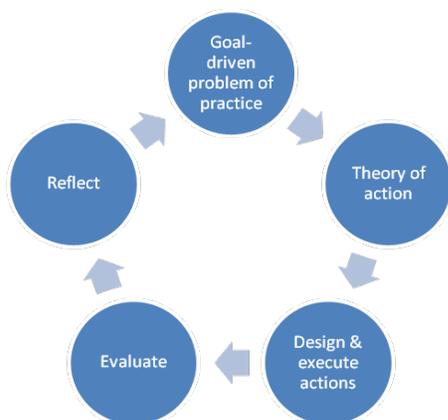




Executive Coaching Model

Introduction

The Executive Coaching Model is a strategy for improving the work of district leaders. The model states that the goal of coaching is to support leaders as they implement the continuous improvement (or inquiry) cycle in schools and school districts. To the extent that educators are familiar with this cycle, or one like it, they often use it as part of a yearly school improvement planning process. We suggest that this cycle can be used productively more often than that, and in many more situations, and that coaching is effective when a skilled coach works with a leader to use this cycle to do the work of improvement. The cycle of inquiry employed by the coaching model is represented as:



There are hundreds of coaching models and thousands of books about coaching. The skills that they describe are all very similar—listening, questioning, goal-setting, etc.—and for a comprehensive description of the skills of a coach, we refer to you the International Coach Federation document *ICF Professional Coaching Core Competencies*. The coaching model assumes that good coaching demands the same skills of coaches as every other coaching model—we label these the technique of coaching. In addition, however, the model seeks to be explicit about three other aspects of leadership coaching in the context of schools and school districts. These aspects are:

1. The underlying theory and research. For example, the coaching model has as one of its premises the very powerful idea that it is the way we make meaning out of our own experience—not somebody else's—that leads to professional growth. While this is a belief that drives the coaching model, it is also well grounded in research and theory¹

¹ The idea of making sense of experience in education goes back at least as far as the work of Dewey, and for a good summary of the history of the idea plus a useful model, see Kolb (1984).

2. The strategy of supporting leaders in designing and implementing school and district improvement strategies through the cycle of inquiry
3. The coaching work is specifically intended to build the professional capacity of school and district leaders, enabling them to lead schools and districts more effectively and to improve student learning at scale.

The Cycle of Inquiry

Effective Feedback

Feedback is not an explicit part of the cycle of inquiry. However, we have included it as a separate section for the purposes of this document for two reasons. First, we think of feedback not as a separate step in a model, but as information that is available all the time if you know how to acquire it². And second, our technical definition of feedback in a coaching context is different and more structured than feedback in a more colloquial sense³. We typically think of feedback as evaluative information or opinion. We pay more attention to feedback that we generate for ourselves, and feedback questions that encourage this kind of self-regulation are intended to build leadership capacity over the long term.

1. We want leaders to have a shared understanding of what effective performance looks like as described by the relevant competencies.
2. We want them to be able to **self-assess** relative to those competencies. The coach assists the leader in making that determination.
3. We want leaders to be able to generate **possible courses of action** to get them from where they are to where they need to be. The coach helps the leader think through possible courses of action.

Not all feedback is equally useful, and sometimes it is actually detrimental⁴ to the coaching process.

- Feedback that people perceive is about them personally is called ego-involved, and it is often counter-productive. E.g. “You’re very clever to think of that”.
- Feedback about the task tells the person what to do and is helpful when it clarifies the goal. E.g. “You need to speak more loudly, it was difficult to hear you”.
- Feedback about the process tells the person how to think about doing the task. E.g. “Plan the meeting using this template”.
- Feedback about self-regulation⁵ helps the person be more metacognitive about his or her performance. E.g. What is your goal in having that meeting? How will you know whether the teachers benefited from

² For a very helpful discussion of the idea that successful people know how to wring a gallon of feedback out of every situation, see Seashore, Seashore, & Weinberg (1997).

³ Our model of feedback is taken from the work of Hattie and Timperley (2007), who reviewed the research on feedback and attempted to re-conceptualize it in line with the research that shows that some kinds of feedback are more useful than other kinds (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

⁴ This way of sorting out the difference between ego-involved and task-involved feedback comes from the work of Nicholls (1984).

⁵ Because so many fields utilize the concept of self-regulation, there are many variations on its definition. What they all have in common is the idea that humans have, to varying degrees, the capacity to regulate their behavior, actions, and thinking, with a desired outcome in mind (Karoly, Boekaerts, & Maes, 2005). Self-regulation, then, is the ability to think strategically about your own behavior in the service of reaching a particular goal, and to actually act on that strategy.

that workshop? In other words, you are helping the person answer the feedback questions for him or herself.

Goal-driven Problem of Practice

Specific challenges related to improving performance are what we mean by a goal-driven problem of practice⁶. Executive coaches can help with most with goals that are about learning, rather than about doing. We start from the assumption that the challenges leaders face are a mix of technical and adaptive⁷, and facility with both are necessary. In both situations, the coach's goal—and the goal of the leader being coached goal too—is to help build capacity rather than only solving the immediate problem.

Theory of Action

A theory of action⁸ is the rationale behind the school or district improvement actions that a leader takes. When fully developed a theory of action often includes the action steps and indicators associated with the leader's improvement hypothesis. We all have a leadership theory of action ; it's just that we are not always explicit about it. Chapter two of *Instructional Rounds*⁹ provides a straightforward and useful description of the concept of a theory of action and why it can be so powerful in thinking about school and district improvement. We start with the assumption that every theory of action is flawed, meaning that it does not account for all the possible connections and assumptions that can exist between a desired outcome and the actions intended to get to that outcome. The executive coach will help with the development, implementation and ongoing assessment of a solid theory of action.

Strategic Action

Strategic actions are, ideally, the outcome of a thoughtful combination of your problem of practice and a theory of action. The coach helps the leader think through the possibilities for action and decide which ones to enact. The coach also helps with time management in getting to the work that affords the highest leverage to effect improvement as well as helping the leader determine whether the hypothesis and action plans need to be changed based on evidence collected over time

Evaluation

Evaluation doesn't always have to mean test scores or standardized assessments, although of course it always should when possible. The coach can help focus on both of these essential processes and also help to develop and refine the skills for interpreting data which are a prerequisite for determining whether or not time is being allocated to what is most important. Am I getting the predicted or anticipated results? How do I know? What are the evidence indicators? Are others interpreting the outcomes the same way? To the extent possible,

⁶ The term problem of practice has been in use in the field of organizational change for at least 50 years. In education, it refers to a challenge that you are facing that is central to becoming more effective in improving student outcomes and that you need to understand better in order to approach the problem.

⁷ The concept of technical and adaptive leadership comes from the work of Ron Heifetz and his colleagues (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Very simply, the distinction involves determining whether the answer to a professional challenge is known or not. .

⁸ Our work on theory of action is based on the work of Chris Argyris and his colleagues (see, for example, Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985).

⁹ *Instructional Rounds* (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) is a particular process for improving student outcomes based on the theory of action that creating a practice for administrators to connect their leadership practice to the work of teaching and learning will provide information about what is actually going on in classrooms that can be used to improve instruction throughout the system.

evaluation criteria or evidence indicators are part of the planning process and set in advance. They also are central to the next stage in the cycle of inquiry, that of reflection.

Reflection

We use the word “reflection” all the time. Sometimes we use it to mean thinking about what went well and what could have gone better. Sometimes we use it just to mean that we are thinking about an experience. In our work, we use it to signify the process of making meaning of something, and generate a theory that explains what happened and then we often use that explanation to plan the next level of the work of improvement

Reflective practice is a process followed by professionals during which they:

1. bring to mind (through observation or recollection) an event or pattern of events;
2. make explicit their thinking about why these events happen the way they do in such a way that they can;
3. articulate their values, beliefs, and mental models, so that they can; and
4. change the way events happen in the future.

SUMMARY

The Executive Coaching Program for superintendents aims to provide timely, ongoing and skillful leadership support at the service of high leverage school and district improvement. The program is based on the coaching model described above. Coaching is a capacity-building activity that has the potential to make a significant difference in the school and district improvement trajectories of the participating leaders.

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