, East Park Academy was awarded Coaching Mark Gold. In June 2019, Ofsted returned and East Park was formally recognised as 'outstanding', with coaching at the heart of our mantra of 'Growing hearts and minds'.

How coaching enabled East Park to move out of 'special measures'

Coaching began with our SLT, with more experienced leaders coaching less experienced leaders. This enabled rapid development for leaders, from both sides. The confidential

thinking space, driven by their agenda, allowed them to explore their priorities, empowering and enabling them in their roles.

Is there a connection between pure coaching and successful learning?

Absolutely! With high aspirations at the heart of our agenda, developing a growth mindset for all, alongside excellent teaching, was crucial. As substantive leadership posts were filled and those who didn't want to be on this journey stepped back, we were able to recruit new teaching and support staff roles. It was important that non-directive coaching (what we call pure coaching) provided the thinking space to give clarity for individuals in taking their next steps and maintaining their own sanity in this much-needed fast-paced journey!

How can coaching improve classroom practice, pupil learning and pupil outcomes?

Effective coaching includes high levels of challenge. In our experience, we began to see this level of challenge within people's leadership roles and within the classroom. Teachers' levels of questioning expanded and became more effective as their active listening improved along with their use of challenging and open-ended questions. They appreciated the impact of exploring their own thinking in their individual coaching sessions and began to see the impact that this had upon their own children within their individual learning, enabling children to drive their learning independently.

When is it more appropriate to use directive approaches or non-directive approaches?

Mentoring and clear articulation by leaders, for both teachers and support staff, provided clarity around our direction of travel, in which the contribution of the individual was essential. What some schools today may be calling instructional coaching we have always termed as mentoring: 'the passing on of professional knowledge and guidance to someone less experienced or competent'. Quality feedback was and continues to be essential in maintaining our progress and standards.

Leaders were talent-spotted to step up their training to lead year groups, and our coaching competence was further developed. What emerged became the coach training system, which became the Leadership Edge 3 tier programme, which we continue to develop and share with other schools in our MAT and beyond. Coaching is seen as inclusive: 'the way we do things round here'. To be a coach, you have to have a coach – this wasn't going to change!

In our schools, what do we mean by coaching?



There continues to be a challenge in the school workplace about what school leaders/teachers understand by the term *coaching*. The coaching spectrum (attributed to Myles Downey, 2003-4) best illustrates the difference between the four perspectives of coaching used by schools. Mentoring sits in the lower part of the spectrum, as shown in **Figure 2**, and is frequently described by a school as ‘coaching and mentoring’.

Let’s explore a few:

Instructional/incremental coaching (a directive coaching model) is used to raise attainment in the classroom. Residing primarily in the lower half of the spectrum, the focus is on feedback, advice and instruction. It sits in the school improvement agenda, driven by organisational objectives rather than a focus on personal needs and circumstances. This coaching methodology can be linked to a support plan and can mean that rapid improvement is needed to avoid competency procedures.

Performance coaching is mid-range, similar to the above but with more emphasis on shared dialogue. Professor Christian van Nieuwerburgh (Growth Coaching), Carol Wilson and Peter Hawkins have continued to build on this work in promoting coaching in the workplace that primarily drives performance. Performance coaching is often the model that people think of in relation to sports coaching. The coach is there to improve the performance of the team. Performance coaching has a focus on the workplace, and doesn’t necessarily address the wellbeing needs that people have in order:

- to be developed in areas of personal strengths or interests
- to make contributions that align with their personal values
- to fulfil their personal aspirations.

Pure coaching provides a non-directive model of coaching, one that values both people and results. Each coaching session is *purely* the agenda of the coachee. Pure coaching maintains a focus on the individual’s wellbeing and specific needs, interests and aspirations. Done well, it often shows an impact on attendance, performance, career development and perceived wellbeing.

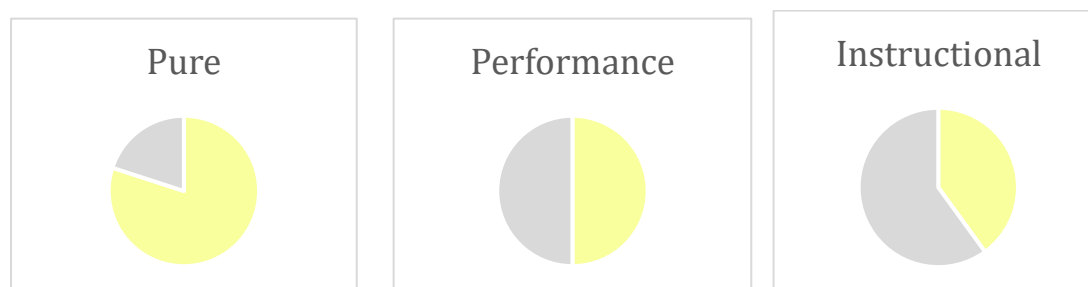
Coachees experience a space to think for themselves and explore their current challenges or opportunities, and with their coach holding this space for them, they determine ways of being proactive and taking control over their own thinking and actions, rather than being

dominated by the voices of others. The coach facilitates through questioning, and the coachee shapes their own actions going forward, identifying when and how they might achieve their next steps.

Figure 3 expands these models of coaching further.

To expand this further:

	% of Voice: coachee (yellow) v coach (grey)	Who steers the conversation?	Leadership Edge call this:
Pure Coaching	80 -20	Coachee steers	Coaching
Performance Coaching	50-50	Coach or coachee steers	Professional dialogue
Instructional /incremental Coaching	40-60	Coach steers	Mentoring



<A>The process of implementing coaching within schools

In implementing coaching across my MAT family of schools, we encountered many now-familiar challenges: a misunderstanding of what coaching is, the prevailing culture in a school, past experiences, money/Return on Investment and time.

At the start of the first COVID lockdown, we opened up the opportunity for coaching across all nine schools and actively paired coaches and coachees with individuals from different schools. We were conscious of staff wellbeing more than ever and saw pure coaching as providing effective support. The pairings from different schools added another element to our coaching approach. It enabled us to utilise more experienced and accredited coaches from schools while providing inexperienced coachees with a coach who was naturally curious, a crucial element to any effective coaching pair.

Our non-directive coaching took time to embed; it was not a quick fix – no short training course and off you go. It was a slow and steady process of introducing coaching skills, together with personal experience, reflective learning and articulation of the impact. Starting with senior leaders and early adopters in 2016–17, word spread, and in September 2018, by then with a greater capacity of accredited coaches, I opened up the opportunity to have a coach to all staff at East Park, regardless of role. A further 27 staff requested to begin their own coaching journey.

Sessions are held at a mutually convenient time for coach and coachee. Such is the value placed on these sessions, they are seen as win-win, give and take. It is a privilege to coach someone, and staff are appreciative of being coached. The words/phrases that most

commonly appear in our testimonials include 'empowering', being 'listened to and heard' and 'gaining clarity'. They confirm that staff feel that their wellbeing matters.

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