

Strengthening Middle Level Education through Leadership Coaching: Helping Middle School Leaders Survive and Flourish in Critical Times

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Being a successful middle school principal has *never* been easy! The job has always required tremendous administrative skills in tandem with an abundance of energy, flexibility and good humor. Most of all, the position has always been best filled by those adults with a passionate calling to work with young adolescents during one of the most confusing yet exciting times in the students' lives. While always challenging, the job has recently become exponentially more difficult. As accountability standards evolve into an unfolding list of consequences for many schools, middle level principals are feeling the pressure to produce immediate and dramatic results. Fullan (2001) called this emerging dilemma of trying to meet all the demands of conventional schooling along with accountability "the worst of both worlds..." (pp.138-139).

With such a strong accountability focus on test scores, many have overlooked the rapid demographic shift which has begun in recent years. As members of the aging baby-boom generation, veteran principals are beginning to retire in record numbers. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2006), this trend will continue for at least a decade. In the wake of these departures, schools are filling vacancies with a growing number of school leaders who have been fast-tracked into the role without significant time spent as assistant principals. When combined with the rapid departure of veteran leaders who previously served as models and mentors to new principals, many districts are discovering a real vacuum of leadership experience at the school level. Such pressure on less-experienced principals is creating an environment that is conducive to burnout and possible derailment of school leaders (Holloman, Rouse, & Farrington, 2006).

In the midst of this difficult challenge, some schools are discovering creative ways to nurture and develop leadership capacity in new leaders through a customized coaching model (Farrington, L'Esperance, & Mazingo, 2005; L'Esperance & Farrington, 2007). Coaching is an old word with a newly-discovered vitality in the Information Age. According to Chandler and Black (2007), modern coaching is "all about what's possible. Coaching is moving a person from being stuck in a mindset in which they think they are limited, to opening a new possibility." (p.189) This strategy for moving into new possibilities has caused many organizations to pursue coaching as an improvement strategy.

Once used to bolster troubled staffers, coaching now is part of the standard leadership development training ... companies are discreetly giving their best prospects what star athletes have long had: a trusted advisor to help reach their goals. (CNN.com)

as cited by Chandler & Black, 2007, p.184)

Since reaching goals is now an integral part of school improvement, coaching can be a valuable tool for moving schools and leaders to the next level of performance in a way that recognizes the power of human relationships. Such people-centered efforts honor the long-held values of the middle school concept and increase the possibility for success.

Some Beginning Steps

A growing number of North Carolina middle schools are in the process of implementing quality improvement efforts that include leadership coaching. One such example is in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS). The district is the 5th largest in the state and 94th in the nation with a student population of over 50,000 students (WSFCS Website, 2007). Superintendent Dr. Donald Martin has demonstrated a strong commitment to leadership development and site-based decision-making throughout the district. In the middle school division, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Angelia Fryer, has led a multi-year middle school project which included group activities for all middle school principals and an individualized coaching component for new principals (L'Esperance & Farrington, 2007). New leaders were paired with a leadership coach for a minimum of one year. This coach had extensive background in middle school leadership and engaged in a variety of reflective activities with each new principal. Some of these activities include:

Defining and Targeting the Coaching Process

This time defines the relationship expectations and serves to clarify what coaching is and what it is *not*. During this time, the coach makes it clear that the coaching relationship is designed and customized completely around *the goals set by the principal*. The focus of the coach will be to help the principal reach the goals that are important to the new principal. To do this, the coach must assure the new principal that his/her only focus will be to help the new principal reach his/her self-developed goals. This relationship must be built on trust and it is formed upon an agreement that the coach holds all information from the monthly coaching sessions in strict confidence. This is designed to encourage free and honest dialogue which, in turn, builds relational trust.

Building a Support Network

Early in the coaching sessions, a priority is established for building and developing a network of professional and personal support. Referred to as the new principal's personal "board of directors," the coach emphasizes the need to have critical mentors and advisors which invest wisdom into the new principal's life. According to Young, Sheets, and Knight (2005):

... a mentor is a wise and trusted counselor or teacher. But when used as a verb, as in “to mentor a beginning principal,” it is more about a partnership of learning ... When learning is not the primary focus, the partnership fails. (p. 2)

It is critical to understand that coaching and mentoring are not synonymous terms. Mentors are personal role models that engender respect on the part of the principal and this relationship is less-driven by results than that of a coach. Mentoring can involve a broad spectrum of wisdom and modeling, often including a vast working knowledge of the organization. Great mentors are also adept at using coaching techniques in their mentoring relationships. In contrast to classic mentoring where the emphasis is on relational learning, pure coaching stays focused on achieving results by reaching stated goals.

Once the coach works with the new principal to identify specific mentors, the next step is to increase the new principal’s expertise network. This is an intentional process of identifying the most qualified experts throughout the district and across the state in a variety of domains. The ability to make personal contacts with credible sources known for high performance increases the new principal’s quality of information and builds information resources. This increases the principal’s self-confidence as an instructional leader and helps provide timely and appropriate interventions that help teachers. The principal is encouraged to create a network which includes national sources and to cultivate the network regularly and intentionally through the years.

No mentoring discussion would be complete without also stressing a need for the new principal to build leadership capacity in other new leaders. This includes the principal eventually working to foster relationships which allow them to become mentors for future leaders. Most current leaders can readily cite the interest shown by a past mentor and how a past leader encouraged and helped them along the way. This attention to reinvesting in others helps ensure that great leaders are developed for the future and gives the principal another relationship in which the learning comes from actually mentoring others.

Reflective Practice

With the busyness of daily routines, most principals have very little time to reflect and plan in a meaningful and purposeful way. Many principals talk about the time crunch and “to-do lists” which grow longer with each day. This activity simply requires the principal to briefly journal significant events and thoughts during the month. During the coaching session, time is spent debriefing with the coach. The coach is more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers. The purpose is to stimulate and focus the thinking of the principal to find creative answers to issues.

Articulating Dreams and Recording Goals

This activity is a type of backward mapping which takes the new principal into the future and asks questions about the principal's life-long aspirations. These help the principal remember the purpose of their work in the bigger picture of life. From this point, the coach works backward to the point of setting two or three major goals for the school year. These will be a focus in all future discussions and keeps the principal focused on the results they have selected. The coach's laser focus on personal goals may have been best described by the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star-Tribune:

Part therapist, part consultant, part motivational expert, part professional organizer, part friend, part nag – the personal coach seeks to do for your life what a personal trainer does for your body. (As cited by Chandler & Black, 2007, p. 185)

Providing Honest Feedback

One of the most valuable assets of a leadership coach is for the principal to have the opportunity to get unfiltered feedback. This comes from a variety of data from visits, observations, conversations, and staff assessments. The staff assessment allows the principal to get honest feedback given anonymously from the staff on a 42-item survey. After collecting and analyzing the information, the coach shares the results in a feedback session with the principal. This is designed to decrease the number of leadership blind spots. This powerful experience may allow the new principal to be affirmed positively by the data and can result in a greater sense of self-confidence. If weaknesses surface in the results, it gives the coach a chance to ask related questions and work on incorporating the findings into the next year's personal goals for improvement. Additionally, this provides a powerful opportunity for the principal to demonstrate ongoing professional growth as a value to be esteemed and emulated among the faculty and staff. The willingness of the principal to go through this exercise sets a great example and truly exemplifies the philosophy that honest feedback is truly a gift.

Implementation in WSFCS

In Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, this quality improvement initiative has been customized to meet the specific demands of the district and designed with direct input from the district's middle school principals. The principals collaboratively coordinated their leadership staff development based on a dual emphasis that included one-on-one coaching for new principals and whole-group seminars for both new and veteran middle school principals. As a result, each principal entering the first year of the principalship received coaching based on the previously-outlined modules for school leadership. The coaching was provided by a veteran school leader from outside the district, who met regularly throughout the school year with each individual principal to discuss relevant issues and monitor goals. The coach asked a variety of questions related to the

principalship and gave feedback on observations and data. In addition to the individual coaching, the district has also provided leadership coaching in a variety of other forms which include:

1. Whole group seminars around topics such as teambuilding, time-management, and building capacity in teachers. These seminars were held monthly and included all middle school principals. This setting provided many perspectives and helped create a dynamic learning environment.
2. Leadership workshop for new principals. This meeting involved new principals from several school districts across the state. Each attending principal was in a one-on-one coaching relationship and the meeting brought these leaders together for the purpose of dialogue and activities pertaining to instructional leadership development and networking.
3. A series of modules for aspiring teacher leaders within the school district. This involved six modules designed to inform and involve participants from around the district on topics relevant to school leadership in the current age of accountability. A number of participants expressed interest in pursuing an administrative career after completing the staff development modules.

According to Assistant Superintendent Angelia Fryer, this quality improvement initiative is providing needed support for principals by offering another helpful and practical resource during this very hectic and busy time in a new leader's career. Fryer noted that "the coach gives the new principal another person they can trust to talk about real leadership frustrations without any reservations because of the confidential relationship." The fact that the coach is not an evaluator increases the likelihood for open dialogue and helps cultivate a meaningful learning environment.

Fryer continued by noting that the coaching relationship helps her principals by confirming best practices for middle level leaders. The coaching support has ranged from practical advice on developing checklists for beginning and ending the school year successfully to helping new leaders see the more global issues of school leadership. As a result of the current success, plans are already being made to extend the initiative through the 2008-2009 school year.

Next Steps

These beginning efforts are designed to support and encourage middle school leaders. School districts of varying sizes across the state are searching for ways to customize school improvement efforts to fit the unique characteristics of each school setting. This ongoing commitment in Winston-Salem/Forsyth

County has been designed to work collaboratively with people and empower leaders to creatively seek new solutions for improvement. Without question, schools are not going to reach the next level of achievement by simply working harder. Successful middle schools will continue to improve in relation to the ability of schools to attract and maintain great teachers and leaders.

When all is said and done, the greatest power in the world for improvement has always resided in the hearts and minds of people. Leadership coaching is one key resource available for unlocking this potential and schools are in a position where a breakthrough strategy is much needed. Middle schools have taken a leading role in providing pedagogy based on the developmental needs of children for decades. At this critical juncture, we should also be ready to provide support for our leaders based on their developmental needs as well.

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