Coaching Educational Leaders

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As institutions of higher learning respond to the rapidly changing demographics of its administrators, they must continuously find processes that improve the performance and effectiveness of these individuals. They must also begin to understand how the integration of coaching and/or mentoring shapes educational leaders and their institutions. From developing administrator’s potential to work well with others and strengthen communication, coaching also access to mobility, career advancements, promotions and pay increases. Of interest is the presence of female administrators in the California community colleges and the role that coaching plays in their ability to be effective educational leaders.

As leaders in diverse fields are seeking strategies for enhancing leadership, organizations are discovering that coaching is a key factor in improving the leadership of administrators. While designed for a business model initially, aspects of it have proved transferable to the educational sectors. While educational organizations, among others, are seeking a competitive edge in a global market, and both formal coaching and informal mentoring program have proven to be beneficial to both the individuals and the organization.

Kunich (1999) discusses how mentoring and coaching are both an obligation and responsibility of leadership. Inherent in this idea is that anyone in leadership should partake in these relationships as there is clear evidence of the increases in performance and alignment with the organizational vision. Edwards (2002) also looks at how coaching empowers administrators to develop new individualized ways of increasing their work performance and the performance of their teams or departments. This is critically important as colleges are implementing assessment and measurement through many of their processes and this would benefit the leaders who oversee these systems.

A strong coach would challenge leaders to discover the internal resources within themselves so to be more effective and this carries over to being more effective with the resources under their supervision. Many senior and even emerging educational leaders would find professional support in coaching by creating flexible, customized systems based on their personal needs for improving both individual and institutional performance.

And part of being an educational leader is the sharing and passing down to others regarding the values, principles, traditions, and lessons learned throughout the coaches own career. This has traditionally been done by a more senior staff member in order to support more junior moments.

**The Distinction between Mentoring and Coaching**

Mentoring and coaching are terms used interchangeably to denote the relationship between two individual who participates in a relationship. In this relationship one person is skilled and knowledgeable of certain areas and the other person seeks to gain the skills and knowledge through this relationship. It has become a common practice in organizations to engage in informal mentoring, which develops naturally and more formalized coaching, usually the result of a training program.
A strong coach will utilize his expertise to increase the effectiveness of the client through facilitating individual learning. Edwards (2002) states that coaching delivers results when a relationship is established between the two individuals and is based on mutual respect, shared vision and an effective and clear communication. In many ways, coaching is a personalized one-on-one training program.

It should focus on the potential on an administrator and allow them to see the possibilities in their leadership. While one has more expertise, the goal is to facilitate the client to their own learning rather than teach them and provide the answers. In this way, the client should be able to maximize their developing skill set and improve their performance and they are responsible for the outcomes of the decisions they make as a leader.

The challenge for some people is understanding the distinctions between mentoring and coaching as they are often used interchangeably. Edwards (2002) points out to the historical distinctions between them. She notes that mentoring dates from Greek mythology and Odysseus. When Odysseus was setting out for Troy he entrusted his house and the education of his son to his friend Mentor. “Tell him all you know”, said Odysseus. Instantly the limits of mentoring were set to that of “telling”, in the form of teaching or advising.

Edwards (2002) also explains the long history of coaching, which can be traced back to Socrates. Socrates’ view was that people learn best when they take ownership of a given situation and take personal responsibility for the outcome. The purpose of this is so that the person being coached has a personal experience and, therefore, the learning is retained.

Essentially the difference between coaching and mentoring is that Mentor is more of a teacher and gives advice, whereas a coach is more of a facilitator so that you engage in learning for yourself. In this way, both methods have differences in the achieved outcomes. The most important criteria is that the coach asks high impact questions that allow the person being coached to discover the answers within themselves. So whereas a mentor will tell a client what they need to do, a coach will know what to ask and when to ask it for the client to have deep learning.

Organizations utilize different terms to define this relationship so a coach may be called a mentor, a counselor, sponsor guru, teacher, coach, or senior adviser. In like manner, the other person in the relationship may be referred to protégé, mentee, intern, candidate, or trainee. Despite the various terms used to define this relationship and role, it is consistently accepted that the presence of this relationship plays a significant role in the recipient’s career outcome.

There are several reasons for this. One is that coaching requires organizational focus. Pittenger (2000) states that the college’s mission, vision, and direction are aligned, the collaborative effort for this relationship should produce the desired result of organizationally desired outcomes where the goals are interwoven through the college. Next, coaching should provide the training for strong interpersonal skills that increases their sense of competence and skills in dealing with people. In this way, the microcosm of this coaching relationship extends its applicability to all relationships within the organization. The value in devoting time to being a better listener and communicator is because our educational and career backgrounds have not adequately prepared administrators.

The organizational design is another important variable. When there is a lack of time, schedule conflicts
and distance those can have a negative impact on the quality of the relationship. But when factors are aligned to encourage close and frequent communication, Pittenger (2000) states that the result is higher levels of organizational socialization and commitment. In this way, administrators can improve effective communication patterns and their ability to improve their performance in working with others.

Pittenger (2000) also acknowledges that gender issues can have a direct impact on the effectiveness of coaching relationships. It has already been established that the outcomes can extend beyond career functions of promotions, mobility and salary increases. But as the effectiveness of these relationships often hinge on the degree of closeness between the individuals, it can create a unique challenge for those of different genders. They may be less open unless an organization has clear guidelines for interaction and appropriate opportunities to interact at the workplace.

Creating these effective relationships do more than secure promotions and more money, they continue to be aligned to organizational outcomes. While it was established that great socialization and commitment were organizational outcomes, it must also be inclusive of job satisfaction. Pittenger (2000) notes that this is typically the most common outcome from coaching.

Characteristics of Coaching

Burdett (1998) discusses how coaching has been the impetus behind many successful organizations. And that success is measured by having winning teams and that model is only supported through having a coach. He uses the sports model that any competitive team cannot achieve its goals with a world class coach who channels the talents and energy of the team they are working with.

From the sports model he shows how the business world relies on a similar model and both easily translate to an educational model. As human resources are an organization’s most valuable resource, then organizations must continuously invest in their people through processes such as coaching that allow them to have maximum output. For educational organizations to thrive, then they are going to have to invest in the people who make up the organization. In order to adapt to the dynamic changes that the environment and community are having on institutions of higher learning, Burdett (1998) says that in order for them to move forward, they will have to utilize coaches that possess the delivery skills as well as the spirit of coaching.

As colleges are being asked by both the community and external agencies for greater accountability and measurement, coaching in many ways provides those features. There is a key element of measurement within coaching and according to Megginson (2006) it supports administrators in identifying areas for improvement in both the process and performance of their practice. It is also linked to being a driver in an organization because it incorporates coaching into strategy, measures and processes. It is connected to high performance on the part of administrators. It is measured and over time can impact the way an organization operates for maximum productivity.

Aspects of an Effective Coaching Relationship

In studies, it has been determined that the coaching relationship itself is the critical factor in the success of coaching outcomes. As research point to this, then participants need to understand the
characteristics of effective coaching relationships so they can ensure its presence in one or make modifications if it is not a component in an existing relationship. Bluckert (2005) references an outcome study of executive coaching conducted by Wasylshyn (2003) that identifies the top three characteristics of an effective coach. These characteristics included the ability to form a strong connection with the executive (86%); professionalism (82%); and the use of a clear and sound methodology (35%).

As organizations are investing in coaches for many of their administrators to improve performance measures, then it becomes critical to understand the factors that must be present for this exchange to be effective. Blocker (2005) grounds his understanding of effective coaching in the work of Kilburg (1997) who outlined the following characteristics:

1. Predictability and reliability.
2. The “hygiene” factors of time, place, confidentiality, fees and cancellation are properly set out from the beginning as well as the coach’s expectations about homework, etc.
3. The coach displays respect, consideration and understanding for the complexities of the client’s experience.
4. The coach demonstrates empathy for the client.
5. The coach interacts in an authentic and genuine fashion and provides an experience of non-possessive regard.

Besides displaying those characteristics, a coach should also display the following behaviors in their interactions with their client. Kilburg (1997) also lists:

1. Respect for the client as a person;
2. Consideration and understanding for the complexities of the client’s life and his/her inner world;
3. Courtesy;
4. Accurate empathy; and tact.

Essentially, these areas address both the coaches and the client’s ability to form meaningful relationships with effective communication. And as many administrators need to improve in just this area, this relationship also works as a microcosm of the larger extent to which they can improve relationships and communication in the workplace. A coach is working to achieve balance between supporting and challenging the administrator to change though processes and behaviors.

As many administrators are generally self sufficient and it can be the norm to work in isolation, many administrators may find coaching relationships to be challenging. This is also a result of a combination of personality traits from reluctance to open up and accept feedback as it can view as a judgment on their ability. Other influences is how one views support.

One administrator may view support as implementing tangible options through clear directives or through focused listening where there is an emotional connection to the coach. It is also critical that trust
be established between the parties as the coach is privy to the administrator’s sensitive information. But if hired by an organization they may be privy to who is getting fired to potential mergers.

The most valuable aspects of coaching for educational leaders can be found in several principles. Edwards (2002) states that leaders need to focus their energy and attention on achieving their outcomes. As stated earlier, due to coaching being a highly individualized program, there are personal outcomes which range depending on that administrator’s goals. But even their individual outcomes have meaning for the larger institution. As the administrator improves their performance, they can channel the same skills towards improving the college’s performance and meeting educational outcomes for the system.

Next, the administrator can negotiate how they want feedback. Whether this is delivered in a no holds punches where information is direct and honest or cushioned by a more fuzzy approach. This is based on the relationship established as well as the agreed upon communication established at the beginning of the relationship. Edwards (2002) also notes that the high impact questions (HIQs) are valuable because they force an administrator to reflect on their decision making and create creative solutions in a more intentional manner. As leaders develop new behaviors, they are able to work in different ways in order to respond to a dynamic and ever changing workload. Coaching is based on the premises that people have the inherent abilities and skills dormant in them to succeed and through strategic coaching, those qualities can be realized, processes improved, and leadership will become more effective for the individual and the institution they lead.

Works Cited


