Creating coaching cultures for learning

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Introduction

As we have shown throughout this book, coaching has a unique contribution to make in educational settings and allows powerful learning to occur in carefully constructed environments. This chapter considers how to re-create, in schools and other learning organisations, the conditions in which coaching can be effective. In other words, how can we create "coaching cultures for learning"?

As the focal point of the communities of which they are a part, schools are the ideal context in which to grow coaching cultures for learning. As we have shown already, there is a considerable and growing body of evidence that coaching improves results for individuals and organisations. More specifically, the UK's National College for School Leadership (NCSL) concludes that "there is strong evidence that coaching promotes learning and builds capacity for change in schools" (Creasy & Paterson, 2005). It follows, therefore, that successful implementation of coaching cultures within schools (based on proven coaching principles) can lead to improved environments for learning. This, in turn, will mean better results for students, staff, and the wider community.

It is important for us, at this point, to reconnect with the real purpose of schools. Jim Collins, a leading American business thinker, states unequivocally that "we must reject the idea—well-intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become 'more like a business'" (Collins, 2006, p. 1). While schools have sizeable budgets that they manage and many now employ business managers and business directors, we must be careful to remember that they are *not* commercial businesses. Collins suggests that in the public sector, the question should not be " 'How much money do we make . . .' but 'How effectively do we deliver on our mission and make a distinctive impact, relative to our resources?' " (ibid. , p. 5). We would argue that this applies to all educational organisations, regardless of whether they are in the public or private sector. Fundamentally, well-led schools, colleges, and universities should necessarily focus on the outcomes for their students, and not solely on financial indicators. The key question for educators, then, is: "How much of an impact are we making on the children, young people, or learners in this organisation, within the limits of our resources?" If this is the case, the aims of educational organisations and of coaching are the same: to support people to achieve more of their potential.

So, what might this look like for a school at the embedded stage of developing their coaching culture? Hayes Park Primary School in the UK was identified by NCSL as having a well-established culture of coaching (see Chapter Ten). Its senior coach believes that coaching works best when the coach

- is very focused and is able to relate continually each stage of the activity back to the learner's goal'
- is a good listener and can pick up the nuances of the learner's talk;
- is patient and a good judge of when to ask a question and how to ask it;
- can formulate questions in response to the discussion with the learner;
- can rephrase questions and prompts when there is a silence;
- avoids putting forward answers;
- avoids preset questions. (Creasy & Paterson, 2005)

Essential elements of a coaching culture for learning

So, what are the essential elements of successful coaching practice and how can we transfer these into learning organisations? In Table 9.1, we consider some generally agreed characteristics of effective coaching relationships.

Combining the characteristics described in Table 9.1 creates a unique environment for individuals to engage in powerful and meaningful conversations. The learning that takes place often leads to better

Table 9.1.   Characteristics of effective coaching.

Characteristic	Description
Mutual trust	Trust is the cornerstone of a successful coaching partnership. Some of this trust is created through the confidential nature of coaching. The rest is built through the relationship and over time.
Timeliness	The fact that coaching takes place regularly, dealing with issues that are current and relevant for the coachee means that the intervention is "just-in-time". This is not the case with many "one-off" professional development opportunities currently available to educational staff.
Awareness of the need for change	Often, coachees are aware of the need for change when entering into coaching relationships. This awareness is critical if the coachee is to take positive steps towards better outcomes. In other words, it is important for the coaching opportunity to be voluntary.
Ownership of goals	The most successful coachees identify their own goals and related tasks through the coaching relationship. Goals and targets are not imposed from external sources.
Supportive relationships	Coaches are always present in a supportive capacity (even when asking challenging questions) to help the coachee to achieve more of their potential. Coaching should provide a motivational and encouraging context for the coachee.
Genuine care	For successful outcomes, coaches need to demonstrate respect and genuine care for the coachee and their goals.
Positive outlook	Good coaches are always forward-looking and optimistic, seeking out what is positive in their coachees.

outcomes for coachees and raises their levels of self-esteem and moti-vation. Bresser and Wilson identify some other commonly mentioned benefits: "enhanced personal and organizational performance, better work–life balance, higher motivation, better self-reflection, optimized decision making and improved change management" (2006, p. 11).

By recreating the characteristics of effective coaching conversations in educational organisations, there will be an increased likelihood of emotionally intelligent leaders working with valued and motivated staff in positive and healthy learning environments. Students would thrive in an organisation that models a supportive and ambitious learning community. Most importantly, the supportive environment would encourage everyone to seek out more of their (sometimes hidden) potential.

Steps towards a coaching culture for learning

If we accept that coaching cultures can enhance learning experiences, how can we start to move towards creating them? Three approaches are discussed here and they might be helpful in understanding the process. Each brings a slightly different perspective and we invite you to consider where you would locate your organisation in its journey towards a coaching culture (see "Reflection exercise", below).

Creating a coaching culture: the competence model

One way of understanding the steps towards a coaching culture is based on a well-known learning model probably developed by psychologist Noel Burch in the early 1970s (Adams, see: www.gordon-training.com).

Unconscious incompetence

This is the stage where there is little or no awareness of the benefits of a coaching culture. There is no shared understanding of the term "coaching", and many people will say or think that they are "too busy" to get engaged with coaching, which is considered to be of limited value.

Reflection exercise

Where are we now?

Just as every coachee is unique, so, too, is every organisation. You might already be leading or working for a supportive learning organisation that fully embraces the concept of a coaching culture for learning. Or else your organisation might just be at the very early stages of thinking about the possible benefits of coaching. Or, more likely, it is somewhere in between.

According to Erik de Haan, "coaching is predominantly an exercise in *self-understanding* and *self-changing* on the part of the coachee" (de Haan, 2009, p. 52). Similarly, creating a coaching culture for learning is all about *organisational self-awareness*. It is an important first step to know (as an organisation) where you are. Equally important is the notion that the development of a coaching culture for learning is *self-directed*. Even if there is a need to involve third parties in a change programme, ownership of the process must rest with the organisation and the people within it.

As you read about the three approaches to understanding the process of creating a coaching culture, please reflect on your organisation's place within each.

Conscious incompetence

At this stage, there is a general recognition that some change is needed in the school: a new way of thinking, a more dynamic culture or a "turn-around". Coaching might be discussed as one way of moving forward, although the term itself might be confused with mentoring or counselling. A few influential people might be prepared to explore the idea of coaching further while others are doubtful or cynical.

Conscious competence

This is a critically important stage. Coaching will be better understood and have some key champions within the organisation. Coaching is broadly accepted as a positive intervention that will allow the organisation and individuals within it to achieve better results. Much learning is still taking place, and along with successes there might be difficulties. It is important in this phase to be resilient, working hard to ensure that a coaching culture for learning becomes embedded in the organisation.

Unconscious competence

This is an ideal place to be. The coaching culture will be embedded and well understood by all members of the organisation. It becomes the normal way of being as the organisation continues to develop organically. It is no longer a "coaching initiative" or "programme", but a natural way of being.

Creating a coaching culture: stages

We will now consider an alternative four-stage process developed by Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005). This approach relates directly to coaching and has been used in a number of organisations as a way of creating a coaching culture. Clutterbuck and Megginson describe the following four stages.

> Nascent: at this stage, the organisation "shows little or no commitment to creating a coaching culture" (p. 96). Coaching activity is sporadic and unco-ordinated.
> Tactical: at this stage, the organisation might have "recognised the value of establishing a coaching culture, but there is little understanding of what that means" (ibid.).
> Strategic: at this stage, the organisation will have invested considerable resources into educating staff about the value of coaching as well as training. "Top management have accepted the need to demonstrate good practice" (ibid.). Leaders connect strategic business drivers with coaching initiatives.
> Embedded: at this (ideal) stage, "people at all levels are engaged in coaching" (p. 97) and "coaching and mentoring are so seamlessly built into the structure of HR systems that they occur automatically" (ibid.) As a result, the organisation can tackle difficult issues and focus on improvement.

Creating a coaching culture: journey

A third model of stages towards creating a coaching culture presents the various stages as part of a "journey" (Passmore & Jastrzebska,

2011). This journey has five staging posts from the use of external coaching practitioners to using coaching across the wider network with all stakeholders, including governors, parents, and partners. This is summarised in Figure 9.1.

We propose that it is important to start by defining a coaching culture. The term itself is widely misused and often has been taken to mean simply that coaching is used widely with teachers or with students. However, for this to be part of a coaching culture for learning, we believe it should be used consistently across the wider school community.

We define a coaching culture for learning as one where coaching, the use of reflective and provocative questions, is used consistently by all partners across the school community, to help develop learning, understanding and personal responsibility in others from staff, to parents and from students to governors and wider stakeholders.

Stage one: informal external coaches

Many learning institutions hold the presumption that if they use external coaches they already have a coaching culture. However, from

Figure 9.1.   Five levels on the journey to a coaching culture.

our experience of working with many different schools, the appointment of a coach to work with the head teacher or deputy head teacher is helpful, but this does not necessarily lead to a shift in the organisational culture. Coaching needs to extend beyond the leadership team and across the organisation. It needs to be planned and be part of a wider process to drive change and transform the way the school or college works and learns.

Stage two: strategic use of external coaching

At stage two on the journey towards a coaching culture for learning, we would suggest that coaches would be appointed in a professional manner, and in a way where there is a plan for how the external coaches can share their knowledge so that the senior team both learn the coaching way of developing others and start to use it consistently with the staff, and second, their own coaching is tied to a set of objectives for the school and specifically links to the organisation's development plans.

Stage three: coaching as a management style

The third stage of building a coaching culture for learning involves the move to introduce coaching for all staff, not only the senior or middle managers. At this stage, schools have tended to move towards creating a cadre of internal coaches, as the use of external coaches for all staff is expensive and unaffordable for most schools.

The first step in this process is building a pool of internal coaches. This involves selecting and training individuals throughout the organisation. From experience, we have found that inviting volunteers is helpful, as such individuals are more likely to remain involved with the future programme and make time for coachees than those pressed into coaching service. Ultimately, this should mean that all staff being trained in coaching skills are able to use coaching in multiple interactions with others, helping each other to learn through, when appropriate, useful, open, and reflective questions.

Stage four: coaching for all

The fourth stage for organisations on the journey to creating a coaching culture for learning is to extend coaching from management

discussion into learning discussions with students. Teachers can use coaching as a way of encouraging learning in the classroom, alongside tried and tested didactic methods. This involves asking provocative questions, encouraging students to think and discover the answers to questions for themselves.

Stage five: coaching across the school network

The fifth stage is spreading coaching beyond the traditional boundary of schools and communities, into the wider community. This involves the use of coaching in conversations with parents, with governors, with stakeholders, and encouraging each of these groups to learn about coaching and to use coaching with their children and others in appropriate ways which maximise learning and facilitate the development of personal responsibility.

Activity

Once you have decided where you would place your organisation in any or all of the three approaches described above, ask yourself this question: "What would other people in my organisation say?" Think of a few members of staff from across the organisation. As a next step, why not ask them?

Working towards a coaching culture for learning

How well are you doing currently? You may like to take a few minutes to complete Table 9.2. Be as honest as you can.

Completing this table will give you a good indication of your own perceptions about how well your organisation is doing currently as a coaching culture for learning. Where you have rated yourself highly, it is important to recognise the strengths in your organisation and look for opportunities to both celebrate and promote those aspects. Where you have given yourself a lower rating, that could be an area that the organisation chooses to prioritise for development.

Table 9.2.   Self-assessment.

Elements of a coaching culture for learning	How it might be represented in a school or college	Your assessment 0: No, not at all 10: Yes, all the time
Mutual trust	Staff and students trust one another	
Timeliness	All staff and students have opportunities to discuss any learning or development issue at any time	
Awareness of the need for change	Staff and students want things to be better, are open to new ideas and looking for ways of developing themselves and the organisation	
Ownership of goals	Staff and students play a significant role in setting and achieving their own goals	
Supportive relationships	Staff and students support one another through praise and encouragement	
Genuine care	Staff and students show respect and genuine care for one another	
Positive outlook	Staff and students are positive about each other and the school	

Using appreciative inquiry to embed a coaching culture for learning

Coaches use a number of theoretical and organisational development tools during their coaching conversations. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an area of work that has been developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastra (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). It has been applied in a variety of contexts and is now a popular model for both the commercial and public sectors (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2011). Its principle is to focus on an organisation's strengths and to build on these, rather than to focus on areas of perceived "weakness", which can lead to negativity and lack of motivation.

Our view is that educational improvement has focused too closely on a deficit model. In situations where improvement is necessary, identifying, analysing, and scrutinising the institution's weaknesses often exacerbates some of the problems that the organisation is facing, increases stress for key leadership team members, and demoralises both staff and students.

Below, we have proposed one way of using an appreciative approach to start to work towards a coaching culture for learning. As stated earlier in this book, there are no blueprints for embedding coaching in educational organisations. In addition, it is important to recognise that such transformations require commitment, time, and energy. The proposed approach set out in Table 9.3, therefore, is very open to adaptation and development.

Pre-work: setting the scene

By its very nature, it is impossible to "implement" a coaching culture for learning just as it would be counterproductive to impose a confidential, safe relationship on an unsuspecting coachee! As with coaching, the essential element of mutual trust is nurtured through the joint creation of a safe learning environment. So, the very first step is to involve others. It is impossible to build a positive learning culture alone.

Before the work of co-creating a coaching culture for learning can begin, the concept of coaching will need to be discussed openly and honestly. For obvious reasons, those starting to share their thoughts about coaching will want to model best practice, either by undertaking

Table 9.3.   Stages of an appreciative approach towards a coaching culture for learning.

Stages	Who needs to be involved?
Pre-work: discussion and planning	School leadership team
Discovery stage	School leadership team
Discovery stage	Whole school workforce and students
Dreaming stage	Whole school workforce and students
Designing stage	Whole school workforce and students
Destiny stage	Whole school workforce and students
Continuing work: encouragement	School leadership team

some professional development around coaching or by having a coach themselves. Where schools in the UK have successfully introduced coaching cultures, an important prerequisite has been the commitment and "buy-in" from members of a school's leadership team. From that point of view, it is important to create opportunities within leadership team meetings to start talking about the potential benefits of a coaching culture for learning. As part of the groundwork, we would recommend that a school leadership team should complete the "discovery stage" of the AI task for themselves before involving the whole school workforce.

The first part of building a coaching culture is to *engage* people in your organisation with the concept of a coaching culture for learning. Building a positive learning culture together is an essential part of the process. People will need an opportunity to explore what they want for themselves and the organisation. In this stage, it is important to involve as many stakeholders as possible.

1	Appreciative Inquiry: Discovery Stage
	"What's good about the way we work together already?"
	What are we best at?
	What is behind our success?
	What motivates us?
	What are we all about?

As mentioned above, we would recommend that the leadership team spend some time with the questions of the discovery stage before involving the rest of the school community. Rather than scheduling additional meetings, perhaps this could be introduced into an exisiting meetings structure. Commitment and enthusiasm from the leaders of an organisation is a necessary prerequisite for the co-creation of a successful coaching culture for learning.

Once the leadership team has had sufficient opportunity to start thinking about the strengths and successes of the current team, this stage will need to be repeated with the whole-school workforce. In an ideal setting, students should be involved in this process as well

(perhaps during an assembly, or in smaller groups or classes). After introducing the concept of a coaching culture for learning, it will be important to create opportunities for staff and students to talk about what is already good about working in the organisation. What dreams or ambitions do they have for themselves and the organisation? What deeper moral purpose drives them? If all of this is implicit in your organisation, make it explicit. Our dreams, our moral purpose, and the things we are passionate about are the most potent motivators. Made explicit, the school's moral purpose will re-energise members of staff and bring them together. At the same time, students will have an opportunity to focus on what is good about their school. Crucially, the shared purpose is the reason for working together to improve the way in which people learn together in the organisation.

Sample activities

1. Positive perceptual positions: relationships within the school
    ● Divide people into three (or six) groups.
    ● Each group is given the task of discussing how others might perceive relationships within the school.
    ● Each group (or two groups) is assigned "student", "parent", "visitor".
    ● Groups then discuss the question of "What is good about how staff work together?" from the point of view that they have been assigned.
    ● Groups should capture the perceptions, along with "evidence" (i.e., what the student/parent/visitor would actually see that would lead them to their perception).
    ● Each group then presents their information to the other groups.

2. Current reality and desired future
    ● Ask groups to draw a star as their "desired future" in the top right of a sheet of paper. In the bottom left, ask them to write "here and now" (Figure 9.2).
    ● In groups, staff or students should decide what is positive about the way they already work or learn together.
    ● Everyone should be given an opportunity to contribute at least one positive aspect.

Here and now

Figure 9.2.   Current reality and desired future.

- When groups have jotted down all the existing attributes, ask them to identify the three most important things. In other words, "What do you think must be protected at all costs?"
- Ask them not to write anything in the "desired future" yet.
- Once groups have completed this task, they share their three most important things with the other groups. Groups should be given an opportunity to explain any challenges or difficulties they encountered with the task.
- A facilitator should aim to capture the "three most important things" of every group on a flipchart or board.

3. Agreed moral purpose
- Divide the group between tables. Allow five minutes for each person, in silence, to draft a one-sentence description of the organisation's moral purpose. How would they describe, in one sentence, the fundamental purpose of their organisation?
- Allow another 10–20 minutes for the groups on tables to agree one sentence. They will need to hear everyone's sentences, and then negotiate it down to one sentence that everyone can agree to.
- Finally, ask the groups to choose two words from their sentence that they would be prepared to fight for.
- The facilitator then captures the two words from each table, and then asks the groups to combine all the words into one statement.

2	Appreciative Inquiry: Dreaming Stage
	"What might happen?"
	What can we achieve together (as a learning organisation)?
	What outcomes would make us proud?

The next stage is to explore the possibilities. This is the opportunity for people to dream. What could the educational organisation achieve for its students? What are their individual ambitions, and those of the organisation? In coaching, the exploration of possibilities and the opportunity for coachees to share their dreams add real energy to conversations. A well-expressed dream or ambition is a powerful motivator for the coachee, who often needs to change his or her own behaviour or work harder to achieve the goals. For an educational organisation, it is important that members of staff and students can agree on an aspiration or motivational goal that makes the required additional effort worthwhile.

Sample activities

Activities should focus on exploring shared ambitions and aspirations. This stage creates opportunities for participants to declare what is important to them. This stage can also confirm that some of the deeper motivators are shared.

4. Sharing dreams
    ● Complete the "desired future" star on the "Current reality and desired future diagram (Figure 9.2).
    ● On tables, groups are given fifteen minutes to discuss a motivational ambition or goal that everyone on the table can agree with.
    ● These "dreams" are shared and captured on a flipchart.
    ● The facilitator leads a discussion on similarities first and then any significant differences.
    ● As a conclusion, the facilitator points out that the creation of a coaching culture for learning will support them in achieving their ambitions.

5. No constraints
    ● On tables, groups brainstorm the question "If we could do anything as an organisation, what would we do?"
    ● Groups can be as creative or as imaginative as they want to be.
    ● The scribe or artist captures the ideas or image that has been agreed.
  ● These are shared among the group.

● The facilitator then leads a discussion on what is achievable, using the ideas and images as an indication of what members of the groups are passionate about.

3	Appreciative Inquiry: Designing Stage
	"How will a coaching culture for learning look and feel?"
	What will we look forward to (as a learning organisation)?
	What can we start doing now?

How will we make it happen?

Once participants have had a genuine and thoughtful opportunity to dream about the possibilities, it is time to start working towards the practical steps that will take the organisation in the right direction. With a shared understanding of the organisation's current strengths and a clearer notion of what is important, it will be possible to start planning with real energy and purpose. The co-creation of a coaching culture for learning will be a firm foundation for a successful, constantly improving educational organisation.

Sample activities

Activities should focus on identifying what each element of the coaching culture will mean in a specific organisation.

6.   Coaching culture for learning in practice
● Using Table 9.4 as a prompt, ask participants (in groups) to complete the "in practice" column.
● Coaching triads can be used to explore some of these elements further. Ask the group to split into triads.
● Each member of a triad is asked to select one element of the Coaching Culture for Learning. The members rotate in the following roles: coach, coachee and note-taker.
● The coach asks the coachee open questions about how each element can be put into practice in their organisation.
    "How will this element be visible in our organisation?"
    "What real difference will it make on a day-to-day basis?"

Table 9.4.   Creating a coaching culture for learning.

Elements of a coaching culture for learning	In practice	What success might look like
Mutual trust		
Timeliness		
Awareness of the need for change		
Ownership of goals		
Supportive relationships		
Genuine care		
Positive outlook		

"How will it make a difference for staff/children and young people/parents?"

● To allow the coachee quality thinking and speaking time, the note-taker should make brief notes to capture the main points of the discussion. These notes will be used to complete the "in practice" column.

● Each group is asked to complete the table.

● Each group is then given one or two of the elements to collate. In their groups, team members are asked to collate all the suggestions for the elements they have been assigned. For example, one group would receive all the completed rows for "Mutual trust" and "Timeliness". The group would work together to combine all the suggested responses.

● After the session, all the collated responses are copied on one table (Table 9.4).

4	Appreciative Inquiry: Destiny Stage
	"How will you feel when we have achieved it?"
	How will we be feeling?
	What will members of the community be saying about the organisation?

How will we know it is happening?

To ensure that progress can be monitored and achievements celebrated, it is important at the outset to define success. What will people

be hearing, seeing, feeling, or saying when the organisation has a coaching culture for learning?

Sample activities

Activities should focus on discussing and agreeing success criteria. This should be followed by an action planning stage.

For the purposes of measuring progress, it is important to agree on success criteria so that achievements can be celebrated. Table 9.5 can be used to fill in the final column: "What success might look like".

7. Imagining success
    ● Each group is given one element to discuss. They will have the "element" and a description of what this means in practice in their organisation.
    ● The group is then asked to complete the final column by answering the question: "What will be different when the organisation embraces a coaching culture for learning?" It is important for this to be described in a way that will be easily observable.

8. Action planning
    ● Once the above activity is completed, elements are passed around so that the groups are working on another element.
    ● Each group should discuss an action plan for moving toward the successful outcome. The question for brainstorming is "What can we do now to move closer to the outcome we want?"
    ● Proposed actions are submitted to the leadership team, who will consider and incorporate suggestions into the organisational development plan.

Continuing work

As the organisation starts to work towards its aspirations, an important part of ensuring success and continued commitment is for everyone involved to experience and celebrate change. Change will be slow and sporadic unless a significant number of individuals choose to adopt new behaviours. The leadership team has five key responsibilities in this regard.

1. Ensure suggestions and proposals for moving towards a coaching culture for learning are incorporated into the organisation's strategic plans.
2. Model the required new behaviours and have a clear expectation that others will do the same.
3. Encourage implementation of action plans while being available to support colleagues.
4. Engage with challenges and difficulties quickly and effectively, seeing them as evidence that change is taking place and listening carefully to the concerns of members of the team.
5. Celebrate successes and regularly reflect on what is going well.

Successful outcomes

You will be able to achieve many successes by working collaboratively with a group of like-minded and positive colleagues. However, you will never "complete" the process of embracing a coaching culture. For one thing, at the heart of a coaching culture for learning is a desire to continuously improve and find better ways of achieving what is important. Equally, coaching is a powerful intervention because it is always forward looking. However good a particular coaching session is, it is never repeated. A good result in coaching simply leads to new opportunities and further successes. It is also useful to reflect on Collins' observations about greatness in relation to organisations:

> No matter how much you have achieved, *you will always be merely good relative to what you can become.* Greatness is an inherently dynamic process, not an end point. The moment you think of yourself as great, your slide towards mediocrity will have already begun. (2006, p. 9).

Conclusions

Building a coaching culture in a school or college is a journey. Like most journeys, they usually start with a first step; introducing coaching for staff or into the classroom. Like most journeys, unplanned events occur, and we take a slightly longer route and learn from the experience. As you will see from the case studies in this book, organisations have approached coaching from different directions.

Practitioners, students, academics, and policy-makers in the UK, the USA, and Australia are embracing the role of coaching in education. We hope that what you have read will encourage you to do the same.

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