

Value of Coaching in Building Leadership Capacity of Principals
in Urban Schools

A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how coaching support structures enabled and sustained leadership practices of urban principals. The study investigated how the intervention of coaching for academic leaders can serve as evidence based professional development for building leadership capacity. The central focus was on principals' perceptions of coaching engagements over time to identify recurring themes and essential elements of the coach-to-client relationship. With a goal of meeting 21st century school accountability requirements of standards and assessments, the urban district in this study implemented coaching for academic leaders who were selected to participate in the coaching intervention as job-embedded professional development. The district assigned a cadre of trained coach leaders to building principals with the primary goal of coaching academic leaders to attain desired goals. The district's director of professional development was a certified coach leader and had the responsibility of screening applications from principals and assigning coaches. The data collection process for this study included in-depth interviews, direct observations, and review of archival documents. Holistic analysis captured recurring themes and assertions. Essentials of participants' perceptions of coaching were collected through semi-structured interviews, analysis of textual content, coding, and categorizing by themes. The significant themes revealed the perceptions of coaching as: (1) Supportive Environment, (2) Relationship Built on Trust, (3) Confidential Conversations, (4) Leadership Support, (5) Significance of Reflection, (6) Benefits of Coaching Language in Communication, (7) Co-Constructor, (8) Thinking Partner, and (9) Trust.

Introduction

The growing issues faced by principals to meet 21st century education standards of accountability for student achievement have continued to spiral with demands for greater productivity. Literature suggests that leaders of learning organizations need context-specific support to implement research-based leadership dimensions and practices to excel in school performance and impact student outcomes. This study revealed how job-embedded leadership support contributed to and enhanced the overarching goal of excelling in school performance and improving student outcomes. One of the reasons for conducting this study was the need for an awakening that schools are organizations that are ever-evolving and that this evolution necessitates equipping principals with the skills to successfully lead 21st learning organizations.

Background of the Study

Spillane and Hunt (2010) stated empirical research with reference to leadership practices for building principals is somewhat small and this literature precedes the standards and accountability reform that has primarily changed the environment of most schools in the United States. A review of literature by Hallinger and Heck (1996a) acknowledged deficiency in the research and that which was overlooked because of theoretical and epistemological biases for comprehending leadership practice. The case that leadership makes a difference is increasingly accepted, although there is continuing debate concerning what training is necessary to develop the optimum leadership behaviors (Bush, 2009). Elmore (2003) explained that the majority of principals are ill-prepared for high-stakes accountability in today's schools, which intensifies the problem of building capacity. Additionally, the lack of capacity-building support for administrators in this new quest for improving test results is a recipe for little success or even failure.

The current attention given to test scores to satisfy accountability requirements in the absence of guidance or assistance for capacity building could unintentionally be producing a condition whereby principals feel fully responsible for school-wide instructional programs and procedures (Pepper, 2010). Education leadership and principal training programs have infused the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards as a foundational component of preparation programs. Some of the information, content, and presentations given by ISLLC are research-based, and some are sound educational practices (Streshly & Gray, 2008).

Leadership Development

Contemporary school administrators are engaged in an array of roles, varying from educational visionaries and change agents to leaders of instruction, curriculum and assessment specialists, budget forecasters, facility supervisors, special programs directors, and community planners (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meverson, 2005). Effective principals worked persistently to generate safe and orderly environments for learning, establish clear instructional objectives, anticipate lofty performance through increased time on tasks commencing with teachers to students, and build positive home-school relationships (Jacobson & Bezzina, 2008).

In schools across the United States many people within the organization assume responsibilities for leading instructional initiatives to ensure that vision becomes reality and learning is the top priority. Darling-Hammond, (2007) wrote that a variety of reasons are offered when referencing the significance of effective leadership and the value of leadership on student outcomes. Reports on poor performing schools, increased demands of principals, and media coverage of national “principal shortages have brought issues of: (1) administrative recruitment; (2) credentialing; (3) training; and (4) support” (p. 4). Examples of problems identified in the literature which have impacted principal shortages include:

- (a) Traditional college preparation programs for principals have been ineffective in recruiting adequate numbers of promising candidates who will commit to leadership roles in high needs areas (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003 cited in Darling Hammond, LaPoint, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007); and
- (b) Aspiring and practicing principals are frequently ill-prepared and lacking support to tackle the challenging job of instructional leadership and school improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Public Agenda established that the most essential element needed to attract and retain quality principals in high-need schools is providing them the support needed to do their jobs (Murphy, McCarthy, & Moorman, 2008). The Council of Chief State School Officers released in 1996 the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (revised in 2008), and these standards have been used as guidance for leadership policy, planning, and decisions. As a result, many state and district leadership policies have been amended and accountability benchmarks established for principals leading improvement in student learning. The Wallace Foundation (2008) stated that leadership academies are operational in a number of states, such as, Georgia, Iowa and Louisiana, as well as in urban and sub-urban districts to include Chicago, Boston, New York City, and St. Louis. These academies provide high-quality options to district leadership needs, and, in some cases, collaborative university and district leadership training programs are available (p. 4). The New York City Leadership Academy's implementation of a blended coaching model served as an exemplar for institutions. Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren's, (2005) blended coaching strategies for principal development incorporates facilitative coaching, instructional coaching, consultative coaching, transformational coaching and collaborative coaching.

Table 1

Bloom's Five Blended Coaching Strategies

Facilitative Coaching	Builds on coachee's (i.e. client's) existing skills, knowledge, interpretations and beliefs as the coachee constructs new skills, knowledge, interpretations, and beliefs as a platform for future actions (Bloom et al., 2005);
Instructional Coaching	Sharing personal experience, expertise, and craft wisdom with coachee (i.e. modeling, providing resources and direct instruction, (2005);
Consultative Coaching	Utilizing coach-as-consultant who possesses resources and expertise that will benefit the coachee and the organization (2005);
Collaborative Coaching	Incorporates instruction and facilitation to focus on concrete action with a larger goal to expand knowledge, skills, and internal capacity (2005); and
Transformational Coaching	Processing that moves people beyond improved performance, to developing new ways of thinking, and ultimately to changing their ways of being (Hargrove, 1995).

Adapted: Bloom et al. (2005) Blended Coaching Skills and Strategies to Support Principal Development.

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) conducted the largest in-depth study in the US to date on education leadership (p. 11). Reported findings from in depth case studies and extensive quantitative analysis reinforced the empirical link between school leadership and student achievement (Louis et al., 2010, p. 57).

Robinson's Leadership Dimensions (2007)	
Leadership Dimensions	Effect Size Estimate
1. "Establishing Goals and Expectations;	Average ES = 0.35
2. Strategic Resourcing;	Average ES = 0.34
3. Planning, Coordinating and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum;	Average ES = 0.42
4. Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development; and	Average ES = 0.84
5. Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment" (Robinson, 2007, p. 8).	Average ES = 0.27

Figure 1. These dimensions can serve as evidence-based data to prioritize school improvement planning, professional learning team agendas, and professional development support for teachers and administrators. Adapted: Robinson (2007) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why* (p. 8).

This chart represents Robinson's five inductively-derived leadership dimensions (2007). Robinson's finding present an effect size of 0.84 for the dimension of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. The next leadership dimension with the second highest effective size was leaders targeting planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) suggested having knowledge of these dimensions or set of practices was critical in that current research on teacher and professional learning has revealed groups cannot internalize images of effective practice in

their context unless they comprehend the theoretical principles of why they work and under what environment.

Coaching in the Education Setting

Leadership support and capacity building for impacting students and organizational outcomes can occur over time during coaching conversations. Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris, and Shuster (2010) write,

While coaching presence is ever present in coaching conversations, there are other competencies at work in the coaching zone...including the following:

- Coaching agreements;
- Committed listening;
- Intentional language;
- Powerful questions;
- Create awareness;
- Plan for action;
- Design action; and
- Manage progress. (p. 60)

Brock (2008) stated that over the past decade coaching had been defined as a learning process. According to Sherman and Freas (2004), executives of fast-moving learner organizations are recognizing the following understated set of competencies: the interpersonal skills and communication skills essential for influencing employees, the ability for rapid change, and respect for individuals from diverse cultures. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) offered to improve the skill performance of teachers and school leaders, organizations are increasingly seeking professional development strategies such as coaching and other relation-

ship based support. According to Reiss (2004), a well-trained coach is accomplished in the change process, supporting a course of action while individuals create their desired changes for themselves and the organization. Leadership coaching has been referred to as a supportive model for systems learning by district administrators and principals.

Goleman (2006) argued that the innovative field of social neuroscience presents why a personable leadership style shows promise. Ashcroft and Kirk (2001) stated, emotions can either enhance or inhibit the brain's capability to learn based on the existence of neural wiring connecting the thinking and emotional centers of the brain. Goleman (2006) asserted, as students, teachers, and school leaders take steps to boost their emotional self-awareness and social intelligence, a dominant climate for learning will occur. The leader's most customary style of interacting can either rejuvenate or collapse people in their organization (Goleman, 2006).

Significance

Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) suggested there is no documented evidence to support that achieving schools can accomplish this status without a successful leader. Coaching offers an applied skill used to construct a functional path to innovative performance, enhanced skills, and transformation leadership. Reiss (2004) stated during the forward-thinking and reframing process for individuals, coaches will acknowledge, question, empower, clarify, focus, validate, champion, and prioritize to skillfully support the leader for goal attainment. Hargrove (2000) suggested the primary responsibility of a coach is to broaden the capacity of the individual's and/or group's capacity to achieve expected outcomes and to facilitate development.

Summary

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential (International Coach Federation, 2009, cited in Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris, & Shuster, 2010). This case study investigated principals' perception of the value of coaching in building leadership capacity in urban schools.

Research Findings and Recommendations

This qualitative case study examined the professional practice of three urban school principals in the school context as a result of them having been coached by an executive leader coach. Conclusions and recommendations of synthesized data to address the purpose of the study and research questions were completed. From the summaries, importance of leadership coaching was addressed and recommendations for future research were presented.

The purpose of this case study was to explore principals' perceptions of one-on-one coaching and the impact of coaching on building leadership capacity for school effectiveness and improved student achievement. The researcher for this qualitative case study interviewed two elementary school principals, one middle school principal, and three executive coaches participating in an urban district's coaching program. Philosophical underpinning for this study was based on the constructivist paradigm. Constructivist researchers, according to Creswell, "focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants" (2007, p. 21). The propositions guiding the purpose, focus, data collection/analysis, scope of the study, and framework (Stake, 1995) were derived from the literature review with specific attention to effective leadership dimensions and practices.

Data were collected through five face-to-face recorded interviews and one recorded telephone interview. Data were also collected from documents and observations. Through analysis of data, the following nine major themes or axial codes were confirmed: (1) Supportive Environment, (2) Relationship Built on Trust, (3) Confidential Conversations, (4) Leadership Support, (5) Significance of Reflection, (6) Benefits of Coaching Language in Communication, (7) Co-Constructor, (8) Thinking Partner, and (9) Trust. These nine themes steadily emerged from the data into three selective codes: (a) Leadership Support; (b) Relationship Built on Trust; and (c) Confidential Conversations. The selected codes emerged through in-depth interviews and through the transcription process completed by the researcher with the aid of Dragon Dictation software. Selective codes were increasingly pronounced, identifiable, and consistent after the researcher identified and charted participants' recurring concepts and responses in a Microsoft excel document. The three selective codes from the data offer insight and clarity into understanding the perceptions of building principals on the value coaching for impacting leadership practices. The preceding section offers discussions on the how, when, where, and why of coaching.

Presentation of Axial Codes

Axial Codes and Sample of Open Codes of Building Principals

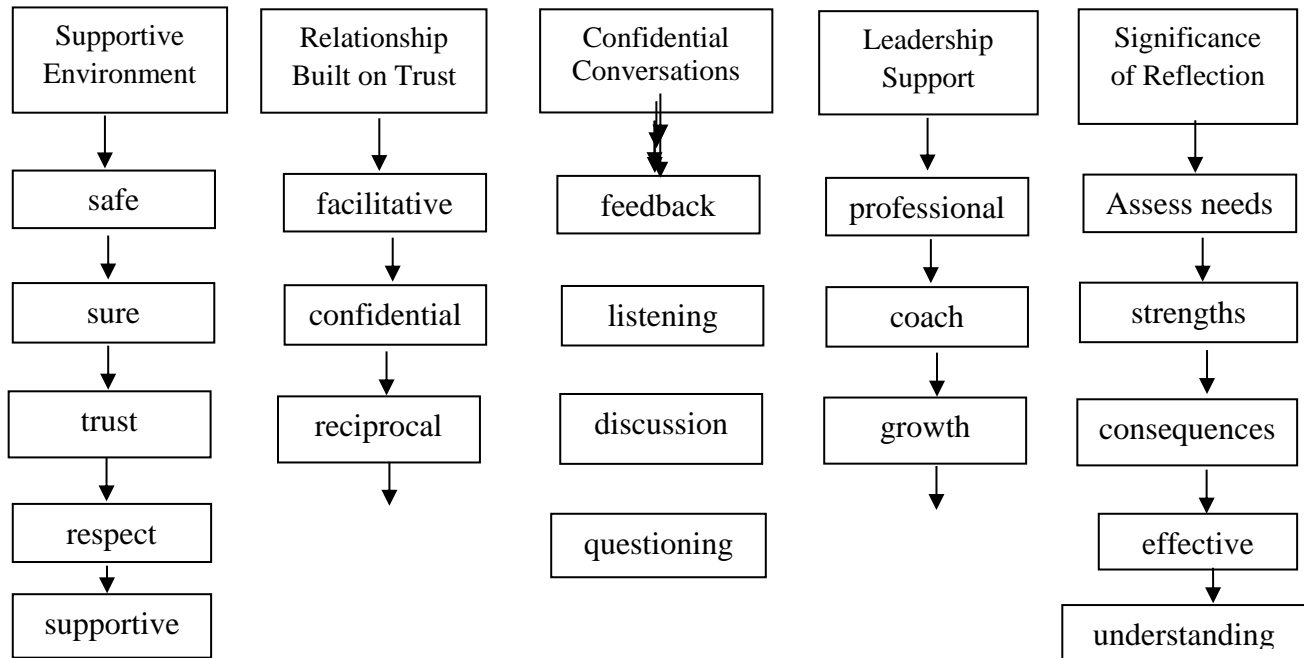


Figure 2. This figure presents a sample of open codes and five axial codes from the building principals.

The axial coding process for building principals (BP1, BP2, BP3) included identifying categories that extend across all data sets. At the conclusion of this coding process, themes were classified after developing across the preponderance of data.

Theme: Leadership Support

This discussion includes themes that emerged from the data. Research Question: What are principals’ perceptions of coaching engagements in supporting and sustaining leadership practices?

The first selective code to emerge in the study was Leadership Support. Leadership was supported by four open codes: (a) professional, (b) coach, (c) growth, and (d) solutions. The

analyzed data indicated all three principals had positive experiences with their executive coach. Data also offered participants were afforded professional growth opportunities which changed the way communication and interactions occurred with teachers, staff, parents, and colleagues. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins summarized findings from empirical studies concerning “four core leadership qualities and practices...building vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning programme” (2008, p. 6). These core leadership qualities and practices were supported during the executive coaching process.

One principal in the study described a coaching conversation that concerned student safety. The leadership practice used in this conversation was “understanding and developing people” and “setting directions” (BP3/4). The teachers had an issue with the number of minutes they were to supervise students in the halls. The client (principal) took time to reflect on the goal focused questions asked by the executive coach. The client voiced steps and solutions around the issue. The executive coach paraphrased several of the suggestions and ideas, and the principal’s thought was to review the union handbook regarding student safety and teacher responsibility. The issue was resolved through conversations with teachers on putting students first, placing student safety as a top priority, in addition to, remaining in compliance with duty time for teachers. Achieving the goal of student safety demonstrated growth in leadership practices to focus on “understanding and developing people” and “setting direction” (BP3/4). Morel and Cushman (2012) offered,

the sociocultural learning theory formulated by Vygotsky (1978) and others is as applicable to the professional learning of teachers as to the educational learning of

children. The way to maximize the capacity of teachers to meet student needs is to embed professional learning in the cultural and social life of the school. (p. 2)

According to the participants in this study, coaching facilitated professional and personal growth. The support of an assigned executive coach was beneficial in having a thinking partner available for goal-planning, action-planning, or solution-focused planning. Coaching provided avenues for the principal to support teachers. According to The Wallace Foundation, the agreed upon instructional leadership practices by teachers and principals included, “Focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement; Keeping track of teachers’ professional development needs; and Creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate” (2010, p. 66).

Solution focused coaching conversations were beneficial for the instructional leaders, so much so, these same strategies supported teachers in finding solutions to their problems, rather than the principal providing the solution to the teacher. Once teachers infer coaching language and skills their conversations, questioning, feedback, committed listening, and reflection are improved in the areas of planning, teaching, and commitment to student achievement. After experiencing leadership coaching, principals understood that the best solution for teachers was for them to determine the answer with a co-thinking partner, in doing so, teachers would own the answer and they would be committed and dedicated to the solution. Through this commitment and dedication, teachers are better able to carry out their plan and get the desired results of improving student achievement.

As related to professional growth, participants in this study described leadership coaching as helping tremendously because it is job embedded work. The principal is not doing extra work. The principal applies research-based strategies to job duties on a daily basis. Executive coaching

enabled principals to assess situations through different lenses, as well as, assess what they are doing, and how to do it better. The ultimate goal is to become a better administrator with the support of an executive coach.

In supporting principals, executive coaches examined the leaders' gifts and abilities, then coached the principals for maximum potential. Using their identified skill sets, principals have more confidence in thinking, planning, and problem solving. The leadership strategy now is to be proactive with issues and opportunities by finding a path around a problems rather than concentrating on the barrier to success. Coaching developed confidence and a renewed mind-set for leaders. The principals were more confident and interactive with teachers and staff after having an assigned coach.

Executive coaching fosters better communication, such as, committed listening, paraphrasing, and feedback. The goal is to have the entire school community having the same expectations. When there is clear communications from the top-down and from the bottom up, plans of action are more concise and effective. Therefore, when the school community implements the plan there is a clear goal for all stakeholders, and then as a result, students perform and the school has achieved greater student success.

Theme: Relationship Built on Trust

The second theme to emerge in the study was relationship built on trust. Relationship Built on Trust was supported by four open codes: (a) facilitative, (b) confidential, (c) reciprocal, and (d) trust.

Building principals said school leadership was lonely territory. Principals also voiced that they were cautious with whom we share and discuss information. Executive coaching offered principals a supportive and confidential thinking partner. The coach is a facilitator on a

journey of helping another person to develop to their maximum potential both as a leader and as an individual.

Principals commented, I have someone to share with, who is confidential, who is facilitative and helps me think through possibilities, and helps me solve my own problems. Two of the three principals revealed executive coaching had taken away the feeling of living in isolation as a leader. All three principals agreed that leadership coaching provides someone we can trust, a confidential thinking partner, and someone who listens and ask reflective and open-ended questions.

The data revealed an executive coach is that active, trusted, and reciprocal thinking partner supporting leaders to become problem solvers, as well as supporters of leaders in thinking through possibilities for solutions. The executive coach is a person who is a confidential, trustworthy colleague with the school leader. Thus, allowing the leader to present their ideas, concerns, and plans of action knowing that all judgment is being reserved. Coaching afforded principals a trusted space and support for leaders who many times were very isolated in lonely positions. Two of the three principals commented that they were reluctant to share with colleagues because there was a feeling of competition verses collaboration (BP1/1; BP2/1).

“The nature of relationship among the adults with a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else” (Barth, 2003, p.8). These adult relationships are formed across the school community with the principal, teachers, instructional coaches, parents, support staff, bus drivers, crossing guards, and collaborative partners. The relationships foster a sense of commitment to the mission and vision of the school. There is a common thread of commitment to goal attainment. Gladwell (2002) explained to achieve the goal of fundamental change in employee’s beliefs and behavior, you

must build an organization in which those beliefs are “practiced and expressed and natured” (p. 173). The building principals in this study have incorporated coaching language, such as, committed listening, paraphrasing, and feedback in daily staff conversations, leadership team meetings, parent conferences, administrative meetings, community forums, and personal conversations. Relationship is trust and trust ignites beliefs and behavior for impacting school performance and student achievement.

Committed listening is one of the traits exhibited by executive coaches. This trait fosters trust in the coach-client relationship. All three principals said their executive coach was a confidential committed listener. The coach would paraphrase the principal’s response before commenting or asking a clarifying question. This technique confirms that the coach was a fully present committed listener for the client. At the beginning of each coaching conversation, the coach and client establish the agreement on the topic for the coaching conversation. The agreement informs the type of questions asked by the coach, which could include planning-focused, goal-focused, solution-focused, or reflection-focused or a combination. The executive coach has received extensive training in how to proceed with the conversation after confirming the agreement with the client. Throughout the conversation the executive coach provides value statements to the client to acknowledge their shift in thinking. Value statements are also offered to the client for their actions and efforts to meet organizational goals.

Theme: Confidential Conversations

The third theme to emerge in the study was confidential conversations. Confidential Conversations were supported by five open codes: (a) feedback, (b) listening, (c) discussion, (d) questioning, and (e) engaging. Sherman and Freas explained executives are recognizing minimized competencies such as interpersonal skills and communication skills essential for

influencing employees, adapting to rapid change, and respecting individuals from diverse cultures (2004).

Leadership coaching is really a partnership of equals. The aim is to support the principal's development, both professionally and personally, so principals will become more effective leaders. The data revealed all three principals indicated coaching caused them to be more self-aware and more reflective. Many times at the end of the coaching session the client is asked how the conversation supported their thinking. The responses included: (1) I had someone to fully listen to me, a committed listener, and the coach asked reflective questions; (2) the open ended questions allowed me to explore opportunities, and then use those opportunities and options for better planning; and (3) in having a thinking partner, it opened my mind to a new way of thinking, which flowed into identifying approaches to achieve success.

The coach is not the most important person; the client is the most important person. The coach serves as a guide on a journey to discovery. Executive coaches provide unbiased committed listening and must be comfortable with silence while allowing principals to reflect and think. The coaching goal for an executive coach is to coach the client based on the establish agreement. Executive coaches spend a great deal of time perfecting the skills of committed listening, paraphrasing, and providing feedback. The skill of paraphrases requires the coach to repeat what is had heard in non-threatening, non-judgmental terms.

The executive coach is trained to ask open-ended question requiring the client to think deeper and those are important words, think deeper. Think in ways you have never thought before. Use higher level thinking skills. Think introspectively in ways you have never thought before. Coaches ask clients questions and help them discover the treasures that lie within them.

Significance of Executive Coaching

Executive coaching provides targeted support that meets the daily and practical needs of an urban principal. Urban principals are saturated each day with an abundance of instructional and managerial responsibilities. Through coaching, principals developed schemas to better support teacher development and enhanced leadership skills. Principals valued the coaching support for improving and sustaining leadership practices. Executive coaching for this urban district offered an additional support to the district's leadership development system for principals. The executive coach serves as a thinking partner in a confidential trusting environment ready to utilize coaching skills and traits in addressing real point-in-time issues.

Research Question

The researcher's inquiry for question one focused on principals' perceptions of coaching engagements in supporting and sustaining leadership practices; and the sub-question centered on how leader practices promoted professional teachers practices. Executive coaching was perceived by principals as a valued leadership support as related to point-in-time authentic leadership situations. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) asserts leader's individual values, paths, and priorities are authentically articulated from a confident emotional course, whereby effective leaders shift people in constructive emotional paths because they are aware of their feelings and in turn create resonance (p. 38). Coaching engagements helped leaders to tap into the emotional intelligence paths within the cultural context to promote "relationship-management, self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness" (p. 38). The building principals (BP1, BP2, and BP3) were better equipped to empower teachers and leadership teams to accomplish the school's vision, mission, and goals because the leader clarified expectations, nurtured social awareness, and managed relationships.

Robinson (2007) offered “planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum” as one of the...“leadership dimensions derived from 11 studies of effects of leadership on student outcomes” (p. 8). Executive coaching for leaders afforded time to discuss topics, such as, teacher observations, professional learning communities, classroom walk-through, and school improvement goals. Formative and summative feedback on teacher planning and instructional strategies were enhanced by the coaching competency committed listening. The principals in this study agreed that committed listening was a valuable coaching strategy for providing authentic feedback. Through committed listening the principals (BP1, BP2, and BP3) were able to paraphrase and offer feedback, which in many cases the feedback, included the language spoken by teachers. Committed listening created awareness for teachers that the principal really heard what was said and specific feedback was provided. Reported findings by Robinson (2007) suggested leaders effect students outcomes as they “promote and participate in teacher learning and development” in their quest for reaching school improvement goals (p. 8). Judge and Piccolo (2004) offered the transformational leadership factor “individual consideration” where the leader attends to each follower’s needs, works as a mentor or coach, and commits to listening to the follower’s needs (p. 755), thus providing authentic leadership support.

Through confidential trusting conversations, principals in this study had facilitative conversations with the executive coach for support of leadership effectiveness. At a time when federal and state accountability mandates have made data analysis a fact of school life, effective principals know how to make the best use of data, learning to ask useful questions of it, and taking advantage of it for collaborative inquiry among teachers and helpful feedback to students (Portin, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman, Russell, Samuelson, et al., 2009). The significance of

establishing and sustaining a trusting relationship allowed the client (principal) to release apprehensions of judgment and appraisal, and lift up their best thinking and planning for effective leadership. Principals (BP1, BP2, and BP3) welcomed the coaching support and valued the opportunity to communicate in a trusting and non-threatening environment.

Kee et al. (2010) explained the new mindset as how people change and essential skills the Coach leader shall possess:

Creates the environment and scaffolding for thinking in new ways; Creates environments where deep thinking is sought and valued; Facilitates processes of dialogue for deep thinking and expanding one's insights and experience from different points of view; Presumes the best in thinking and doing in others; Amplifies the strengths and success in others; Communicates clarity of visions and goals and supports the success of all who take up the call; ...Uses language of appreciation, respect, possibility, and clear expectations and outcomes. (p. 21)

Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moren (2011) suggested, "Trust matters most in situations of interdependence where people must depend on one another to achieve desired outcomes" (p. 438). According to Morel and Cushman (2012) trust is a significant component in collaborative conversations.

The axial coding for executive coaches was the researcher's second presentation of data. The coding process concluded by classifying themes that surfaced across the preponderance of data.

Presentation of Axial Codes

Axial Codes and Sample of Open Codes of Executive Coaches

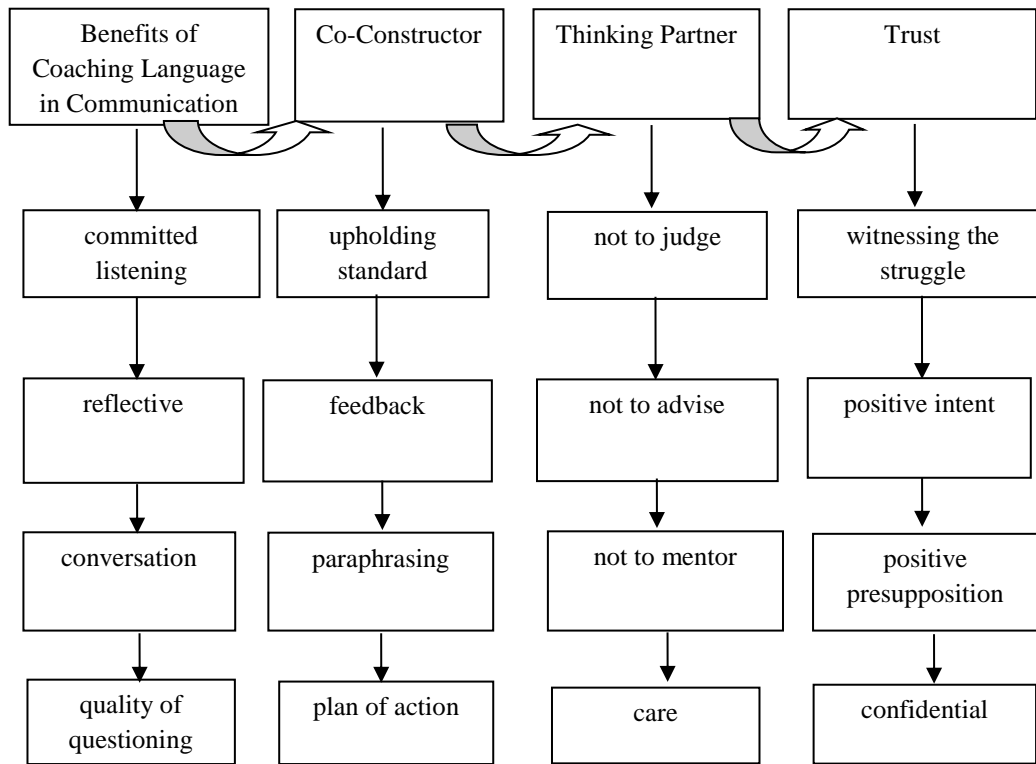


Figure 3. The four axial codes or major themes for executive coaches are: (a) Benefits of Coaching Language in Communication; (b) Co-Constructor; (c) Thinking Partner; and (d) Trust.

The data indicated that executive coaching provided support for building leadership capacity of building principals. The three executive coaches implemented the coaching model with fidelity. It was apparent from the interviews and data analysis that executive coaches hold firm to providing leadership support through trusting relationships.

Research Sub-question

The researcher’s inquiry for sub-question one was the impact of leader practices on promoting professional teacher practices. Executive coaching facilitated better communication for principals and teachers that lead to: (a) improved planning and implementation of plans, (b)

providing professional development for teachers, and (c) infusion of data driven decision making.

Lambert (2003) explained,

As principals and teachers, we must attend not only to our students' learning but also to our own and to that of the adults around us. When we do this, we are on the road to achieving collective responsibility for the school and becoming a community of learners.

(p. 3)

The Wallace Foundation (2010) from their investigation of the links to improved student learning offered a core list of leadership and teacher practices: (1) setting directions, (2) developing people, (3) redesigning the organization, and (4) managing the instructional program (p. 66).

The researcher also inquired as to the factors influencing principals' decisions to participate in leadership coaching. Principals in the district were required to participate in executive coaching based on the school improvement designation for each school. New principals promoted in the district were invited to participate in executive coaching, as well as, new principals employed by the district. This urban district elected to implement leadership coaching as an additional component to the current system of professional development support for building leaders. Executive coaching incorporated coaching competencies to provide one-on-one job embedded professional development on leadership practices for moving the organization forward in meeting academic achievement goals.

Summary of Findings

This study explored urban principals' perceptions of coaching engagements in supporting

and sustaining leadership practices. The goal was to understand the value of executive coaching for building leadership capacities. The propositions guiding the purpose, focus, data collection/analysis, scope of the study, and framework (Stake, 1995) were derived from the literature review with specific attention to effective leadership dimensions and practices.

Three themes emerged from data as influencing the perceptions of building principals as it relates to executive coaching: (a) Leadership Support, (b) Trusting Relationships, and (c) Confidential Conversations. These themes were supported by axial codes or major themes, and open codes. Triangulation of data included open-ended interviews, observations, and collection of documents.

Interpretation of Data

The integration of executive coaching into the district's overall system of support offered on-going professional development for principals. This targeted support meets the day-to-day needs of urban principals who wear multiple hats while attempting to put children first, support teachers and instruction, engage parents and community, and promote improved student achievement for all.

Recommendation to the Field

This study sought to understand perceptions of building principals on the value of coaching in building leadership capacity. Recommendations to the field include a study on the efficacy of coaching as related to implementation of research-based leadership practices and improved performance appraisal for building principals. Conducting research with teachers whose principals have participated in executive coaching for more than one year may provide data that leads to ascertaining teacher perceptions on the value of coaching for informing leadership practices, leadership effectiveness, and school reform.

Recommendation for Further Research

Pepper (2010) states to meet the demands of educational accountability, transformational and transactional leadership styles, working within a balanced approach, is promising for leaders leading learning organizations. Instructional leadership employs research based practices such as, goal setting, managing people, and redesigning the organization. Executive coaching employs various strategies to stimulate change for transforming the organization, teachers, and the leader. The recommendation for further research was to begin from a transformational leadership premise to understand which tenets of executive coaching has the most impact to change leader practices for improved student achievement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to explore principals' perceptions of one-on-one coaching and the impact of coaching on building leadership capacity for school effectiveness and improved student achievement. Specifically, the researcher wanted to know what value did coaching have on reframing leadership practices. The study included two elementary principals and one secondary principal participating in an urban district's coaching program. The principal coaching program included both novice and experienced principals. Recent research indicates improving school performance through the development of effective school leaders is a critical element in the reform agenda (Murphy, 2002/2006).

Through data analysis, three themes evolved: (a) Leadership Support, (b) Trusting Relationships, and (c) Confidential Conversations. Leadership support was most valued, followed by confidential conversations, and relationships built on trust. Leadership support was the major theme which continued to stretch across themes and emerge from the data. Further

study is warranted to understand which tenets of coaching facilitate changes toward effective leadership.

Executive coaching is in the early stages of implementation in school districts. Valid and reliable instruments are needed to measure efficacy of coaching. Also, cost analysis projections are suggested due to the one-to-one ratio of leader-to-executive coach. Consideration should also be given to the human resources needed for districts to train executive coaches from within the district.

Also, credit for professional development hours may be given to participants based on the length of time the executive coach works with the principal. A confidential annual evaluation of services provided by executive coaches should be completed by building principals on the coaching competencies and evidenced-based leadership practices. Annual reports to the superintendent and school board should be provided.

Contribution to the Field of Leadership

Job-embedded professional development for system-leaders is a valuable tool. While districts and policy makers identify effective strategies and allocate resources to support short-term and long-term goals, executive coaching can serve as targeted support for district leaders, principals, directors, content specialist, and central office administrators. The value of executive coaching is unveiled through the individualized support of effective leadership practices such as: (1) establishing vision and mission; (2) building trusting relationships; and (3) goal attainment. As leaders participate in executive coaching valuable skills are developed or enhanced. These skills include, enhanced listening, improved problem solving, productive goal planning, and promotion of solution focused leadership.

Executive coaches in this study offered urban leaders a unique opportunity to engage in confidential conversations, solution focused planning with a thinking partner, facilitative conversations using effective questioning, and leadership support for accomplishing predetermined organizational goals. Findings from this qualitative case study suggest that leadership is a lonely place and in many cases there is no one for the leader to confide in on issues that impact the overall success of the organization. Executive coaching helps fill this void. Additionally, executive coaches establish trusting relationships that fosters open dialogue and genuine conversations to get at the heart of the matter. Leaders are better equipped to accomplish goals and model effective strategies for others to learn from and put into practice. Trusting relationships are paramount to the success of executive coaching.

The principals in this study spoke their truths regarding the conditions and support necessary to lead effective schools. Principals valued leadership coaching in building leadership capacity and supporting leader practices. Leadership coaching for principals served as targeted support in a safe, trusting, and confidential environment. These findings from the voices of principals are contributing to a relatively new area of research.

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