

You Can't Have a Coaching Culture Without a Structure

Attending to 10 key elements lets school leaders design stronger coaching programs.

Elena Aguilar

Management guru Peter Drucker is credited with saying that culture eats strategy for breakfast. But there's an additional truth: Strategy can create culture. An organizational culture must be envisioned, intentionally designed, and nourished. Without strategy, culture may never be born. Without structure, culture will be flimsy.

As an education consultant, I've met many school leaders who are committed to coaching but don't know how to build an effective structure on which a culture of coaching can be draped. As they express frustration about trying to implement coaching, I detect the absence of a *coaching program*, a lack of intentionality and strategy. It's like they are describing a human body that has no skeletal structure.

I know a school's coaching culture is flimsy when coaches say things like:

- "I want to coach, but I don't have time to meet with teachers."
- "I don't really know what I'm supposed to do as a coach."
- "Teachers won't meet with me."
- "I don't know whether my coaching makes any difference. Maybe I should go back to the classroom."

Likewise, I know a school lacks a coaching model when I hear administrators say things like, "How can I know whether coaching is helping a struggling teacher? I don't know whether it's worth the expense." Or "I need our coach to step in for a teacher out on leave and manage testing."

When I hear such comments, I respond, "How is coaching defined in your school or district? Who came up with that definition and how has it been communicated?" I'm usually met with a blank stare until a realization sinks in: Without a definition, we're hamstrung. The problem isn't that teachers don't want to meet with coaches; the problem is that teachers don't know why they need to meet with a coach—or what to expect. The problem isn't that a principal doesn't know whether coaching is worth the investment; the problem is that there's no agreement on what the school's coaches are supposed to do. The root of the problem is lack of structure for a coaching program.

Elements of the "Skeleton"

What constitutes the "skeleton" of a coaching program? What lets a healthy culture of coaching flourish in a school? When I consult with leaders committed to coaching, I focus on 10 key elements of a coaching program. Let's look at these elements, each an essential facet of the coaching structure, in depth.

1 Articulate a Definition and Vision

At the very least, a school needs a simple, memorable statement that defines coaching. Without this, coaching

endeavors will struggle. Imagine a marriage without an understanding about what its boundaries are, how it works, or its purpose. At its core, coaching is a relationship between two people for a particular purpose. Relationships thrive when each participant has a clear understanding of what they're doing together and why—and of the rules.

Here's how I define coaching: "Coaching is a form of professional development with a person who willingly engages in reflection and learning."

Let's unpack this. Coaching is *one* form of professional development that's ideally part of a robust approach to PD. It's a particularly effective form of PD because it's generally ongoing, job-embedded, and personalized by nature. But coaching is *not* a way to fix people. It's not something that's done to those who aren't meeting professional standards. Ideally, coaching is for the willing, and ideally, every educator would work with a coach throughout their career. A true learning organization encourages and commends those who seek out opportunities to grow and doesn't coerce or mandate anyone into coaching.

How a definition of coaching is articulated, and by whom, is key to building a culture of coaching. Without a process that's anchored in students' needs, and without recognizing organizational conditions, a definition's impact can be weak at best, problematic at worst. And

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the definition of coaching needs to be clearly communicated to teachers, site administrators, and (of course) coaches. A definition buried in a Google Doc does more damage than good.

Before crafting this definition, leaders may want to develop a vision statement for the program. Definitions often emerge from and feed visions. A vision statement articulates “what will be true” as a result of our efforts; it answers the question, “Why do we need a coaching program?”¹

Here’s an example of a vision for coaching: “Coaching supports teachers to improve their instructional practices, implement a new curriculum, develop trusting relationships with colleagues, refine their reflective capacities, build their emotional resilience, and improve student outcomes.”

2 Consider the Context

Coaching needs to fit into a broader plan for professional development. Districts or schools often use three structures as vehicles for teachers’ learning: Professional learning communities that use an inquiry cycle to examine problems of practice; whole-staff PD sessions facilitated by instructional leadership team members or consultants on topics relevant to all teachers; and individual coaching, through which a teacher focuses on refining two or three areas of professional practice.

Often, however, these three structures aren’t strategically aligned. There are too many initiatives and areas of focus, and what’s happening in the classroom doesn’t really change. Professional development programs need one person to oversee, coordinate, and lead them and to

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ensure alignment between different PD structures. A director of PD could, for example, guide teachers to set a goal with their coach that emerges from a district’s curriculum or instructional practice focus.

Individual coaching can’t be responsible for building *all* the skills and knowledge teachers need—as it’s often expected to. There’s just too much to learn. And if, for example, five teachers need to develop skill with engagement strategies, it makes sense to bring them together for learning rather than to have each one coached individually. When we can see where coaching lives as part of a broader plan for development, we can zero in on what coaching can and can’t do—and what learning needs to happen within other structures.

3 Choose a Coaching Model

The term *coaching model* refers to the broad parameters of how a coaching program works and what it focuses on. Naming the coaching model an organization will use is an act of messaging values and theoretical underpinnings. Coaching is a way to foster change in individual behavior, and different models emphasize different ways to prompt change. For instance, one district might use

an “instructional coaching” model—which promotes change by focusing on behavioral practices—and another a “cognitive coaching” model—which prompts change by focusing on thinking.

I practice and train educators in “transformational coaching.” This model is a holistic approach to leading change on an individual, team, and institutional level. Transformational coaching focuses on an educator’s *behaviors*, *beliefs*, and *ways of being*, and posits that transformation happens when the root causes of problems are revealed and addressed, root causes that often lie in our beliefs and ways of being. We can’t separate a teacher’s instructional practices, ability to build relationships with kids, or ability to design lessons from what he or she believes, because every action people take emerges from a belief. Transformational coaches use a systems-thinking approach; look closely at context, power, and identity; address and explore emotions; coach for changes in behavior; and facilitate reflection on beliefs.

When a coaching program’s designers name the coaching model they’ll use, they should also name the texts and authors who have

influenced their thinking. This helps communicate to everyone what the program will be about.

4 Set Program Goals

After determining a vision and definition of coaching and naming the model, leaders must determine the goals of a coaching program. Here are some sample goals from one school's coaching program:

- This year, 95 percent of participants will make at least one level of growth, in at least two areas, on their evaluation.

- This year, 95 percent of participants will report that coaching was a positive experience, that they trusted their coach, and that their coach helped them reflect on their beliefs and ways of being.

- This year, 95 percent of participants will indicate that coaching helped them build resilience in at least 6 of 12 habits. In turn, teacher responses to the annual wellness survey will improve.

- This year, 85 percent of effective teachers will be retained.

A good goal is SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. Beyond that, a good goal is motivating and inspiring. Programs without specific goals have a hard time demonstrating effectiveness. If you want to prove you're doing something good, set up the goal posts before you start playing.

5 Hire the Right Coaches

A good coach is an expert on adult learning. A coach guides adults who work in schools to examine their practice, reflect, and make changes—to learn. The complex skill set required to do all this surpasses expertise on any content area



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or subject matter. Many coaching programs fall short of their potential because coaches often aren't hired with the right criteria in mind. They aren't given training in coaching or don't have the 10,000 hours of practice needed to become a master at it. I've observed many coaches who knew their stuff—how to teach English language learners or how to incorporate technology—but had no idea how to help other adults understand that stuff.

If a good coach is at the center of an effective coaching program, who is that coach? What will they do? What must they know? These questions have implications for hiring, evaluation, and development. A coaching program's directors must name the skills and knowledge their coaches will need and determine which skills can be developed in someone and which must be evident at the time of hiring. It's critical to delineate and name this criteria.

I'd argue (endlessly) that social-emotional intelligence is the foundational skill set for coaches.

Coaches need to recognize and manage their own emotions, recognize and manage the emotions of others, and be able to build relationships across lines of difference. You can teach a coach to ask good questions or analyze data; it's really hard to teach a coach to manage his or her emotional triggers and not fly off the handle when a teacher says something provocative. It's hard to teach a coach to listen well if they are consumed by judgmental thoughts. When I hire coaches, I look for many criteria, but to start with, I look for indicators that they know themselves; have strategies to respond to strong emotions when they arise; and are reflective, humble, and eager to improve their own practice.

6 Build the Coaching Relationship

For coaching to be effective, the person being coached must feel psychologically safe. For a teacher to reflect on the aspects of his practice where he feels most uncertain, he *must* feel that his coach will suspend

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judgment, maintain unconditional positive regard for him, see his potential, and keep conversations in confidence. Above all, the coaching relationship must be characterized by deep trust—especially if coaching explores beliefs and ways of being.

For trust to be built, coaching must be kept separate from evaluation. Strict boundaries around confidentiality must be maintained. And when coaches are recruited, hired, and trained, rather than focusing on technical skills, we should focus on the personal dispositions that will most influence the coaching relationship. Dispositions are attitudes and ways of being; they are how you “show up.” I’ve identified six dispositions that enable a coach to develop a trusting relationship that leads to transformational change: compassion, curiosity, trust in the coaching process, humility and mutuality, appreciation, and a learner orientation.

Dispositions can be strengthened and cultivated, but they’re also hard to develop. It’s best to seek coaches who already demonstrate the essential characteristics to some extent.

7 Understand How Coaching Works

Here’s what happens in coaching: A

teacher recognizes aspects of her practice that she wants to improve and agrees to coaching. Her coach gets to know her—to understand her core values, sense of purpose as an educator, and experiences—and then the two determine a focus. The coach and teacher create goals—aligned to programmatic goals and perhaps to school or district goals—to work on together. (For example, “I will use three kinds of formative assessment every week to track student growth in standard ____.” Or “I will develop more positive relationships with my African American female students.”)

Once goals are established, the coach engages the teacher in such activities as planning lessons, practicing specific strategies, analyzing student work, and seeking out additional resources. Observations and conversations between coach and teacher are integrated into these activities, because *coaching happens in conversation*. This is why a coach needs refined skills in facilitating effective conversations, in listening, and in asking powerful questions. When conversation strategies are strong, a 15-minute coaching session can be transformative.

After perhaps 8 or 12 weeks, the coach guides the teacher to reflect

on what she’s learning and on her progress toward goals. This is an opportunity to recalibrate those goals, if necessary, reflect on the coaching process, and make any changes to that process.

8 Protect Confidential Communication

A breach in confidentiality can deal a death blow to a coaching relationship. Let’s start with the obvious: A coach must never speak to a teacher’s evaluator about the details of coaching work or the teacher’s performance.

The coach should try to outline the parameters of communication from day one. While a principal may want updates on the specifics of coaching, the coach can explain that for a teacher to feel safe to learn, strict confidentiality is required. To share the basics, create a Google Doc, accessible to the principal and the coachee, on which the time and date of coaching sessions and the broad area of practice discussed are logged. A coach should also proactively address communication with the teacher being coached, saying something like, “I will never speak to your supervisor about you or our work together unless you are present or included in the email.”

If a principal does ask, “How’s Mr. ____ doing?,” I usually give a lighthearted response like, “You know I can’t share any observations or opinions on Mr. ____! I encourage you to observe him and form your own opinions.”

Confidentiality should be observed on all fronts. If a coach talks to colleagues or other teachers about a client, that can also destroy the relationship.

9 Evaluate Your Efforts

Of all the elements discussed in this article, evaluation of coaches shows up as the weakest in districts I've worked in. I suspect some of this has to do with educators' general fear of evaluation, while some is because we don't know how to evaluate coaching. But both the coaching program and coaches need to be evaluated regularly, to see where to make programmatic adjustments that will enable you to meet goals.

In my work consulting and training coaches, I use three rubrics for evaluation: one for coaching programs, which allows me to assess the context in which a coach works; a second for coaching as a practice, the

counterpart to a rubric for teaching; and the third for coaching conversations, which focuses on a key slice of a coach's skill set. The data that emerges from using these rubrics can reveal strengths and obstacles in the coaching program, which helps leaders prioritize PD for coaches. (Note that evaluation can't be done well if you haven't articulated clear goals for your program.)

Coaching can also be evaluated on the basis of various outcomes, including a teacher's professional growth, well-being, and resilience, and students' performance. When I led a coaching program in the Oakland Unified School District, we measured improvement in teacher

performance, job satisfaction, retention, and attendance; in student reading and use of academic discourse; and in amount of office referrals and suspensions of black and Latino males. While the many variables made it challenging to draw a direct connection between coaching and improvements in these areas, we saw undeniable trends in the data that suggested the positive influence of coaching.

Evaluation allows you to tell your story and make the impact of coaching—on teachers, students, and culture—visible. Compiling data that proves the value—or ineffectiveness—of coaching can be challenging. The question of whether



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coaching is having an effect can seem subjective; some will question whether coaching can really be tied to measurable changes. But I know it can, and I've found organizational leaders appreciate the trends that can be uncovered and the narratives that can be crafted from evaluating coaching programs.

10 Establish Professional Development for Coaches

Coaches may be among the least professionally trained educators working in schools. They need no certificate or credential to coach, and rarely get PD on working with adult learners. Yet to realize their potential, coaches need training. Just as the classroom teacher has the greatest impact on a student's learning, the coach—and the coach's level of expertise—will have the greatest impact on a teacher's growth.

But training in what and by whom? Here's what I found in my work in Oakland: The coaches I hired needed training in coaching skills, including listening, facilitating conversations, managing their own judgments and emotions, planning for coaching conversations, and responding to the emotions of teachers. These coaches also delivered PD and facilitated team meetings, so they needed training on how to create and deliver powerful professional development sessions, manage group dynamics, and just show up as a humble, confident team leader.

Our coaches engaged in PD weekly. We learned about and practiced coaching skills and planned meetings and teacher professional development sessions. While I designed the scope and sequence of learning for coaches at the beginning



REFLECT & DISCUSS

Does your school have a written vision statement for coaching? If not, what would it be?

Social-emotional skills, Aguilar claims, are the top skills a coach needs. Do you agree? Thinking of great coaches you have worked with, what are the qualities that made them stand out?

Which of the 10 elements for coaching-program structure are most lacking in your school or district? How could you address these areas?

of the year, I left space to respond to needs that arose. We discovered a clear connection between this PD for coaches and the outcomes we saw in schools. For example, I knew that for coaches to have successful conversations with teachers about how they managed student behavior—and about the role of race, class, and gender in their responses to behavior—coaches needed training in having such conversations. They needed space to unpack their beliefs about the role identity plays in the classroom. After we provided such PD, we saw a reduction in office referrals and suspensions for African American and Latino boys.

Effective coaching programs have a scope and sequence for the coaches' professional development, one that

aligns to the program's goals, emerges from the criteria for coaches, and responds to coaches' needs. A master coach—someone who can model the skill set needed for working with adult learners—should design, implement, and monitor this plan.

Designing a Coaching Program

Besides planning for these 10 components, program designers must consider who needs to be involved in creating a coaching initiative and how the final product (the program itself) will be shared with stakeholders. Without careful thought about process, even a beautifully designed program attending to these 10 elements may fail.

It helps to stay anchored in the potential of coaching, to remember that good coaching supports educators in the myriad ways necessary so they can serve the social-emotional and academic needs of children. When we keep that potential in mind, we can amass the resources, capacities, and courage required to design effective coaching programs. **EL**

¹A mission statement can also answer this question, but a vision statement is critical. A mission statement is responsive to current and past realities, whereas vision statements are about the future, about what will be true. An organization can create both a mission statement and a vision statement.

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