

5

GUIDING QUESTIONS

BUILD A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP COACHING



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Leadership matters. In fact, research identifies leadership as second only to teaching in school-related factors influencing student achievement (Louis et al., 2010). As districts seek ways to improve the quality of school leadership, they often turn to coaching. And coaching can improve leaders' effectiveness — under the right conditions (Grant et al., 2009). Without the right conditions, coaching may offer advice or emotional support, but do little to effect change in teaching and student learning. To guarantee a return on the sizable investment entailed in coaching, district leaders must articulate how it will serve the overall improvement strategy and

design the intervention accordingly.

We have researched, designed, and engaged in leadership coaching for many years, from many angles and across many district contexts. We have been struck by how rare it is to see a leadership coaching model that clearly aligns with and supports district priorities. To help change that pattern, we have distilled the lessons we've learned into five key questions that can guide strategic planning for leadership coaching programs.

Here we share those questions, with examples of how we addressed them in one large-scale school improvement project, LEAD Connecticut, in which we worked with a varied group of stakeholders to articulate a strategy for

school turnaround, a corresponding vision for turnaround leadership, and a strategy for developing and supporting a cadre of school leaders equipped to carry out that vision.

1 What is your vision for effective leadership?

Most school districts are guided by an improvement strategy that specifies what leaders and teachers should do to reach student achievement goals. Some of those improvement strategies are clearly understood and palpable in the daily activities of administrators and teachers, while others are just words on a page. In every case, the improvement strategy carries within it, implicitly or explicitly, expectations about what

A clear vision aligned to district goals is key.

school leaders must do to carry it out. Making that vision of effective leadership explicit in the form of standards or competencies is a key step to ensuring that the strategy doesn't stay on the page.

Key decisions about what coaching should look like flow from that clearly articulated vision for effective leadership. Therefore, the more specific and bounded the vision is, the easier it will be to design a coaching system that complements it.

The LEAD Connecticut team drafted key leadership competencies for school and district leaders in turnaround settings (Partners for Educational Leadership, 2022a; LEAD Connecticut, n.d.). Each set of competencies focused on a handful of high-leverage leadership activities that research has shown drive school turnaround. They provided a much-needed anchor for all of the support that the state-sponsored initiative offered, including leadership coaching.

2 What aspects of that vision for effective leadership can coaching best support?

Once an understanding of what effective leaders do has been established,

consider how coaching can best support leaders in reaching that vision. Educational leadership is a complex job, with myriad skills necessary for success. Coaching, which is a personalized, interactive intervention, is better suited for developing some of those skills than others, and particularly skills related to reflection or cognition. Getting clear about which of the many critical leadership capacities coaches are meant to support will help them focus their work with school leaders on the highest-leverage skills.

In LEAD Connecticut, we opted to use whole-group professional learning to teach school principals procedures and concrete skills and identified only a small subset of habits of mind as outcomes for coaching:

- Principals learn how to think strategically and intentionally about the connection between their leadership and student achievement.
- They learn to challenge their own and others' assumptions about what is possible.
- They learn how to be reflective practitioners.
- They learn to do this work independent of the coach.

We believed that principals best develop those habits through one-on-one questioning and feedback, things coaches are well-positioned to do. This theory of adult learning drove the decision about which competencies to focus coaching on and the shape of the coaching itself.

3 Given the knowledge and skills your coaches will help develop in school leaders, what should the coaching look like?

The role of the coach is frequently vague and underspecified. Leadership coaches often are seasoned education leaders, retired from the role their clients now hold; they are accomplished professionals with many successes to their names. Surely, the logic goes, they know what they are doing, and to prescribe specific practices may seem presumptuous and unnecessary. It is tempting to simply let the coaches do their magic without interfering, especially when the leaders, who usually appreciate the rare opportunity for personalized support, are satisfied with it.

Yet when we avoid offering clear, explicit guidance, we diminish coaching's power. Coaches should not

be allowed to do whatever they choose, no matter how accomplished they are. Effective coaching programs develop a clear and specific set of expectations for coaches' practice, tied directly to the learning outcomes that they hope coaching will achieve and to their best guesses about how adults learn those things.

For example, after much research and discussion about how adults develop the habits of mind listed above, we created a vision for leadership coaching in LEAD Connecticut. This vision is described in 10 succinct standards, such as: The coach routinely connects the coaching conversation to the leader's strategic plans and related short- and long-term goals (Partners for Educational Leadership, 2022b). These standards are based on a model of learning that suggests, in part, that adults can become more reflective and strategic if they are supported in slowing down and clarifying the desired results of their actions.

We have found that this step in the process can be surprisingly challenging. It requires surfacing and interrogating a range of assumptions — about how adults learn, the tension between building leaders' long-term capacity and solving their immediate challenges, and what good coaching looks like in action. Even in the face of disagreement about what effective coaching should look like, we urge you not to gloss over the need to develop a shared vision.

4 Now that you have a vision for effective coaching, how will you ensure that coaches have the skills and knowledge to carry it out?

We observe that organizations and districts that have invested in clarifying specific learning goals for coaching resemble one another in at least one way: They do not view coaching as a simple task. They also recognize that effective coaching draws on more than personality and leadership experience; it draws on the skills and knowledge of a professional practice. Ultimately,

it is incumbent on the organization to ensure that coaches have the skills and knowledge to carry it out. Learning any new professional practice is challenging, and it may even require unlearning old practices.

The first step in ensuring coaches have the right skills and knowledge is to decide which qualities to screen for in the hiring process. Some qualities are more easily screened for than taught, like a reflective disposition or a learning orientation. In contrast, some other desired skills, like effective questioning techniques, can be taught and practiced. Taking time to sort the skills this way allows for the development of explicit hiring criteria and interview strategies.

LEAD Connecticut drew largely from a pool of retired principals and superintendents for its coaches, knowing their experience would lend credibility with clients. We knew we might not find candidates with that background who were also highly skilled at the types of listening, questioning, and feedback specified in our coaching model.

Those skills likely would need to be taught. Therefore, we screened for candidates who leaned towards helping the leader find a solution rather than dictating what they should do. We developed authentic scenarios and asked prospective coaches to role play during the interviews. We looked for those who demonstrated curiosity and asked thought-provoking questions and screened out those who immediately offered advice.

The second step is identifying which aspects of the coaching model will require training. Coaching is a professional practice, and learning a professional practice is hard. It requires practicing the practice, receiving feedback, and practicing again.

Teaching leadership coaches a professional practice can be particularly challenging. As noted above, programs often hire retired educational leaders as coaches. They spent their careers doing the job. The challenges their clients face

are often very similar to challenges that they faced in the past. And they often desperately want to see their clients succeed. The temptation to step in and fix problems directly — or give clients explicit directions about how to do so — is strong. Learning to check that temptation is challenging and requires commitment, practice, and feedback.

Time and again, we have been surprised by just how much training and practice is needed to develop a cadre of effective leadership coaches. After much experimentation and learning, we recommend the following:

- Share with coaches the district improvement strategy, the vision of effective leadership, and the model of effective coaching and help them understand the connections among the three.
- Model the desired coaching practice over and over again. Coaches can't enact a practice that they have not seen.
- Record and transcribe real or practice coaching sessions and allow coaches to examine them against the program's vision for effective coaching practice.
- Practice the practice in safe environments. For example, engage coaches in role plays followed by specific feedback about how well their practice aligned with the model of effective coaching.

5 How will you know if this coaching program is working?

Coaching a leader toward effective practice is complex work. We won't always have research to guide our models and decisions. Therefore, it is critical to approach our strategies as hypotheses and look for opportunities to gather data that will help improve those hypotheses and tighten training and support.

This should involve careful monitoring of the coaches' developing practice. We do not assume that coaches are doing exactly what we

trained them to do, even if we trained them well. Asking coaches regularly to reflect on their own practice is a good start, as they are likely to have ideas about what is working well and what is not.

However, if the coaches report that they are completely proficient at implementing the coaching model and have no further questions, we do not take that at face value. We are not suggesting that they are willfully deceptive; rather, we observe that effective coaching is surprisingly challenging and people are unreliable judges of their own efficacy. We must find ways to examine what, exactly, coaches are doing with clients.

At LEAD Connecticut, we did this by arranging for volunteer coach-client pairs to record themselves, then had the recordings transcribed with all identifying information removed. We examined the transcripts for alignment to the program model, identified the coaches' strengths and growth areas, and designed follow-up training for coaches around what we learned.

Studying whether coaches are successfully implementing the model provides important information but will not show whether the model itself is effective. Therefore, we suggest also studying the impact of the coaching on clients' leadership. This must go beyond simply gauging client satisfaction to look for improvement in the leadership practices identified as targets for coaching.

We do not underestimate the challenge in studying changes in leadership practice, nor in distinguishing the impact of coaching from other supports. We have struggled with how to do this effectively, ultimately choosing to collect imperfect data from a variety of perspectives, including leaders' own self-assessments against the leadership competencies at various points in time; their coaches' and supervisors' assessments of their practice against the leadership competencies; and clients' reports of the ways in which coaching was most

and least helpful in supporting their growth. Our lesson: Don't let the desire to collect perfect data impede the collection of good enough data; there is always something to learn.

FINDING BALANCE

Experience has taught us that designing, building, and continuously improving a coaching program for educational leaders requires balance in two key areas. The first is balance between coaches' professional discretion and fidelity to the coaching model.

Every coaching relationship is different. Coaches need enough discretion in deciding how to spend their time to allow them to build relationships, adapt to the client's context, and switch gears when a coaching session does not go as planned. Some discretion in decision-making is good. But offering coaches too much independence leads to idiosyncratic practice, diluting the power of coaching and its potential for supporting desired improvements. Finding this balance may take trial and error; dialogue between coaches and the leaders who design and run the program can help refine it over time.

Program leaders must also balance support and accountability. Effective leadership coaching — no matter the model — is complex. Learning to do it well is challenging and takes time. Coaches will need lots of guidance and empathy as they develop a practice. At the same time, coaching is a huge investment, and a system of accountability for how coaches practice (beyond client satisfaction) must be in place.

Continually learning about how well coaches are enacting the model, and holding them accountable for improving, helps protect that investment and ensure a strategic approach to coaching aligned with improvement goals.

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