

“Directions for Catholic Educational Leadership in the Twenty First Century”

Conference Paper **“Sustaining the Profession through Coaching”**

This paper seeks to provide a rationale for the agenda of coaching and mentoring in the school leadership context of today. It will present the authors’ view of the current school leadership challenges and then present by illustration its application to a large P-12 school campus whose academic achievements bear testament to the success of the strategy. Whilst the anatomy of the PALS program will be discussed it will be presented as a demonstration of the principles behind a holistic positive coaching for performance model.

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The Peer Assisted Leadership Services (PALS) mentoring program sponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) was spurned from a sense of crisis in the US. The aspirant pool for positions for some quite large schools was so shallow that some very inexperienced leaders were being called upon to run these complex organisations with little or no experience and support. PALS was thus initiated in response to the need to provide less experienced leaders with access to recently retired or senior principals trained as mentors whose support could scaffold quickly the learning of these still developing leaders.

In Australia the lack of aspirants for the principalship recently led to a joint study by the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) and the Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council (APAPDC) entitled “Alternative Models of Principalship”. This document points to the factors that might encourage aspirants to consider leadership and then sustain their continuing aspirations.

This paper develops a rationale for the place of coaching and mentoring in the daily fabric of school operations such that aspirations are grown naturally as a consequence of developing the professionalism of staff. Further it will examine the structural underpinnings of the PALS program as a potential framework for mentor training in Australia. Finally it will showcase the work of a large urban school whose holistic approach exemplifies both the rationale and the techniques.

The terms *coach* and *mentor* are not interchangeable and the definition of their boundaries is often a point of discussion. For the purposes of this discussion we will refer to mentoring as a peer led ‘hands on’ activity often moving between providing advice and open ended questioning; and “coaching” a more ‘hands off’ clarifying, goal setting, progress and review oriented process. We use the terms interchangeably within this paper not to blur them as one but to discuss their common foundations and their collective contributions to school improvement.

Why the need for coaching and mentoring.

We postulate three organizing themes that set the context for school leadership of the future. Finding a *clarity of purpose* amidst paradox, meeting the *velocity* of impacts on schools and finally understanding the *changed paradigm of the school* as an organism rather than as a machine.

Finding sense of Purpose:

As the brief for school outcomes expands in the form of curriculum breadth the measures being used to rate school performance narrows. The more schools are seen as part of a free educational marketplace their capacity to operate as autonomous units is reduced through systemic, industrial or legislative mandates. As more value is placed on community engagement the more clutter is placed on the leader’s desk to relate to hierarchy, legal process and financial management. As more emphasis is placed on individual teacher professionalism schools recognize the benefits of collective alignment and team based action. Two significant recent research projects in Australia probing principal wellness both identified the administrative load as being the primary cause of principal frustration and lack of focus in their role. (“The Privilege and the Price” Vic Govt. 2005 and the joint research on principal Welfare completed and published separately by ASPA and APPA 2005). Principals there reported being squeezed between the busy work of administrivia and the real work of curriculum and community leadership.

Clearly a need exists for educational leaders to establish a steering focus for their daily work amidst very demanding and often contradictory agendas. Central sources of wisdom and authority can no longer prescribe nor describe the work for their employees. How do leaders in schools establish the situational certainties that consolidate the work of the individual professionals who deliver the success of a school? Herein lies the case for a coaching and mentoring culture that coalesces an alignment between individual professional aspirations, student needs and school strategies. Successfully capturing everyone’s explicit role in the big picture provides the “still point in a turning world” so eloquently tagged by Patrick Duignan.

Velocity of Change:

Bill Gates described the first decade of the twenty first century as the decade of *velocity*. The impact of the demands of a digital communication culture that provides short lead times, immediacy, regularity of access and sophisticated accountabilities from a broader range of educational stakeholders (employers, governments, curriculum authorities, registration boards, pressure groups and parents) threaten the sustainability of our leaders. Further the call for more school based autonomy promises to accelerate even further the flow of inputs into schools. As one Catholic principal of a large urban school noted to me “ Its like standing waist deep in a rolling surf...the work is relentless.” Kathy Lacey in her IARTV seminar Series paper on “Exploring Sustainability in School leadership” draws the point that

“Sustaining high performance, in the long term requires strength and resilience. The more the challenges and pressures grow the more rigorous and conscientious we need to be with our rituals- both for building emotional, physical mental and spiritual strength and for allowing recovery to take place”. (Lacey p. 14)

The important role of routine coaching and mentoring is significant to the reflective, empathetic and resilience building processes that the velocity and intensity of school leadership involves.

However beyond the challenge of surviving change is the process by which we use the velocity and relentless volume of inputs not as distractions but the very substance of our strategy. The nature of a school leader's day consists of a series of brief interactions across a staggering range of issues, decisions and activities. However each one is potentially significant in the progress of the school towards its strategic mission. Every one of these busy isolated events and decisions either confirms or detracts from what the school is on about. The ‘busyness’ of a school day requires all involved to operate from a bed of internalized beliefs and understandings which steer individual responses towards coherence. The coaching process is focused on establishing that coherence between individual beliefs and strategic direction such that everyone leads by example allowing priorities to be exercised even with the most brief or menial exchange turning them into ‘the walk of our talk’.

Changing paradigm of schools as organisms

Sergiovanni makes the case strongly for schools to perceive themselves as moral enterprises and not as businesses. The most significant resource in a school is its people; their moral purpose in clocking in there; and their goodwill invested in achieving that moral purpose. Schools wake, eat, laugh, work, play, cry, mourn and go on holidays. To affect its performance you must deal with people's beliefs, their spirit, their emotions, their health and of course their personal skill set. This requires a shift away from managerial, mechanistic ways of leading to models based on people leadership or relational leadership principles. The processes of coaching and mentoring are therefore

intrinsically the acts of leadership that nurture a living organic organization such as a school and not just the preparations for such leadership.

The QCEC/APAPDC study reports for example the significance of such models to emerging both Generation X and female aspirants generally who respond most strongly to leadership strategies that provide freedom, active involvement, shared visioning, supported learning and development, recognition, empathy and direct communication. (QCEC/ APAPDC p8)

Therefore it would appear that both from the perspective of the potential aspirants themselves and the needs of the principal of a school operating in the new paradigm the process of coaching and mentoring is both beneficial to the leader's purposes and to the orientations of the aspirants themselves.

The anatomy of PALS as a starting point for coaching and mentor training

PALS has a number of structural components that support its effectiveness. Firstly PALS is based on a clear definition of what leadership is in a school. The standards developed by NAESP form the content of mentoring exchanges. Mentors unpack these standards and develop a rich knowledge of what effective leadership looks, feels like and sounds like in a real school. Regardless of which description or set of set of capabilities we choose the visualization process between coach / mentor and mentee in clarifying directions and indicators of success is critical in shaping the focus for coaching and mentoring. Australian educators have in fact a rich menu of standards and frameworks from which to choose an agreed context for the coaching conversation.

Secondly PALS ensures commitment contracting both the mentor/coach and aspirant to a process that is tracked, timetabled and tested for quality. These are not loose and aimless conversations. Each one requires openness from the mentee, a fair degree of well practiced skill on behalf of the mentor and clean honest exchange from both parties.. This sort of engagement requires a deep reciprocal respect between the participants. It has both a beginning and an ending and the flow between is formed through a set of skills that is trialed and accredited through a tertiary partner. Its power to enhance both parties positively is only matched by its potential to destroy confidence and reinforce poor leadership. Our Australian efforts to build a coaching for performance culture needs to address the need to quality assure, accredit and scaffold the process appropriately.

Thirdly PALS is firmly based on an appreciative model where people's capacities extended from their strengths not from an audit of deficits. These strengths are scientifically identified through a tool developed by the Gallup Corporation. The processes of self reflection and self awareness are critical for the mentor to develop an authentic coaching relationship and strategy.

Fourthly PALS provides a model for a process that is owned by the profession for the profession. The NAESP example demonstrates one powerful process for the profession to lift the bar on its own standards of leadership and the outcomes of our schools. This is the

technology through which schools can harness the motivation, skills and potentials of its staff serving both to affect current school performance, to re invigorate experienced leaders and to regenerate the applicant pools of the future. This is indeed valuable professional property and an example worth following but not necessarily imitating.

References:

Duignan, Patrick in “ The Lost Sandshoe” APAPDC 2001

Lacey, Kathy *Exploring Sustainability in School Leadership* IARTV Seminar series March 2006 No 151’

PALS Mentoring Program National Association of Elementary School Principals Training Kit for Participants , Washington DC 2005.

QCEC/APAPDC joint project paper *Alternative Models of ‘Principalship’* October 2006

Sergiovanni, Thomas *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* Jossey Bass 1996

The Privilege and the Price: A Study of Principal Class Workload and its Impact on Health and Wellbeing Dept of Education and Training August 2004

Coaching and quality performance in the classroom – are they connected?

Background

The description which follows provides an example of the application of coaching and mentoring to the success of large and very complex school where the supervisory challenges are immense and have demanded new processes for the support and inspiration of staff at all levels.

North Lakes State College is a purpose built P to 12 College with a present enrolment of 2050 from Prep to year 11. Next year the enrolment prediction is 2600.

The Literacy results are outstanding, with all aspects of the state wide tests significantly above the state mean. These results are improving each year, the number of students in the bottom 15 % in these tests is declining significantly and all sub groups within the school are improving at least at a rate that is comparable to the state.

These outstanding results are not by accident but rather they are as a result of an embedded culture of high expectations, clear school programs, a differentiated curriculum, explicit teaching and assessment and a strong performance and coaching model.

A coaching model that allows for differentiation of delivery, a sense of planned versus point in time delivery and a model that allows for the development of a culture where aspirational leaders are fostered, staff are supported and nobody walks alone. A culture where the “main thing remains the main thing”– amongst the busyness of running a large and complex organisation.

Beliefs

Coaching is not an activity that occurs on a Tuesday afternoon or through a series of workshops but occurs as a part of the school culture of high performance and academic excellence. It is a part of each conversation, each meeting and each curriculum and strategic planning session. It is not a one size fits all model.

To be successful as school leaders we cannot waste opportunities to align our performances across the school to our beliefs and practices that are needed to bring about improvement. An essential element of this uncompromising drive to high performance is the concept of coaching. – coaching an individual or a group of staff members so that they can become self reflective learners and life long learners who can adapt and change their practices that will bring about high performance. However to be successful it is important that the coaching is differentiated so that there is a respect and an alignment to an individual’s needs, the activity or the circumstance.

The model in Action at North lakes State College

Literacy – Our steps to success – The shift from a planning model to a pedagogical model using coaching.

This shift in emphasis moves the focus of teacher supervision from planned intent to the effectiveness of teacher actions and behaviours. As such it takes goal setting to the next step of reviewing progress, the confirming or changing of teaching practice and the establishment of new goals. The nature of these conversations represents a true coaching model for developing teacher performance.

Examination of the steps in the model described below over the course of a year identifies the critical strategies and implies coaching skill sets for each.

- Following the completion of a unit of work, year level teams meet with their HOD to reflect on the unit and make adjustments – *we do not have days off class anymore to plan units of work.*

- Two units of work per year – but each term has either a major Science or SOSE focus.
- The first four weeks of Semester One is a mini-unit that consists of
 1. Parent – teacher conferences
 2. Teachers internalising the internal and external data for each child
 3. Teachers conferencing with Previous teacher, STLD, ESL and other support teachers – developing partnerships and plans
 4. Standardised testing completed
 5. Teachers plan their criteria sheets so that it is clear what an A is etc. (*Goals are clarified/ and success is defined*) examples are given to the students so that they too can see what an A is. These are aligned to the district criteria sheets and our school programs
 6. Teachers plot students on the criteria sheets and then collaboratively develop literacy and numeracy goals for each child – an opportunity to compact the curriculum for our more able students
 7. **1 day release** – (*Three Way goal setting and action planning*) Teachers work with their teaching partner and the HOD to plan how they are going to operationalise the unit. Here the teachers get very specific about planning teaching strategies that will meet the different needs of the different students within the class
- Progress review meeting Week 8/9 Sub School Principal or College Deputy meets with each teacher to discuss students’ progress – data driven – (*Review goals and actions*)
- Opportunity to identify and share good practice across the campus through our “Coffee Club”
- (*Facilitated reflection and Summative Review of Results*) Term 2 – Week 2/3 – **.5 day release** – HOD meets with teachers to analyse results thus far – Teachers to become self reflective learners within a supportive environment – adjustments made to programs and pedagogy to bring about better results –developing link to standards framework for teachers
- (*Shared Review of Results*) – through moderation of key Literacy and numeracy aspects of our reports – aligned to criteria sheets – facilitated by HODS
- Admin team analyse report card results (subjects, year levels, teachers) and use a sampling process to “validate” reports before signing

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