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One-to-One Leadership:

Coaching in schools

What are the conditions that need to be present for a coaching leadership style to make an impact?

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“How do you lead in a world when your best resources walk out of the door every day?”
(Kouzes and Posner, 1995)

Introduction

Coaching is central to current thinking about leadership. Involvement in the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) highlighted many headteachers' coaching qualities. But to what extent are these skills consciously developed and used in schools and what are the conditions that need to be present for this leadership style to make an impact?

This study draws on interviews with 10 headteachers who have identified that the coaching style of leadership is relevant to them. It shows how headteachers have made coaching work for their schools. It specifically relates to the manner in which headteachers take it on themselves to act as coach to their colleagues in schools and to facilitate a coaching approach generally within the school.

The study aims to answer three key questions:

- what does coaching in schools look like?
- how is a coaching approach to professional development used by headteachers?
- what factors affect its likely success as a leadership tool?

Throughout this report the terms coach and learner are used to denote the colleague leading the coaching and the colleague being coached. A theme emergent from the enquiry indicated the learning benefits to both parties.

What is coaching?

Given the proliferation of books, seminars, courses, diplomas and enquiry studies around coaching there are numerous definitions. Within the various definitions a number of characteristics of the process appear to be generic:

- a focus on learning
- results orientation
- skills, competencies and attitude development

Paul Lefebvre (in Downey, 2001) illustrates the coaching process when he points out that, “In the sixteenth century, the English language defined coach as a carriage, a vehicle for conveying valued people from where they are to where they want to be”.

In LPSH, Hay McBer defines coaching as a style where the primary objective is the long term professional development of staff:

When using this style, a leader:

- helps member of staff identify their unique strengths and weaknesses in the light of their aspirations
- encourages members of staff to establish long-term development goals;
- Reaches agreement with staff on both the headteacher’s and the staff’s roles in the development process
- provides ongoing advice and feedback – with underlying rationales and principles, and
- may trade off immediate standards of performance for long term development (Teacher Training Agency, 1999)

There are some similarities with a process of coaching and the more established notion of mentoring in schools. A difference between the two does exist (and indeed it may be that much of the activity we have routinely categorised as mentoring may in fact be coaching).

Coaching is a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve. To be a successful a Coach requires a knowledge and understanding of process as well as the variety of styles, skills and techniques that are appropriate to the context in which the coaching takes place ... mentoring is off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking.

... coaching tends to be seen as a form of mentoring, or as one aspect of mentoring, but having a more narrow focus, notably relating to an individual’s job-specific tasks, skills or capabilities (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000). Green et al (1991) thus state that coaching involves “a focus on skills and competencies in action and feedback on performance” (Green et al, 1991).

(Hobson, 2002)

Clutterbuck (1998) argues that the distinction between coaching and mentoring is less than clear in many situations, particularly when a partnership is well established. He concludes that:

Coaching often slides into mentoring when discussion and dialogue move onto wider, more personal issues. (Clutterbuck, 1998)

Everard (2002) positions coaching as a central leadership and management tool:

Reduced to its barest essentials, management may be viewed as a people based art that focuses on creating and maintaining a climate, environment and context which enable and empower a group of people to generate desired results, achievements and accomplishments. Coaching, as we use the term, refers to the managerial activity of creating, by communication only, the climate, environment and context that empowers individuals and teams to generate results.

This proliferation of material makes categorising headteacher leadership behaviour problematic: when headteachers describe their coaching style they are rarely referring to the same things. Those who had been involved in LPSH used the Hay McBer materials as a reference point. For those who had not, the relatively recent emergence of interest in coaching means that they had very little in the way of a shared and common lexicon.

Regardless of definition, it is clear that coaching is an idea that will almost inevitably encroach on school leaders' professional consciousness in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Belasco (2000) writes that:

Coaching now occupies a place of honour on the management stage [and] is destined to be the leadership approach of the twenty-first century.

Coaching in schools

“Some of the most successful work I’ve been involved in here has come from focused conversations with staff. Sometimes a conversation can move them on bit and move you on as well.” (Headteacher)

All those involved in the enquiry identified times when they used the coaching style to achieve the results they wanted. Only one respondent used this as a predominant leadership style and only one other had planned to use coaching as a school improvement strategy. Other respondents, when describing school improvement initiatives that they had developed in their organisations, referred to behaviours that have been categorised as elements of the coaching style. These included:

- listening to understand
- reflecting
- paraphrasing
- summarising
- asking questions that raise awareness
- making suggestions
- giving feedback on performance
- offering guidance
- giving advice
- instructing
- showing how
- suggesting examples (Downey, 2001)

Less prosaically, Hobson (2002) suggests that:

The coach helps the individual to find opportunities for applying newly-learned skills; to manage the more mundane aspects of development; to fight the fear of failure; and to break the habit cycle.

Coaching appears to be a style that headteachers fall into. It is often used to supplement more familiar behaviours and comes into play when there may be isolated issues in the school that need to be addressed with small groups of colleagues. Likewise, it is commonly used when schools are planning team or person specific improvements. For example, in one school the headteacher had identified that the role of the subject leader was underdeveloped. She drew upon her prior experience in the role to work on a one-to-one basis with a colleague who was driving improvements in numeracy. She was able to work alongside this colleague over a short period of time and add to her skills within the context of real ongoing work:

This was ultimately very successful. I found myself asking lots of questions rather than just saying what I thought needed to happen. It seemed to work well for us both ...

The evidence in this work appears clear: headteachers commonly, but irregularly, adopt a style that can be included under the umbrella of coaching. However, it seems that this rarely involves the level of coaching partnership described by much of the growing body of coaching literature.

Opportunities to deploy coaching approaches (consciously or unconsciously) tended to emerge in the day-to-day business of getting things done.

All the headteachers I spoke to were positive about their coaching experiences. Even where the results had not met the expectations, they were still able to find something worthwhile to report from the experience. One headteacher had made an attempt to weave coaching behaviours into the performance management process within the school. This had not transformed the way that performance management worked in the way the school had hoped:

I had ideas that this was going to make the performance management process more useful. But it ended up being messy and complicated ... I think I was a bit ambitious to start with ... I did learn things about the way my school was though and I will try coaching again.

One finding that was particular to this enquiry seemed to be a paradox. Of the headteachers who were keen to pursue coaching as an explicit and structured form of professional learning for their staff, most were in the early stages of their headship in a particular school (although one did have experience as a head in another school). However, the factors that emerged as potential determinants of success of any coaching venture seemed to militate against these people and work in favour of those colleagues who had been in their current post for at least three years. No positive reasons were identified for this. However, the factors explored in the next section, Making coaching work (see page 7) would seem to indicate that one-to-one leadership is most effectively realised in the medium to long term. In addition, there may be some mileage in the tentative hypothesis that quality coaching has some connection with authority (moral and actual), security and self mastery ... (Senge et al, 1999). This appears to affirm the position of coaching as a tool for change (Selman, 1998) rather than one of control and maintenance of the status quo. Coaching is best used to develop the performance of the learner rather than the enhancement of the coach's authority:

A number of headteachers were clear that they coached for "heart and morale" (Kouzes and Posner, 1995) as well as for competency.

Working with difficult children is hard work. It drains you. I seem to spend a lot of time with people trying to give them a boost. Pointing out that they do a great job and that they are valued.

Most of the headteachers related that the coaching process was beneficial to the coach. Among the benefits suggested were the opportunity to reflect on current practice, the need for the coach to revisit previous learning so as to offer greater authority to the coaching process and the necessity of considering the fundamentals of interpersonal communication.

Making coaching work

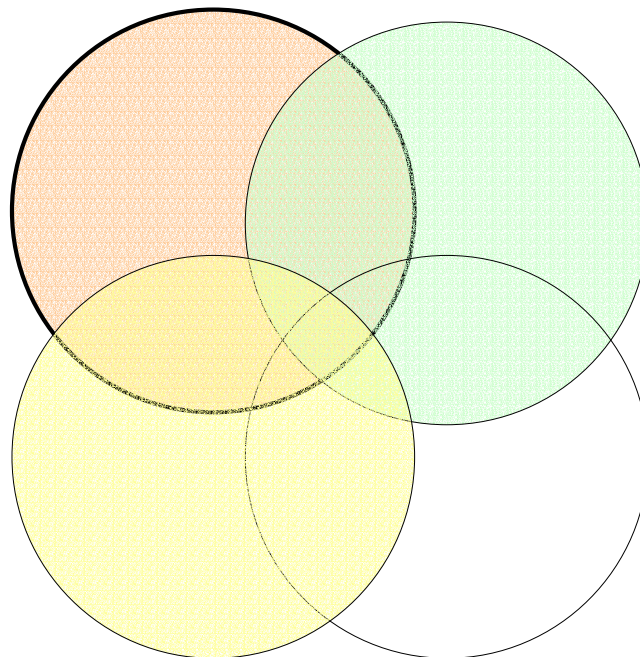
“I think I’m a good listener. I like to listen to what they have to say so I can give value to people and encourage them.” (Headteacher)

There are a number of models in existence that describe how coaching might be developed in schools (see McGrane and Baumfield, 2002). The literature points to powerfully aligned processes that have a clear focus and draw upon a specific and explicit set of skills. The notion of developing coaching partnerships where two or more colleagues engage as coach and learner seems to be a common theme (Gibbons, 2002). This is rarely found in schools.

Despite the absence of a conscious, planned and systematic process, most headteachers I spoke to were positive about their coaching experiences and were making it work. They all reported performance gains as a direct result of their one-to-one leadership of colleagues. However, drawing on selected evidence from all those interviewed, it is possible to tentatively identify a number of factors that contribute to the success of the endeavour. The factors have been expressed diagrammatically.

The task focus of the coaching

The context or ecology of the school



The coach: personal mastery, coaching competencies

The person being coached: skills, attitudes, knowledge

The diagram attempts to illustrate that where coaching might be seen to be most powerful as a school improvement lever is at that point where the four generic factors meet. Coaching requires that all the factors are present to some extent. The determining factor in the success of the endeavour is the degree to which the conditions are present and the commitment to the use of coaching from all those involved, but particularly senior school leaders. It is also necessary to clarify that the enquiry did not reveal any hierarchy of importance in these characteristics/factors. It is notable that not one headteacher I talked to said that they had managed to create a climate with all the features noted here.

The ecological context

Handy (1993) defines organisational ecology as that element that influences the growth and development of the school and individuals and teams within it. Headteachers identified a number of ecological factors as being significant in their use of the coaching style. The factors are related and to a great extent overlap.

Shared values between coach and learner

Headteachers interviewed were clear about their own values and the values they held to be important for the organisations they lead. In this respect values can be described as the “way we do things around here” (Senge et al, 1999). The values seemed as much about what happens and what people do as what they believed and said. Some of the people I spoke to in this enquiry suggested that time in post was an important factor in this respect. One told me:

When I came here I was clear who I was and what I stood for. It took about three years for my values to be the school’s values ... This happened by talking and listening and taking every opportunity to discuss ideas.

Shared values appeared to be most powerful when they were explicitly communicated and when the values were consensual between partners. In one school I was witness to an unplanned exchange between the headteacher and another colleague. The conversation (about a child with emotional and behavioural difficulties) was quick and efficient. Words and gestures were used in a way that communicated agreement on the nature and complexity of the situation and the two colleagues referred to their commitment to inclusion on two occasions. When I asked how this had happened the head told me:

It’s a phrase we use all the time. I suppose it comes from the work we’ve done on our SEN policy in the last couple of months.

What seemed evident was that the term inclusion had been transformed from a word into a specific set of values and related actions.

A common understanding of the direction of the school

Where headteachers identified that their coaching had been successful they were almost universal in their recognition that there had been a common understanding of school direction between coach and learner. Interestingly this seemed to have a bearing on the selection of those involved in coaching partnerships (however loosely defined).

One headteacher described a situation where he was coaching a colleague through a difficult transition of responsibilities for a member of staff. The colleague in question had moved from a Year 6 class to a Year 2 class:

She didn’t need support in the conventional sense. She is a brilliant teacher. She needed some clear idea of how to develop her teaching so I helped her to sort herself

out. I observed her teaching and gave her feedback. But instead of giving her a set of objectives to work to, we had a conversation about what she'd done. I listened to the ideas she came up with for herself. She's one of my key people here. One of those you have to rely on when you know that you have to start changing things round.

This idea that headteachers tend to select like-minded colleagues as the focus of coaching activities arose time and again in the course of the enquiry. They seemed to instinctively reflect aspects of the change and team development literature (Robbins and Finley, 1996) when deciding who to give their time to:

I suppose I make the extra effort to work with the people who I see as being with me.

and

When someone wants to move forward in the direction you think you want to go I try to support that. Sometimes working or coaching if you like with someone is hard work. I'm not going to put in all that effort unless I have a good idea I'm going to get something back.

A common language of learning between partners

It was interesting in the course of the enquiry to observe headteachers interactions with their colleagues. Inevitably these interactions were swift and succinct, mindful that there was work to be done and that the headteacher's focus was on conversation with myself. Despite this, it was evident in one particular school that the (very short) interactions were efficient and productive. One or two phrases communicated a great deal because the colleagues shared a common language related to their work. This language had evolved over time from the many and varied professional conversations that had occurred. This common language seems to enable colleagues to engage with one another in a coaching context in an effective way. The head concerned told me:

When I came here I'd been a head – a successful one I think – for four years. I remember my first staff meeting very clearly. I was talking and they all seemed to be listening but it was obvious that they didn't understand a word. I don't think it was rocket science but they just weren't getting it. When I thought about it afterwards I realised that the fault was mine. I'd assumed the words that meant so much to my staff at my last school meant little here.

I had to explain what I meant in great detail. It was frustrating to have to almost define what I meant by things like the learning environment so everybody had the same understanding. This took up a lot of time and it was only when I got past this that we began to have the sorts of professional conversations that really get things moving.

It seems sensible to suggest that building a common language of learning may be one possible explanation for the pattern of use of coaching as a leadership style by those headteachers who have been in post for longer periods of time.

Very clear and well understood operational guidelines for the school in general and for the coaching partnership in particular

OFSTED reports bear testimony that all the headteachers I spoke to were successful leaders. Invariably leadership and management were identified as good or very good. One head was clear that having clear routines, systems and procedures for most aspects of school life was:

... liberating. We have well rehearsed ways of dealing with things that everybody understands.

She was clear that this liberation from thinking about the routine aspects of work enabled her to think more clearly and deeply about other issues which were more developmental. She was able to spend more time leading and less time on more routine management issues that were often dealt with by others according to established custom, practice and policy.

Robust school self-evaluation routines that are aligned with performance management processes

I was interested to discover how headteachers decided who they would work with and once this decision was taken, what focus any coaching activity may have. The headteachers who felt themselves to employ coaching styles with reasonable frequency (and had had this perception confirmed through the data provided from Hay McBer by involvement in LPSH) appeared to know their schools very well. They demonstrated an awareness of their colleagues and this awareness had grown partly as a result of robust school self-evaluation process.

There appeared to be a number of key elements of knowledge and understanding of colleagues' work that were significant in helping the coaching process along:

- colleagues' particular strengths
- colleagues' particular weaknesses
- colleagues preferred style of learning (eg "one of my staff thrives on being coached. He wants to learn but he hates to go on courses")
- colleagues capacity to accept change

Blanchard, Zigarmi and Zigarmi (1994) illustrate the importance of this deep awareness of learners' competencies and areas for development:

"Everyone has peak performance potential. You just need to know where they are coming from and meet them there."

The alignment of performance management process with school self-evaluation may have a bearing on the impact of coaching on improvement. Many headteachers identified that performance management presented a (largely under-developed) opportunity to engage in coaching. They were clear that they were working towards a situation where performance management linked with other key process (self-evaluation, target setting, continuous professional development, improvement planning) to transform their schools. They are supported in this by Crane's conclusion that:

"In schools where performance management continues to be a bolt on activity it has little impact upon the progress of students, the performance of staff or the overall achievement of schools." (Crane, 2002)

Visible and accessible leadership that was well established in headship

Most of the headteachers I spoke to were proud of their visibility and profile within the school. They appeared to be around and about in classrooms, on the playground, in corridors. They maintained a presence in the staff room and largely identified themselves with the professional team that they lead. Their doors were usually open and they appeared to welcome and expect interruption. They were keen to engage in professional conversation at almost every opportunity.

In this way coaching behaviours may be seen to overlay many of their activities in an unplanned and ad hoc manner. Delving deeper there may be some truth in asserting that although their coaching is unsystematic in structure, it is firmly embedded in the professional ethos, culture and values of the organisation. Their very accessibility and willingness to listen and talk pervades the

schools in which they work. There was some anecdotal evidence that this behaviour was contagious (see Gladwell, 2000).

The coach

The headteachers interviewed in this enquiry were universally action orientated. They saw spending time with their people on a one-to-one basis as a vital investment in furthering the development of their schools. They often spent significant amounts of time on this one-to-one activity. Where respondents identified themselves as coaches for their colleagues a number of features are held in common.

The headteacher was coaching from a position of professional strength. They were either very secure (and usually well established) in their own roles within their schools or felt able to guide staff on particular learning routes with some authority (perhaps backed with expertise or practical experience). One head had started his career working in the special school sector, dealing with children with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. This gave him a great strength in coaching colleagues work with managing challenging behaviour:

I suppose it means that I don't just chant the latest mantra to them when it comes to dealing with problems. I can talk to them about real situations I've been in and how I dealt with them. I learned a huge amount in that post and some of the things I had to do then I find myself doing now without really thinking.

The headteachers held a clear idea of their own competency. A number referred to their notion of "knowing what I don't know". This theme reflects Senge's concept of cognitive blindness, a recurring theme in his work on personal mastery. Several headteachers alluded to this in conversation:

When I came into the job I felt a great pressure to have all the answers and be able to solve everybody's problem for them. You soon learn that this is just not possible and probably would be unhealthy for the school if it was possible. These days I don't feel guilty about saying 'I don't know'.

Headteachers' involvement in LPSH has also brought a new dimension to many headteachers perceptions of how they do their work. Particularly enlightening has been the 360 degree feedback on professional characteristics, climate for learning and leadership style provided in this programme. While not being universally well received by the headteachers I spoke to it does seem that it has been useful to many in understanding how their actions are viewed by others. MacBeath (2001) explains how this is important:

The exercise of leadership requires first and foremost clear expectations of self ... Self-knowledge was not only a precondition of leadership, but also a prelude to acknowledging the expectations and perspectives of others. It contained the paradox that self-knowledge is gained through openness to the perceptions that others have of you, yet dealing imaginatively with those perceptions presupposes a degree of comfort with who you are and what you believe. (MacBeath, 2001)

I always thought I was pretty democratic in the way I did things. The data (from LPSH) said I was a bit of a controller. This was a bit of shock to the system. (Headteacher)

Where headteachers cited particularly successful outcomes to the coaching process a sense of knowing their colleagues strengths, weaknesses and learning needs was strongly expressed. This links clearly to the school self-evaluation processes that schools had developed but also went further. Most of the headteachers made efforts to get to know their people at a level beyond the professional arena. They took the time to share time and

conversation about personal interests, family and friends. This reflects Goleman's application of emotional intelligence thinking to leadership:

By making sure they have personal conversations with employees, coaching leaders establish rapport and trust. They communicate a genuine interest in their people, rather than seeing them simply as tools to get the job done. Coaching thereby creates an ongoing conversation that allows employees to listen to performance feedback more openly, seeing it as serving their own aspirations, not just the boss's interests. (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKie, 2002)

Crane's enquiry into performance management in business settings established that:

Crucially, highly motivated staff drive up performance. This enquiry suggests that the emotional climate of an organisation is key to continuous improvement – the very factors that are difficult to measure. (Crane, 2002)

There was a tendency for respondents to articulate a reluctance to blame colleagues for mistakes in day-to-day leadership transactions (although accountability systems appeared to be well developed). A number of headteachers involved in the enquiry spoke about the way that they handled situations that had turned out badly. They were almost unanimous in the expressed view that these critical incidents could be used positively and as foci for professional learning, particularly when the colleague involved accepted responsibility for an error and demonstrated a willingness to learn from it. Two headteachers used a formal debrief to look at such incidents. This appears to provide a solid platform on which to construct effective coaching: the coach and learner are reflecting on a real and relevant issue and each brings to the partnership a set of experiences that can be used as a basis for mutual learning.

One head was clear that he was committed to holding people to account without attaching the stigma of blame:

I can't do everything and be everywhere. I encourage teachers to take initiative and have a go at things. If I laid into people every time they tried to do something and it had gone wrong they'd soon stop trying and start playing safe. (Headteacher)

Critical incidents are those events in leader's lives that offer the chance to improvise while still staying true to the script. Although they can't be explicitly planned, we should keep in mind how we handle these incidents says volumes about what's important. (Kouzes and Posner, 1999)

Headteachers I spoke to had received no formal training in coaching skills other than those within the sporting dimension. There are opportunities for developing coaching skills through attendance at formal training courses but none of the headteachers had explored this option. Headteachers identified a number of factors that they believed relevant in this respect:

- pressures of time and money
- perception of themselves as coaches may be underdeveloped
- the generic nature of such courses
- conflicting priorities

Another analysis of this situation may point towards the emergent nature of conscious coaching as being significant. Gibbons (2002) illustrates that while coaching can be a powerful transformational level it:

... does not come without significant challenges, not least of which may be significant gaps in the core skills or knowledge required to perform the job. Whilst a formal training

course may offer wholesale transfer of many of these skills, it is unlikely that the employee will 'hit the ground running' without further guidance.

At least two of the headteachers I spoke with had made efforts to develop their understanding of coaching and its potential through personal study. Both were prompted to engage in this study by experiences in LPSH. One colleague expressed an interest in neuro-linguistic programming as a coaching tool.

The learner

In most cases the partner at the receiving end of the coaching process – the learner – was carefully selected as a potential learner from the process. This selection process involved hard, objective criteria (pupil-performance data, formal self-evaluation information) and less tangible measures (intuition, gut feeling). The balance of application of these criteria does not appear to have had bearing on the outcome of the coaching process.

Interestingly, an aspect of this selection process for some respondents appeared to be a reflection of power relationships within the school: there were instances where headteachers had deployed a coaching style with individuals who had some influence over other colleagues. In this way coaching approaches were used to achieve what Hay McBer call “sophisticated influencing”. One headteacher referred to his “strategic dealings with key people.”

Regardless of the selection for, and motives behind, deploying a coaching style, the headteachers interviewed confirmed aspects of the relevant literature describing some key features of successful work in this area.

A good deal of trust was held between the coach and learner. This trust involved high levels of confidentiality, an appreciation that risks may be incurred. Such trust inevitably takes time to develop and most of the headteachers took care to avoid actions that damaged it once it had been established. One head expressed the view that trust was essential in all aspects of school operations:

We have to raise standards. But it's the staff, not me who does this work. I can create the conditions and show the way to a certain extent. I can send them on courses and make the resources available but at the end of the day I have to trust that they do what's needed. I can't monitor everybody all of the time.

Bennis echoes this sentiment:

Coaching by its nature is very personal and is based on a unique and profound level of trust between the coach and those being coached. (Cited in Selman and Fullerton, 1998)

A willingness to be involved in coaching and accept responsibility for fulfilling any commitments made.

It is not possible to coach someone or for that matter to be coached in the absence of authentic commitment. (Selman and Fullerton, 1998)

This resonates with headteachers' views on selecting colleagues to be involved in some form of coaching partnership. It emerged that not all colleagues were seen to be equally receptive to this approach to professional learning. Some writers, however, point towards the potential of coaching to create the commitment that may be lacking initially. Selman and Fullerton (1998) envisage a stepped approach to the coaching process with step four being:

... enrolling others. The objective of this step is to expand the network of people committed to leadership and creating the future.

Downey (2001) sees a higher moral purpose in contributing to development being a key to securing commitment through the coaching process:

Performance matters, learning matters. Coaching doesn't just matter: it can make a difference. And when it comes down to it most people want, more than anything else, to make a difference.

The task focus

The action orientation of the enquiry group gave significant emphasis to the task element of coaching. The tasks that headteachers alluded to when speaking of coaching were many and varied. However, some common themes for the focus of coaching approaches did emerge.

Performance management

All headteachers reported the use of a coaching approach in this context.

There emerged a general feeling that while coaching behaviours enhanced the quality of the performance management cycle in school, the very nature of the process that schools are required to implement may militate against the development of meaningful coaching partnerships. This may be wrapped up in perceptions of power and authority within schools, whereby those being coached see themselves not as learners but as employees being managed. The formalised link to pay was seen by headteachers as being unhelpful in this respect (but useful in others). This scenario finds resonance with Crane's (2002) study into leadership and performance management.

Pedagogical feedback

Observing lessons and giving feedback on performance was common practice in all the headteachers' workplaces. A number of techniques for completing this task were described ranging from OFSTED-style observations to more participative and collaborative approaches. Those headteachers who had moved furthest into the coaching style and moved beyond reporting back data from lesson observations and used feedback sessions to challenge and support colleagues to develop their classroom work:

I give feedback as soon as possible after the observation. It ends up being a dialogue. I give my impressions of what I saw and we spend time talking about why it happened.

The relationship between the partners in the process can be vital here. As Cushman (1998) points out:

When teachers regularly get honest, supportive feedback from *valued peers* [my emphasis] not only does their own practice benefit but student achievement goes up to.

Career development and leadership development

A majority of headteachers in the sample made efforts to work at a one-to-one level with teaching colleagues to assist in making career choices and in relation to key events such as interviews. Interestingly, however, the school and headteacher was often seen to be the ultimate beneficiary of this process.

When they apply for a job or get an interview I want them to be really well prepared for it ... It reflects on me and the school.

One of the headteachers suggested that he had used lengthy conversations about career develop to retain the services of a particularly valued colleague.

Some headteachers spent considerable time in a coaching capacity when developing the skills of colleagues (such as in subject leadership) and when inducting colleagues into new or revised posts. This coaching was sometimes extended over a long period of time.

When coaching was perceived to be successful by the headteachers I spoke to, they articulated some commonalities in the way they had approached the focus task:

- The partners in the coaching situation agreed success criteria early in the process. This success criteria was not always recorded but there was a sharing of what was to be achieved, by who and by what time.
- There was a significant level of alignment between the task at hand and the objectives of school as a whole or the learner's goals.

However, a strong message was that almost any task will do as a platform for coaching in schools. Because headteachers were opportunistic in their employment of coaching behaviours the actual task that provided the focus for their work was widely varied.

Key messages

The headteachers I interviewed had a tendency to engage themselves as coaches in their own schools, usually with a good deal of success. Coaching can be a potent tool for transforming schools. For maximum impact, however, schools would need to take a strategic view of coaching. The greatest impact seems likely to arise when school leaders:

- invest in the ecology of their school – ensure the growing conditions are right for effective coaching partnerships to flourish
- have developed a clear view of their competencies as coaches and added specific coaching skills to their professional armoury
- have the engendered trust and responsibility in the people being coached
- select those initially involved with some care
- are clear about the intended results and focus of coaching partnerships
- use coaching as a tool in the transformation process, aligned to the overall aims and values of the school

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Appendix 1: Gathering and making sense of the evidence

Selecting the participating headteachers

The 10 headteachers whose views are reflected in the previous pages were selected by serendipity. They are a collection of colleagues who have crossed my path personally and professionally in a variety of capacities in the past five years or so. On the face of it they may present a disparate group but they are linked by number of factors:

- they all expressed an interest in coaching as a leadership style
- they were all willing to give me up to two hours of their precious time
- OFSTED reports that they are doing a good job and their schools are successful

In addition, most, but not all, had been involved in LPSH.

The group was broadly balanced in terms of age, experience in post and gender. However, this arose by accident rather than by design. All participants were primary headteachers and although there is a bias towards the north east of England, the evidence take the views of teachers from across the country. Likewise, there was a bias towards speaking with headteachers of medium to large schools in challenging environments but the respondents were not exclusively from this group.

During the enquiry I also had the opportunity to speak with leaders in the business sector. My conversations with Steve Smith (Chief Executive of the Northgate Group) and Terry Hunten (Head of Human Resources, BASF, Teesside) were illuminating and helped to clarify some of the analysis I made. However, their evidence was not included in the enquiry.

Collecting the data

The data was collected via semi-structured interviews conducted mainly at the headteacher's school. Conversations were wide ranging and generally took about an hour, but on two occasions were significantly longer than this. During the interview I took notes, writing down themes and ideas that we explored but often writing quotations of headteachers' comments.

Each interview was based around at least one current and recent school improvement initiative that had been implemented in the school. Headteachers were asked initially to describe the events and their context and then lead into a more focused discussion of:

- who was involved
- how others were involved
- how those involved were selected
- how those involved were supported in completing tasks
- what adult learning took place
- how this learning was organised

At various points of the interview I would stop the conversation and recap the salient points to get affirmation that I had a clear understanding of the views being expressed.

On three occasions during the enquiry period I used beacon school funding to put on training sessions for headteachers and teachers from a number of schools. The materials I used in this training capacity were based on the emergent findings of the enquiry up to that point. This device enabled me to gather additional material on the quality of the evidence I possessed.

In addition, the enquiry benefited from a number of opportunities to share ongoing findings with groups of headteachers (Hartlepool Networked Learning Community and Ithaka Programme HT6) who did not contribute to the primary evidence base. This took the form of presenting findings and engaging in discussion. The focus of such discussions was whether the findings carried a resonance and authenticity for the members of these groups.