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What is coaching?

In this chapter we will look at:

- what coaching is
- the differences between mentoring and coaching
- a variety of coaching models that can be used in schools
- what makes a good coach.



Good teachers can be developed, providing they are working in a supportive and positive environment where it is okay to try things out, make mistakes and then further refine their ideas. They also need to be able to reflect on the issues that are important to them with an encouraging colleague, who will listen and ask key questions to help them find their solution – not the ‘this is the way I do it, so you should do the same’ approach. This, in our view, is the essence of coaching.

In the sixteenth century, the English language defined ‘coach’ as a carriage, a vehicle for conveying valuable people from where they are, to where they want to be. It is worth holding on to this definition when talking about coaching in schools. The staff are the most valuable resource that a school has. They are the people that make the difference to the young learners that come to our schools. We therefore have a duty to help and support each other, to become the best teachers that we can possibly be. Coaching is a vehicle to do this.

‘The good news is that as a teacher you make a difference. The bad news is that as a teacher you make a difference.’ (Sir John Jones, speaking at the Accelerated Learning in Training and Education (ALITE) conference, 2006)

Teachers are often all too aware of when things are not going well and how they would like things to be – what is often called their ‘preferred future state’. What we often struggle with is how to get there. What do I need to change? What can I do differently? Why is it not working? A coach is a trusted colleague who asks the right questions to help you find your own way to your preferred future state.

It is important to recognise that this is not new, not rocket science, nor is it a panacea. Teachers in schools have been supporting each other in this way for many years. The skills of a good coach will be examined later on but, put simply, they are

listening, questioning, clarifying and reflecting. To coach successfully in schools, you do not need vast amounts of training or a certificate – you just need to have experienced it and to have reflected on its value. We are not talking about life coaching here nor about counselling, which are two very different things that should most definitely be left to the experts. It is the simplicity of coaching in a school setting that makes it such a useful, universal and powerful developmental tool. However, it is only a tool – a very powerful one – but one of many that should be stored and used in the professional development toolbox. It would be naïve to believe that coaching is the ‘teacher’s cure-all’.

When examining definitions of ‘coaching’ it is clear that there are common threads running through all of them. They all suggest that coaching is a professional relationship, based on trust, where the coach helps the coachee to find the solutions to their problems for themselves. Coaching is not about telling, it is about asking and focusing. This is what separates mentoring from coaching. A mentor is often used when somebody is either new to the profession, for example a teacher in training or NQT, or is new to a particular role in the school. The mentor will have more experience than the person being mentored in that particular role, and so passes on their knowledge and skills. With coaching, the approach is different. It is more concerned with drawing out the solutions to a problem, by effective questioning and listening. It is non-hierarchical and does not depend on any expert/subject specific knowledge. In fact, one of the most successful coaching relationships that we have seen involved a NQT coaching an experienced teacher of nearly 30 years on how to effectively incorporate information and communication technology (ICT) into her lessons.



Case Study: Sarah and Jan

Jan was a physical education (PE) teacher with nearly 30 years of teaching experience. She was a good and well respected teacher, who had recently started teaching English to Year 7. Sarah was an English NQT. Jan had identified that she wanted to make her lessons more engaging by using her newly acquired interactive whiteboard. She didn’t want to attend a course on this but had been impressed with some of the lessons of her colleague, Sarah, who taught next door. Following a school training day on coaching, Jan asked Sarah if she could coach her. The two soon struck up a highly effective coaching relationship, which involved three coaching sessions and two lesson observations – each observing the other. Jan described how she felt at the end of the process: ‘Sarah helped me to clarify exactly what I wanted to achieve, and the steps I had to take to get there. As a result, I now feel confident using my interactive whiteboard and have achieved my goal – to deliver more interesting and engaging lessons.’

It is worth acknowledging that this relationship was an unusual one – in terms of the difference in experience of the coach and the coachee. However, it does demonstrate the non hierarchical nature of coaching.

Many of the skills of good mentoring and good coaching overlap – and often a blended approach of the two is most effective. When supporting a colleague, it is important not to be constrained by the labels of ‘coaching’ and ‘mentoring’. By this we mean that, if during a coaching conversation it becomes clear that no amount of

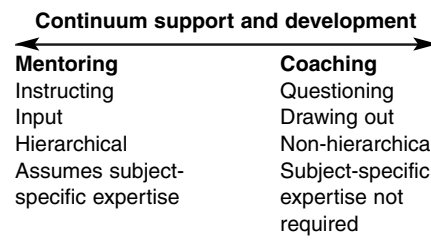


Figure 1.1 Continuum of support and development

questioning, reflecting, listening or clarifying is going to move the person on, then sometimes you need to slip into mentoring mode and make a suggestion. There is nothing wrong with this, although we suggest that it may be helpful to be explicit when adopting a different stance by, for example, asking permission of your colleague – ‘Would it be alright if I were to suggest a possible course of action here?’. Alternatively, the coach may be able to tap into the coachee’s preferred future and ask the coachee to visualise a possibility – ‘What would it look like if you were to ...?’

Mentoring and coaching should be seen as a continuum in terms of supporting and developing teachers.

This blended approach is often evident when mentoring NQTs. At the start of the relationship, when the NQTs are starting out, it is very much a mentoring relationship. You will be imparting your knowledge and skills to the NQTs, so that they can develop as teachers. As the mentees become more confident and competent, the balance between mentoring and coaching shifts further along the continuum towards coaching.

One other important difference between coaching and mentoring is that of making judgements. Often a mentor has to make a judgement about the standard reached by the person being mentored, for example, has he or she met the qualified teacher status (QTS) standards or the induction standards? This will result in quite a different relationship from that between coach and coachee, where it is very important not to be judgemental.

So, what were the skills that make a good coach? It is widely agreed that there are four:

- listening
- asking open **questions**
- **clarifying** points
- encouraging **reflection**.

Examples of these will be discussed later. Coaches also need be good at:

- building rapport – using posture, gestures, eye contact and so on
- adopting a non-judgemental view of others
- challenging beliefs – a good coach must be willing to have difficult conversations

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- seeing the big picture – this is at the heart of good coaching. Ask the question – ‘So what do you want to achieve? What do you want to be better?’
- summing up – this helps to keep the conversation focused and on track. for example, ‘So, what you’re saying is you want to improve ...’
- encouraging others to agree on actions – an essential part of the coaching process is committing people to action. for example, ‘So, following our discussion you are going to ...’
- acknowledging that they don’t have all the answers – this is fine. The role of the coach is to elicit the answers from the coachee
- respecting confidentiality
- developing a mutual trust and respect
- adopting a solutions focus – once the issues have been uncovered, don’t allow the conversation to descend into a spiral of negativity. Direct the coachee onto what they are going to do about it
- holding a strong belief that their colleagues have the capacity to learn, develop and change.

They also have the following qualities:

- curiosity
- optimism
- honesty
- trustworthiness
- patience
- consistency
- flexibility
- creativity
- confidence
- approachability
- professionalism
- openness

The importance of questioning in coaching

It should be clear by now that the principles behind coaching are straightforward. It is fundamentally about using questioning and listening skills to help coachees to resolve their own issues. However, there are a number of different coaching models that can be used to achieve this (see below). These models provide a framework for the coaching conversation – the dialogue between the coach and the coachee.

With all of these models, if a coaching conversation is to be successful, the coach will be required to use a range of different questioning strategies.

Clarifying questions

The purpose of this type of questioning is to clarify the issue – to get to the nuts and bolts, and so clear the way for deeper thinking. For example:

- ‘Tell me more about ...’
- ‘What aspect of this do you want to discuss today?’

- 'When have you had success in this area? Tell me more about that.'
- 'I am interested to hear about ...'
- 'You say that your starters are too long. Is that always the case?'
- 'What makes you think that this is an issue?'

Reflective questions

Reflective questions encourage the coachee to think about and reflect on their practice. For example:

- 'What do you want your starter activities to achieve?'
- 'What factors do you take into account when planning your lessons?'
- 'What did you want the students to learn today?'
- 'What would have to change in order for ...?'
- What do you wish ...?'
- 'What's another way you might ...?'
- 'What would it look like if ...?'
- 'What do you think would happen if ...?'
- 'How was ... different from ...?'
- 'What sort of an impact do you think ...?'
- 'What might you see happening in your classroom if ...?'
- 'What is your hunch about ...?'
- 'What was your intention when ...?'

Summarising questions

These are useful when the conversation has drifted away and you want to get the focus back. They are also useful to check that you have listened effectively and that the coachee has communicated accurately. For example:

- 'So to summarise, you say that the following factors are resulting in your starters taking too long ... is that right?'
- 'So, you are saying the key issue is ...'
- 'So, in order to achieve this, you say that you are going to ...'

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Outcome questions

Towards the end of the coaching conversation, you will want the coachee to commit to action. The following questions may help:

- 'What is your first step to achieve this?'
- 'What will you do next?'
- 'What support do you need?'
- 'On a scale of 1 to 10, how compelled are you to do this?'
- 'What will it look like, when you are successful?'

It should be noted that the majority of these are open questions. An open question directs the respondent away from a 'yes' or 'no' answer, but towards a longer and more reflective response. Open questions will usually start with what, how and describe, for example, what happened when you tried that strategy with this class? What leads you to think that it will not work? How would you do that differently next time? Can you describe one strategy you have used that has been successful? It is helpful to avoid 'why?' questions as they may found too Critical. (see Chapter 3 Setting Started – The 'shape' of the conversation).

Listening: the most difficult skill!

When coaching we must work hard to focus on our coachee's words, tone of voice, body language and what is not being said, as well as what is, in order to ask the right question at the right time. We must not anticipate or construct possible solutions for our colleague – that is not our job. So our listening skills need to be acute and, of course, they will develop with practice.

It is useful to recognise that we listen at three different levels.

Internal listening

Here we are listening to the self-talk inside our heads. Our colleague's comments can, and often do, prompt thoughts of our own. How many times, whilst in conversation, have you found yourself thinking, 'That's just what happened to me the other day ...' or 'I felt exactly the same when ...'? Such internal listening acts as 'interference' and prevents the coach from giving the client his or her undivided attention. With practice, coaches learn to filter out the interference and are able to listen actively.

Active listening

This occurs when the coach is paying full attention to the coachee's words, tone of voice, images and figures of speech. Then the coach is able to ask those (usually open-ended) questions, as discussed above, that help the coachee to move towards a solution. Moreover, by focusing all of his or her attention on the coachee, the

coach is motivating the coachee. There is, after all, something very special about *really* being listened to in the hectic world of a busy school! This is likely to be very important for the self-esteem and confidence of the client, especially if he or she is, as we say, 'in a bad place'.

Intuitive listening

When you are really tuned in as a coach, you begin to learn the thought patterns of your client, detect areas that are left unsaid and sense the feelings that lie under the surface of the conversation. You are beginning to listen *intuitively* and this may lead you to ask questions that will help the coachee to explore important and challenging aspects of issues. Such questions as, 'What are your feelings about ...?' or 'Is it significant that you haven't mentioned ...?' may be helpful here.

Finally, before we move on to consider different coaching models, it is important to urge the coach to allow thinking time and to resist shattering the silence with yet another question! When the coachee is in important territory, he or she often needs a lengthy pause in which to explore and formulate thoughts and feelings and to summon up the courage before saying anything. Have the confidence to hold the silence. Be attentive and encouraging, but don't speak!

Coaching models

The acronyms that accompany the following coaching models provide prompts for the different stages of the coaching conversation. This section will examine a range of these models and discuss the differences between them.

STRIDE model

This model has been developed by Will Thomas, author of two very useful books: *Coaching Solutions: Practical Ways to Improve Performance in Education* (Thomas and Smith, 2004) and *Coaching Solutions: Resource Book* (Thomas 2005). These are two books that we strongly recommend for anybody wishing to explore the skills of coaching in more detail. The STRIDE model is summarised as follows:

- **Strengths:** Affirm the positive throughout and draw attention to their strengths.
- **Target:** What do you want to achieve as a result of this process?
- **Reality:** What is the current situation like now and what obstacles are there to achieving your goals?
- **Ideas:** What could you do to address the situation?
- **Decision:** What are you going to do? What are the next steps?
- **Evaluation:** Check the decision: How committed are you to doing this? Over time: What progress have you made towards meeting these targets?

The essential aspect of the STRIDE model is that it really celebrates the strengths of the coachee so the whole process becomes a very positive experience. However, it does encourage the coachee to consider what obstacles there may be, which could prevent them from reaching their target, but they also have to consider how they could overcome these obstacles. The job of the coach is to keep asking open-ended questions to help the coachee to move towards a solution.

FLOW model

The FLOW model is explained in Powell et al. (2001).

- **Find the challenge:** What is the issue that you need to address?
- **Look at reality:** What are things like now?
- **Open possibilities:** What could you do about it?
- **Win commitment:** What are you going to do and when?

There are clear similarities between the STRIDE and FLOW models. One of the key differences is that the STRIDE model starts by looking at the coachee's preferred future, whereas the FLOW model starts by talking about the challenge, that is, What is it that you want to address? From this starting point will then come the discussion about what the targets are. Both models emphasise the need to look at what the reality is now. This is important, as it will open up a dialogue about what the obstacles or blocks are which are stopping the coachee from making progress. Only once these are brought to the fore can the issue really start to be addressed. It is surprising how often this is the key part of a coaching session and that by just seeing the situation clearly (rather than what was thought or imagined to be the situation), the resolution often becomes obvious and straightforward. Lastly, the STRIDE model encourages the coachee to evaluate both the appropriateness of the target and the progress towards it over time.

GROW model

The GROW model is one of the best known and most widely used coaching models, both within and outside education. It provides a simple yet powerful framework for navigating a route through a problem, as well as providing a means of finding your way when lost. It is described in a number of coaching books, including John Whitmores' excellent book *Coaching for Performance* (2002).

- **Goal:** What is the outcome to be achieved? The goal should be as specific as possible and it must be possible to measure whether it has been achieved. So, having identified the goal, questions like 'How will you know that you have achieved that goal?' are useful.
- **Reality:** What are things like now? What is stopping you from getting there?

- **Options:** What options do you have to help you get there?
- **Wrap up:** This is the What, Where, Why, When and How part of the process. At this stage, having explored all of the options, the coachee makes a commitment to action.

The attraction of the GROW model is its simplicity. A useful metaphor for GROW is a map: once you know where you are going (the goal) and where you are (current reality), you can explore possible ways of making the journey (options) and choose the best route.

OUTCOMES model

The OUTCOMES coaching model has been developed by Allan MacKintosh, of PMC Scotland (www.pmcscotland.com). It was designed for managers and sales managers to use, but it is clear to see how it could be adapted for teachers.

- **O** What are the employees' specific Objectives?
- **U** Understand the exact reasons why they want to achieve these objectives.
- **T** Take stock of where they are at present in relation to each objective.
- **C** Clarify the gap that they have to fill.
- **O** What Options do they have in order to fill the gap?
- **M** Motivate to Action.
- **E** Offer continual Encouragement and Energy.
- **S** Clarify what Support is needed to ensure actions are carried out.

It is suggested that this indepth approach to coaching will enable an increase in the coachee's understanding of the issue, which will result in motivation to change and then commitment to action. Although this model needs a disciplined approach to coaching it is a model that, when used effectively, has been shown to motivate and produce results for both coach and coachee.

CLEAR model

The CLEAR model was developed by Peter Hawkins and is discussed in *Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development* (Hawkins and Smith, 2006).

- **Contracting:** Opening the discussion, setting the scope, establishing the desired outcomes and agreeing the ground rules.

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- **Listening:** Using active listening and catalytic interventions, the coach helps the coachee to develop an understanding of the situation and generate personal insight.
- **Exploring:** (1) Helping the coachee to understand the personal impact the situation is having on the self. (2) Challenging the coachee to think through possibilities for future action in resolving the situation.
- **Action:** Supporting the coachee in choosing a way forward and deciding the next step.
- **Review:** Closing the intervention, reinforcing ground covered, decisions made and value added. The coach also encourages feedback from the client on what was helpful about the coaching process, what was difficult and what she or he would like to be different in future coaching sessions.

The CLEAR model has a number of differences from the other models. It starts by discussing the 'contract'. This allows the ground rules to be set, so the coachee has the opportunity to discuss how he or she would like to be coached. There is then a big emphasis on listening – a key component of coaching. When we are being listened to we feel valued, when we feel valued our self-confidence rises and we are more likely to commit to change. The review stage is also important, as it not only reviews the outcome of the coaching session but also reviews the effectiveness of the process. This is important. We should not just assume that the session has been effective, particularly if there is going to be a further session. We should discuss how useful the session was, and how we could make it even more useful next time.

OSKAR model

This model has been developed by Paul Z. Jackson and Mark McKergow at Solutions Focus and is discussed in *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE* (2007).

The whole principle of this model is not to look at the problem, as this very rarely yields any solutions, but instead to look at what works well and doing more of this and less of what does not work well.

- **Outcome:** What is the objective of this coaching? What do you want to achieve today?
- **Scaling:** On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing the worst it has ever been and 10 the preferred future, where would you put the situation today? You are at n now; what did you do to get this far? How would you know you had got to n+1?
- **Know-how and resources:** What helps you perform at n on the scale, rather than 0? When does the outcome already happen for you – even a little bit? What did you do to make that happen? How did you do that?
- **Affirm and action:** What's already going well? What is the next small step? You are at n now, what would it take to get you to n+1?

- **Review:** What's better? What did you do that made the change happen? What effects have the changes had? What do you think will change next?

The positive nature of this approach, coupled to the idea of scaling, makes it an attractive model. This somehow makes the issue more tangible. This approach is similar to the STRIDE model in that it really focuses on the strengths of the coachees, and encourages them to consider how they could use these strengths to address any issues that they may have.

HILDA model

One of the best bits of advice regarding coaching was also one of the simplest. It followed a discussion with a colleague about the importance of not getting too hung up on following a script when it comes to coaching. We felt that it should be a natural and flowing dialogue between two professionals and the coach should not have to constantly refer to a bank of questions, whilst engaged in coaching. This is most off-putting for the coachee and does not help to create the informal and relaxed atmosphere required for coaching. With this in mind, it was suggested that the best type of person to become a coach is a nosey person! Someone who will quite naturally ask question after question in order to find out what they want – and in doing so, will also help the coachee to find out. This simplicity seemed most appealing. Some readers might remember a character called Hilda Ogden – the archetypal nosey neighbour – in *Coronation Street* (a long-running television soap, based in the north of England) What a fantastic coach she could have made, with her continuous probing and incisive questioning. This led us to consider an alternative, simple model for coaching – the HILDA model.

- **Highlight the issue:** What do the coachees want to address? What do they want to be different and how?
- **Identify the strengths:** What do they already do well? How can these skills and attributes be used to address the particular issues?
- **Look at the possibilities:** In an ideal world, with no obstacles, what could they do to address the issues? What is getting in the way of doing this? How could these obstacles be overcome? What have they already tried? What worked and what didn't?
- **Decide and commit to action:** What are they going to do to address the issues? When are they going to do it? How are they going to do it?
- **Analyse and evaluate the impact:** How will they know if they have been successful? What will it look like?

Although in its early days, we have used this model in schools with an encouraging degree of success. Its simplicity makes the key stages easy to remember, within the framework of a constant reminder to ask open questions throughout each of the stages.



Questions for reflection and discussion

- Who among your colleagues possesses the qualities of a good coach?
- With who in your school could you explore ideas about coaching?
- Who might be interested in developing coaching in your school?
- What do you think the pros and cons of the different models we have looked at might be in your own school?



Summary

- The principles of coaching are consistent throughout these models. What varies is the way in which each of the models approaches coaching. You may, of course, wish to devise your own, based on the best bits of all of the models described above. The advantage of doing this, in collaboration with a range of colleagues from within your school, is that the people using the model will feel a sense of ownership over the approach.
- It is very easy to get bogged down with the theory of coaching – what is right and what is wrong. A coaching conversation, should never become a scripted event, so whichever model you decide to use, do so carefully. It would be very off-putting for a coachee to be faced by a coach with a clipboard and a list of questions. It should be a natural dialogue, involving a great deal of listening by the coach and open questioning, aimed at helping the coachee to find a solution.

Electronic resources



- Chapter 1 Beliefs and principles of coaching
- Chapter 1 Beliefs about learning and teaching
- Chapter 1 Coaching, counselling and mentoring definitions
- Chapter 1 Peer coaching
- Chapter 1 The effective coach

Further reading

Thomas, W. and Smith, A. (2004) *Coaching Solutions: Practical Ways to Improve Performance in Education*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Thomas, W. (2005) *Coaching Solutions: Resource Book*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Whitmore, J. (2002) *Coaching for Performance*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Powell, G., Chambers, M. and Baxter, G. (2001) *Pathways to coaching*. Bristol: TL.

Jackson, P. Z. and Mckergow, M. (2007) *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE* (2nd ed.). Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Useful websites



www.thesolutionsfocus.com

www.coachingnetwork.org.uk

www.curee-paccts.com/index.jsp