



CHAPTER 1

How Can Coaching Transform Schools?

Read this when:

- You are a coach, supervisor of coaches, or principal who wants to articulate what coaching is and can be
- You are an administrator considering developing a coaching program in your school

A STORY ABOUT WHAT COACHING CAN DO

The best way to describe how coaching can transform schools—through improving teacher practices, addressing systemic issues, and improving outcomes for children—is by offering an example.

Karen, a young white woman, was in her third year teaching English in an urban middle school. Before I started working with her, I had been warned that she was “not good with Mexican kids.” One principal had already moved her out of his school, and her new principal, whose student population was 80 percent Latino, was very concerned. I found Karen to be well intentioned, able to create engaging lessons, and capable of building good rapport with students. She was also eager to receive coaching.

A significant percentage of Karen's eighth graders were several years below grade level in reading. Karen agreed to explore her students' skill gaps and selected Angel, a Mexican-American boy, as a focal student. She hoped that digging deep into what was going on with one student would reveal insights and practices that could be applied to other struggling students. Angel was bright, well liked, and had a stable home life; his parents had both graduated from high school in California. He was also goofy and frequently off task in class. Karen had no idea why Angel read at a second-grade level.

As a first step, I coached Karen in using a set of reading diagnostics. She discovered that while Angel had a tremendous mastery of a set of sight words, and therefore could read some text, he could not decode multisyllabic words. Karen dug deeper, finding that Angel struggled with the sounds of certain phonemes. Karen identified the precise skill gaps that made reading difficult for Angel. Now it was just a matter of filling those gaps. Angel leapt at the offer of extra help and extra homework, regularly skipping recess and coming in after school; Karen was enthusiastic about supporting him. In the course of six months, Angel's reading advanced three grade levels.


In an end-of-year reflection with me, Karen revealed that initially she had thought that Angel was "just lazy." She looked at the boy's photo, which decorated the outside of his file. "I really thought he was just a lazy boy," she admitted. She was embarrassed by her previous beliefs and that she'd fallen into believing stereotypes about Mexican immigrants. In our coaching, I carefully and intentionally pushed Karen to explore her belief system; I challenged it and helped her shatter an assumption that she held about some of her students.

I also coached the English department to which Karen belonged. That year, I facilitated an inquiry process to help teachers identify students' key missing skills and provide small-group and individual instruction to close those gaps. By the end of the year, these teachers concluded that it was an imperative to know, from day one, what their incoming students' exact gap areas were. They devised a process in which information could be gathered on students in certain achievement groups as part of the registration process. With these data, teachers could get a head start on planning to close these gaps.

As a result, my coaching led to a systems change — a change in how much teachers at one school know about their students, when and how they get certain information, and what they do with the information they gather. This change was initiated by teachers, welcomed by them, and resulted in a sense of empowerment about changing the outcomes for children. As evidenced by multiple measures, student achievement increased dramatically at this school for the next two years. This is what coaching can offer.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO TRANSFORM OUR SCHOOLS?

Speaking in the early 1980s, poet and activist Audre Lorde warned that true change could only be realized when those engaged in enacting it operate from an entirely different set of thoughts, beliefs, and values and take radically different actions from those taken in the past. Without a new set of tools, Lorde warned that we risk reproducing structures of oppression. Coaching offers a new set of tools that have the potential to radically transform our schools.


*The master's tools will never
dismantle the master's house.*

AUDRE LORDE (1984)

In the United States, our public school system is in crisis. On this point there is little disagreement. Something must be done. Beyond that, there is a raging debate on what to do and how to do it. Those who ride the chariot of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) deliver one message, which perhaps crudely summarized comes down to this—teachers, principals: improve your test scores or you will be penalized or even fired. Perhaps their intentions are positive, but over ten years have passed since NCLB went into effect, and this method has not worked. The “achievement gap” remains, and there have been many devastating side effects from NCLB, such as the narrowing of curriculum, the time and focus dedicated to test preparation, and the increase in rote learning. Coaching must be contextualized within a broader conversation to “reform,” save, or transform public education. As such, coaching—as a method and theory—is a political stance. Coaching rests on a few basic assumptions that place its supporters in a unique location in this discussion of school transformation.

First, a coaching stance views teachers, principals, and all the adults who work in schools *as capable of changing practices*—coaches fundamentally believe that people can learn and change. Second, in order to understand the current reality and challenges in schools, coaches analyze larger systems at play as well as the historical context. We consider the impact of complex organizations, the macro socioeconomic system, and the roles of all individuals; we do not blame one group of people or seek any quick fixes.

It is essential that we explore the nature of the so-called “achievement gap”—why it exists, who benefits from it, and why current federal legislation can’t eliminate it. But it is more important and absolutely critical that we are thoughtful about the way we are going about doing things—the “how”: how we reflect on and analyze the

past, how we confront the present, how we change our schools and create the future. If we are not mindful, the change process will end up replicating the structures of oppression that produced our current system.

This is where coaching comes in: when we explore the “how.” An understanding of this historical context is essential when we work in schools. Teachers have been blamed for poverty and told they are lazy, untrustworthy, and unintelligent. I believe that the most effective coaches were once teachers, and that they carry this awareness with them. Our communication with teachers and principals must be imbued with this empathy and contextual understanding or we risk (perhaps unconsciously) falling into the dominant discourse around what’s wrong with schools.

Former superintendent of San Diego’s schools, Carl Cohn, cautions that “school reform is a slow, steady labor-intensive process” contingent on “harnessing the talent of individuals . . .” (quoted in Ravitch, 2010, p. 66). Herein lies the essential question for us to grapple with: How do we harness the talent of individuals? How do we develop conditions for adults to learn and develop their talents?

A NEW TOOL KIT BASED ON ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

Coaching is a form of professional development that brings out the best in people, uncovers strengths and skills, builds effective teams, cultivates compassion, and builds emotionally resilient educators. Coaching at its essence is the way that human beings, and individuals, have always learned best.

The apprenticeship is an ancient form of coaching. An experienced practitioner welcomes a learner who improves her practice by watching, listening, asking questions, and trying things out under the supportive gaze of the mentor. While there are critical distinguishing factors between a mentor and a coach, the sensibility and outcome are the same: the learner is met and accepted wherever she is in her learning trajectory, she is encouraged and supported, she may be pushed, and in the end, she’s a competent practitioner.

Coaching is also, essentially, what any parent does with a child. When my son learned to walk, I supported him in his first steps, standing close by and offering a hand when necessary. I let him stumble and fall, looking for that fine line between his need for reassurance and his need to remain upright. I’d crouch a few feet away, with my hands outstretched, rambling, “Come on, sweetie, I know you can do it! Come on — take a step, you can do it.” Gradually, I’d scoot backward on the floor, allowing

my toddler to take more steps as he was ready, until eventually he was running across the living room.

With our children, we use a gradual release of responsibility model, providing just enough help for them to do it, but not so much that they don't develop the skills by themselves. When they're nine months old, we don't scream, "I can't carry you any longer. You need to walk now or I'm leaving you here!" Threats and coercion don't work.

In order to transform our education system, we need to pay attention to the people who make up this system and all of their needs. This requires everyone to develop tremendous patience, compassion, humility, attentiveness, and a willingness to listen deeply. We need to meet people wherever they are and then together devise a "how," and, most likely, we'll have to try a few "hows" before we see the results we want. There's just no other way.

WHAT CAN COACHING DO FOR A SCHOOL? WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?



Administrators: this next section will be very useful if you are considering hiring a coach or setting up a coaching program.

There's generally an agreement that educators need more knowledge, skills, practice, and support after they enter the profession. Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008), calculates that it takes ten thousand hours of deliberate practice — practice that promotes continuous improvement — to master a complex skill. This translates into about seven years for those working in schools. The majority of teachers and principals want professional development; they want to improve their craft, be more effective, implement new skills, and see students learn more.

Opinions diverge as to what professional development (PD) should look like. Traditionally, PD has taken the form of a three-day training, say in August before school starts, and then perhaps a couple of follow-up sessions throughout the year. This kind of PD by itself, which just about every teacher has experienced, rarely results in a significant change in teacher practice and rarely results in increased learning for children. According to a 2009 study on professional development, teachers need close

to fifty hours of PD in a given area to improve their skills and their students' learning (Darling-Hammond and others, 2009). While the research on the ineffectiveness of "one-shot" PD continues to pile up, a search is under way for PD that might work. Learning Forward (the international association of educators formerly known as the National Staff Development Council) has developed an invaluable set of Standards for Professional Learning that identifies the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results. It is very useful to all engaged in designing or leading PD. You can find these standards online here: www.learningforward.org/standards.

Coaching is an essential component of an effective professional development program. Coaching can build will, skill, knowledge, and capacity because it can go where no other professional development has gone before: into the intellect, behaviors, practices, beliefs, values, and feelings of an educator. Coaching creates a relationship in which a client feels cared for and is therefore able to access and implement new knowledge. A coach can foster conditions in which deep reflection and learning can take place, where a teacher can take risks to change her practice, where powerful conversations can take place and where growth is recognized and celebrated. Finally, a coach holds a space where healing can take place and where resilient, joyful communities can be built.

When considering hiring a coach, principals often ask the following kinds of questions about the impact of coaching: What does the research say about how coaching can transform a school? Is there a model that is most effective? Is there evidence that coaching will result in increased student achievement?

As coaches, it is our responsibility to know what can be expected. We can't go into schools purporting to raise test scores by 50 percent in the first year. We need to articulate what we might be able to accomplish. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research indicating that coaching can help create the conditions necessary for instructional practices to change and student outcomes to improve. These are valuable data points for coaches to be aware of as they help direct the work we do; our work is not simply about working individually with teachers to improve their practice—it must extend farther.

To date, the most thorough and comprehensive study on coaching was done in 2004 by the Annenberg Foundation for Education Reform. It reports a number of findings that offer powerful validation for coaching. First, the report concludes that effective coaching encourages collaborative, reflective practice. Coaching allows teachers to apply their learning more deeply, frequently, and consistently than teachers working

alone. Coaching supports teachers to improve their capacity to reflect and apply their learning to their work with students and also in their work with each other.

A second finding from the Annenberg report is that effective embedded professional learning promotes positive cultural change. The conditions, behaviors, and practices required by an effective coaching program can affect the culture of a school or system, thus embedding instructional change within broader efforts to improve school-based culture and conditions.

Coaching was also linked to teachers' increase in using data to inform practice. Effective coaching programs respond to particular needs suggested by data, allowing improvement efforts to target issues such as closing achievement gaps and advocating for equity. The Annenberg report found that coaching programs guided by data helped create coherence within a school by focusing on strategic areas of need that were suggested by evidence, rather than by individual and sometimes conflicting opinions.

Another key finding was that coaching promotes the implementation of learning and reciprocal accountability. Coaching is an embedded support that attempts to respond to student and teacher needs in ongoing, consistent, dedicated ways. The likelihood of using new learning and sharing responsibility rises when colleagues, guided by a coach, work together and hold each other accountable for improved teaching and learning.

Finally, the Annenberg report determined that coaching supports collective leadership across a school system. An essential feature of coaching is that it uses the relationships between coaches, principals, and teachers to create the conversation that leads to behavioral, pedagogical, and content knowledge change. Effective coaching distributes leadership and keeps the focus on teaching and learning. This focus promotes the development of leadership skills, professional learning, and support for teachers that target ways to improve student outcomes.

Additional research studies indicate that effective coaching structures promote a collaborative culture where school staffs feel ownership and responsibility for leading improvement efforts in teaching and learning. Coaching attends to the "social infrastructure" issues of schools and systems that often impede the deep and lasting change that school reform requires. These issues include school climate, teacher isolation, insufficient support, and limited instructional and leadership capacity. In 2010, the *Elementary School Journal* published eight studies on the impact of coaching on teacher practice and student achievement. This included a three-year study on literacy coaches working in grades K–2 in seventeen schools. In these schools, they

found that student literacy learning increased by 16 percent in its first year, 28 percent in its second year, and 32 percent in the third (Biancarosa, Bryk, and Dexter, 2010).

Another study investigated the effect of coaching on new teachers in a high-turnover school. It found that schools with coaching programs saw significant improvement in measures of teacher practices and student outcomes compared to schools without coaching programs. The findings suggest that new teachers benefit from teaching in schools with strong coaching programs in place, and that coaching programs could have an added benefit in high-turnover urban schools (Matsumura and others, 2010). Reflecting on the eight different studies, the *Elementary School Journal* editors write: “Many in the field have trusted that intuitive feeling that putting a knowledgeable coach in a classroom to work with a teacher will result in improved teacher practices and increased student learning. The jury of these researchers and the peer reviewers of their work have delivered its verdict: while coaching may be new, it is no longer unproven” (Sailors and Shanklin, 2010).

As the field of coaching in schools develops, it is critical that we identify and gather sets of qualitative and quantitative data that can reveal the impact of our work on student learning. We need to track the changes we see in teacher and leader practice and gather evidence that our work is resulting in improved student learning. This can be an exciting and validating effort — it is these data that help us feel effective and that let us know objectively that we’re doing good work. In order to do this, we need to make sure that the scope of our work is defined and narrow, that we’re gathering data on how our clients make progress, and that we’re articulating these findings. A highly effective, comprehensive coaching program in a school or district supports coaches to systematically gather a range of evidence to illustrate the impact of coaching on teachers, administrators, and students.

THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS

The potential for coaching within the education system has yet to be reached for several reasons. First, in most schools and districts, there is no formal pathway or training for entering a coaching role. The majority of coaches were strong teachers who demonstrated mastery of content and pedagogy and who were encouraged, or self-selected, to pursue coaching. While content and pedagogy are foundational knowledge for a school coach, there are many more skills and capacities required for working with adults. Furthermore, once in the position, most coaches receive little professional development. Therefore, given the inconsistency with which coaches are trained and supported, there is bound to be a discrepancy between what coaching can offer and the reality.

In addition, the potential of coaching cannot be realized if certain conditions are not in place. Daniel Coyle, author of *The Talent Code* (2009), describes coaches as farmers who cultivate talent in others. As someone who has long admired the patience, attentiveness, and groundedness of farmers, I love this analogy. It is also apt when considering what needs to be in place for coaching to be effective: the land must be fertile, invasive weeds need to have been removed, and the seeds can't be old and moldy. A farmer must be aware of local climate—you can't plant pineapples in Alaska and expect them to thrive.

Coaches, similarly, need to be able to analyze systems and identify situations primed for coaching. It is partly our responsibility as coaches to accept positions in schools where the foundation is laid for us to do our best work. Principals, or supervisors of coaches, are also responsible for assessing how “ready” a coach is to undertake the work.

Let's consider these conditions that need to be in place in order for coaching to work. It is critical that these be delineated, because when the status of these conditions is murky, it is hard to assess the impact of coaching or draw conclusions about its impact. For example, if a principal invests scarce resources to bring coaches into his school and sees little change in test scores after two years, he might conclude that “coaching doesn't work.” While this appears to be an obvious conclusion, is it correct? If taken at face value, it could result in a school culture that does not value or utilize coaching.

There are two sets of variables to assess for readiness: the readiness of the coach and of the site.

The Coach's Readiness

A coach working with teachers or principals must have been an effective teacher for at least five years; there is just no other way to have developed the kind of empathy and foundational knowledge and understanding that teachers or principals need in a coach. A dynamic teacher or principal may not necessarily segue into being an effective coach without additional training. Fortunately, many of the technical skills and knowledge about coaching can be learned, but a prospective coach must at a minimum have strong communication skills, particularly listening skills, and high emotional intelligence.

Principals interviewing coaches might also explore how the coach became a coach—did she participate in any training? Has she ever been coached? What draws her to the domain of adult learning? Without a deep interest in—and perhaps passion for—adult learners, a coach will struggle. The following list offers questions that principals might ask applicants for a coaching position.

Interview Questions for a Principal or Hiring Manager to Ask a Coach-Applicant

1. Tell us a little about yourself and your background in education.
2. Why do you want to be a coach? Why do you want to be a coach here?
3. What has your experience been with coaching? If you were coached in the past, what worked for you? What didn't work?
4. Which coaching skills do you feel you're strong in?
5. Which coaching skills would you like to develop?
6. What conditions do you think need to be present at a site in order for you to have an impact as a coach?
7. What does a really good classroom look like to you?
8. When you go into a classroom as an observer, what are you looking for? Or looking at? What catches your attention?
9. What would you do if you were coaching a new teacher who couldn't manage a class?
10. What would you do to get to know a site that you were assigned to coach at?
11. How would you work with a teacher or administrator who didn't seem to want coaching?
12. What experience have you had working in teams?
13. What are your thoughts about how teams develop? What do you anticipate doing as a coach to support team development?
14. What are your thoughts and beliefs about how systems change? As a coach, how do you see yourself affecting system change at a site?
15. How would you measure or evaluate the impact you have as a coach on your client?
16. Tell us about a time when you experienced big change that may have been outside of your sphere of control. How did you manage it?
17. Most teachers and administrators experience significant stress. How have you managed stress and emotional turmoil at work? What ideas do you have for supporting clients in this area?
18. How do you learn best? How do you see yourself developing as a coach?

The Site's Readiness

There are definitely conditions in which an experienced, trained, highly skilled coach can fail to produce any kind of change in teacher practice or student outcome. In this case, we want to be careful not to come to the easy or obvious conclusion that the coach was ineffective without also looking at the conditions at the site.

An abundance of research describes the determining impact that a leader has on a school. In order for a site to be ripe for a coach, the principal must demonstrate some degree of effective leadership. The main areas to assess for are in the domains of how a leader fosters vision or mission, determines instructional foci, creates and sustains a collaborative culture, organizes professional development, and makes decisions. A site that is under a time-bound threat of sanctions for not meeting external goals (such as not making NCLB's adequate yearly progress, or AYP) is one where the range of a coach's impact will be limited — at least for the immediate future. A coach *can* help a site improve markers such as AYP, but it takes years. In a school with ineffective leadership, coaching won't result in whole-school change. While it is very likely that some of these conditions may be in place in any school that seeks to bring in a coach, prospective coaches would be wise to consider for themselves how many conditions need to be in place in order to allow them to be effective, or which ones are nonnegotiable. The following list offers questions for coaches to consider when applying for a coaching position.

Most transformation programs satisfy themselves with shifting the same old furniture about in the same old room. But real transformation requires that we redesign the room itself. Perhaps even blow up the old room. It requires that we change the thinking behind our thinking.

DANAH ZOHAR (1997, P. 243)

Questions for a Coach to Ask at an Interview

1. What are your school's overarching goals? Who has set these goals? What was that process like?
2. What is your school's vision and mission? When were they created? When and where are the vision and mission revisited? What percentage of your staff, students, and parents would you guess know the vision and mission well?

3. What do you see as your teachers' areas of strengths? Areas for growth? How have you gathered these data?
4. What does professional development look like at your site? When and where does professional development occur? What role do you play in professional development? What impact does professional development have on your teachers' practice? How do you know?
5. Have you had coaches working in this school before? What was that experience like?
6. What is your vision of how you'd like to partner with a coach?
7. How do teachers feel about getting a coach? How do you know what they feel?

SPEAKING OF RACE

In June 2011, in the Oakland Unified School District where I work, fewer than 50 percent of the African American and Latino boys who had enrolled in high school four years earlier graduated; almost 75 percent of Asian American and white males graduated. One in three African American boys in Oakland middle schools is suspended in a given year; this exceeds the suspension rate of white males by six times. In our schools that are 100 percent students of color, it's not uncommon to find that the majority of teachers are young white women from middle-class backgrounds. Oakland is not unique among urban districts in facing these issues. Rural and suburban schools grapple with some of the same challenges on a different scale, and with other issues that reflect their contexts. It's hard to work in schools these days without recognizing the patterns in outcomes that correlate to socioeconomic factors and reflect broader patterns of achievement and power.

In order to talk about transformational coaching that works toward equitable schools, we're going to have to talk about race and class and gender and all those other issues that have divided people. There's no way around it. And yet we don't live in a society where these topics are discussed, we may have little experience engaging in this dialogue, and we may not know how. So what can coaches do?

Let's start with three truths about this work, offered with the hope of bringing relief:

1. *This isn't going to be easy.* Whether we're talking to people who share our particular cultural group or skin tones, or we're in mixed company, speaking about race, classism, patriarchy, homophobia, and the like is going to be uncomfortable.

2. *There is no “right way” to have these conversations.* We’re going to struggle to find the right words and get them out; we’re going to blunder and stumble.
3. *We have to do it anyway.* We need to gather skills, manage our own discomfort, and engage in conversations about race, class, privilege, and power because children need us to.

This book will offer some ways to speak about race, but you’ll also want to read other authors, attend workshops, and engage in other forms of learning. You’ll find suggestions for these in the recommended resources in Appendix E.

THE VALUE OF COACHING

The fact that coaching has been taken up in so many personal and professional realms in the last couple of decades is another data set to consider as we make the case for coaching in our schools. Athletic coaches have long been recognized as those who play the determining role in a team’s success—their disproportionately high salaries may reflect this appreciation (a value that is not reflected in the salaries of coaches working in schools). The business world has engaged coaches at all levels, and various companies attribute their successes to coaching. Life coaches have proliferated in recent years; clients who once went to therapy are now trying coaching as a self-help approach. Spiritual coaches are emerging from many traditions. Finally, experienced surgeons are discovering that coaching can improve their practice and they are recommending it to their ranks (Gawande, 2011).

Coaching has proliferated because it is responsive to what we know about what adults need in order to be able to learn. Coaching is at its essence a nurturing structure, but it is also one where there is always a subtle push for change. It grants space for emotions, but doesn’t linger in feelings; our intention is to address them, process them, and then move on. Coaches encourage us to explore our core values, behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being and compel us to venture into new behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being. It is this essential combination of safety, support, encouragement, and forward movement that makes coaching feel so satisfying, that allows us to make changes in what we do, and even to transform who we are.

Coaching, however, is not a panacea for our education system. As Diane Ravitch cautions, “In education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 3). But coaching is one piece—an essential piece—of the multilayered approach that will be necessary to transform schools. Teachers and leaders need high-quality professional development that takes many shapes and forms, and that

development includes coaching, but they also need living wages, improved working conditions, and a whole lot more respect. Our schools need a tremendous influx of cash: decrepit, antiquated buildings need to be repaired, basic supplies dwindle every year, class sizes keep increasing, support staff is slashed out of the budget, and so on. Curriculum must be improved in order to meet the needs of all our students. Our schools cannot continue to exist or be treated as isolated entities in a community—those of us working with and in schools must support them to become more tightly connected to, in service of, and responsive to the communities in which they are located. And on the policy front, the necessary changes are too many to list. The transformation of our education system will need to happen on many levels from the macro to the micro, from policy changes and taxation reform to the interpersonal relationships between people in a school.

But we must devote more time, money, and attention to improving the practice of the adults who work in schools. Coaching offers a model for professional development that can support teachers and principals in making immediate and long-term changes and becoming artful masters in our profession; these changes can lead to the transformation of our education system and the experiences and outcomes of the children it is meant to serve.