

## WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

“I love this text. I think this text helps make coaching practicable.”

**Angela Becton**  
Consultant, Advanced Learning Consultant  
Kinston, NC

“It is a very interesting book that is very needed during this time. It provides a clear path for effective coaching.”

**Tanna H. Nicely**  
Executive Principal, Knox County Schools  
Blaine, TN

“I really liked this book and believe it would be a good tool for administrators who want to grow together or district teams to study how to improve their instructional coaching approach. This book is a good resource for administrators who want to improve their coaching techniques.”

**Courtney Miller**  
Founder, Inclusive Teachers Academy  
Covina, CA

“Matt Renwick is the principal we all wish we had and the one we all want to be. His ideas about walking alongside teachers to grow them in the same ways we want them to grow students are just-right advice. He brings the research on trust and collective efficacy to life through concrete ways to operationalize rituals and routines of observation, goal setting, and planning with teachers.”

**Samantha Bennett**  
Learning Design Specialist, Instructional Coach, and  
Education Consultant

“Matt Renwick makes a compelling case for deeper inquiry and more thoughtful engagement around teacher practice. Full of rich, compelling examples from Matt’s real-world experience, this book will help readers reconnect with their purpose as instructional leaders. Highly recommended.”

**Justin Baeder**  
Director of The Principal Center and  
*Author of Now We’re Talking!*

“Matt Renwick offers readers a rich, practical how-to book supported by current research. This book should be within easy arm’s reach of school administrators wishing to increase their skills of performing their major responsibility: increasing student learning.”

**Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston**

Professors Emeriti, California State University, Sacramento, and  
Co-Authors of *Cognitive Coaching*

“Matt Renwick reminds us of a key element of our shared professional leadership work: we can’t do it alone. He keeps us focused on the value of coaching tools and the pillars he references to keep instruction at the center of the work of educational leaders. This book draws on an extensive research base as well as Matt Renwick’s own professional experience to provide an accessible entry point for school leaders as they consider what it means to lead like a coach.”

**Jason Drysdale**

Assistant Superintendent, River East Transcona  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

“Research is clear: Principals can have a tremendous impact on student success by focusing on job #1: ensuring every student benefits from great teaching in every classroom. Drawing upon his vast experience as a successful leader, Matt Renwick provides compelling insights, practical tools, and real-life examples for how to effect real change in schools. *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.* is a must-read playbook for any principal seeking to improve student outcomes—not by forcing change from outside in, but rather by unleashing it from the inside out through trust, compassion, optimism, and an unrelenting focus on excellence.”

**Bryan Goodwin**

President & CEO, McREL International, and  
Author of *Building a Curious School*

“Renwick unpacks conversations by describing what he said in a coaching situation and then sharing his reasoning for why he chose the actions he took. This book is not just for people who are in the positional role of leader; it is for anyone who wants to develop their leadership capabilities.”

**Bena Kallick**

Co-Director, Institute for Habits of Mind, and  
Co-Author of *Students at the Center*)

“This is exactly the book educators need to build trust while navigating the tensions in today’s school systems. *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.* will provide you with strategies that humanize leadership and bring joy to the work. This is an excellent book to read with your school teams to build the leadership pipeline essential to sustaining organizational excellence and a positive culture.”

**Anthony Kim**

Founder and CEO, Education Elements, and  
Co-Author of *The NEW School Rules*

“An inspirational guide for school leaders, this text provokes discussion and reflection among leaders who see themselves as co-leaders in school communities. School vision becomes a reality when school leaders coach school faculties in a collaborative and collegial way in order to create a comprehensive and cohesive learning environment for students. An excellent book that is accessible to all principals.”

**Allyson Matczuk**

Early Literacy Consultant and Reading Recovery Trainer at Manitoba  
Education and Training

“*Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.* provides a framework that engenders trust and fortifies commitment to instructional excellence. Matt Renwick helps readers envision and rethink roles and routines. Most of all, his strategies, stories, and practical approach take the burden of trying to be an ‘expert of everything’ off of principals’ shoulders. If you want your school to be a place where teachers and students want to be, this book is for you!”

**Cris Tovani**

English teacher, literacy consultant, and Author of  
*Why Do I Have to Read This?*

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# Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.

## 5 Strategies for Supporting Teaching and Learning

**Matt Renwick**

**Foreword by Regie Routman**



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Printed in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Renwick, Matt, author.

Title: Leading like a C.O.A.C.H. : 5 strategies for supporting teaching and learning / Matt Renwick.

Other titles: Leading like a coach

Description: Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021045749 | ISBN 9781071840474 (paperback) | ISBN 9781071840467 (epub) | ISBN 9781071840450 (epub) | ISBN 9781071840443 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational leadership. | Educators—Professional relationships. | School management and organization.

Classification: LCC LB2806 .R384 2022 | DDC 371.2/011—dc23/eng/20211013

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021045749>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

22 23 24 25 26 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# FOREWORD



In his groundbreaking book, *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.*, principal Matt Renwick re-envisioned the roles of the principal as supportive guide, active listener, learner-teacher, and opportunity creator. With humility and deep knowledge, Matt provides the conditions, actions, demonstrations, and language that make it possible to create a trusting, collaborative, and responsive school culture. We accompany the author on his learning journey, get inside his thinking/changing/reflecting process, and come to rethink and expand our own thinking, expectations, and possibilities about literacy and leadership.

While coaching well is central to effective leadership, it is embracing a coaching stance in service to empowering teachers and learners that is at the heart of this book. School leaders are invited to rethink the primary role and identity of the principal as learning partner, not chief evaluator. It is the principal taking a nonjudgmental, compassionate view of coaching—noticing and appreciating what’s going well in the classroom and school *before* focusing on needs. It’s about seeing and commenting on teachers’ strengths and efforts, about treating them, their students, and their families with respect and compassion. It’s about giving agency and authority to teachers, learning from them, and creating opportunities for both teachers and students to take the lead and ably chart their own leadership and learning path.

The author states the main benefits of leading like a coach:

- ▶ Building trust and positive relationships with faculty members
- ▶ Having a more positive impact on teaching and learning
- ▶ Improving the quality of feedback to and from teachers
- ▶ Developing collaborative independence among the staff

Over the decade I’ve known Matt, as both an esteemed colleague and a friend, I’ve been impressed with his openness to new ways of thinking and willingness to reconsider his beliefs and practices—even when initially skeptical. He is a scholar and deep thinker. He pays

attention to research. He listens to other educators. Like all highly effective leaders and teachers, he is always questioning, reflecting, and learning. He demonstrates the power of literacy “as the common thread of all disciplines. Where schools make a conscious effort to develop better readers and writers, every subject area improves.”

Because I have come to know Matt well, I can assert that the changes he has made as a leader are profound and lasting. He came to learn that giving teachers and students opportunities to share their thinking *is* instructional time. He questioned and rethought some of his prior beliefs and practices. He let go of controlling each situation so that the power structure between principal and teachers—and teachers and students—became more equitable. He came to observe teachers with an open heart and mind and to learn from them. He states, “It was I who initially needed the coaching.”

It was through daily instructional walks that Matt began to question his prior assumptions about teaching and learning. Because these visits are affirming and supportive to teachers, they come to welcome these frequent visits, to treasure the immediate recognition they receive from their principal, and to be more open to constructive feedback. The coaching conversations that are integral to instructional walks are akin to a delicate dance, artfully choreographed where the person who takes the lead (initially the principal) is supportive and non-threatening—gently nudging, encouraging, demonstrating, and guiding so the partner (the teacher) is able to assume a more leading role. Throughout the entire book, there are many examples of coaching conversations, which include the actual language used by the principal and the teacher. Coaching conversations, which are at the heart of expert teaching and leading, can also serve as models for teacher conversations with peers and students.

What each chapter has in common is how to explicitly engage in the work of leading like a coach; guide teachers to think critically about their practices; use demonstrations and coaching conversations to help build teachers’ confidence, trust, and openness to suggestions; and promote self-directed teaching and learning for themselves and their students.

As a reader-leader, we explicitly learn how, when, and why to

- ▶ develop and sustain schoolwide trust as foundational to effective leadership and learning;
- ▶ give more agency and authority to teachers—and students;

- ▶ communicate feedback effectively—through paraphrasing, pausing, and posing questions;
- ▶ create more leadership opportunities for teachers;
- ▶ engage in ongoing, professional learning focused on foundations of literacy;
- ▶ establish shared beliefs, norms, and goals and apply promising literacy practices;
- ▶ create opportunities for schoolwide improvement across the curriculum;
- ▶ establish excellent, accessible-to-all classroom libraries with and by students;
- ▶ see obstacles as opportunities; and
- ▶ reflect on the results of our actions and behaviors.

Ultimately, the main purpose of instructional walks and each of the instructional frameworks detailed in *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H* is to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness and enjoyment; build an equitable, schoolwide culture of high achievement, trust, and ongoing collaboration; and foster leadership beyond the principal. Matt reminds us, “The goal of *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H* is nurturing self-directed leaders and learners among your staff: developing a school culture that can sustain itself beyond one’s tenure.” With that important goal in mind, Matt continues to lead by example: highlighting strengths of his capable staff, listening more and advising less, and seeking to ensure teachers drive the important conversations about teaching and learning. In *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H*, Matt has gifted us with frameworks of possibilities for transformational leadership.

—Regie Routman, October 2021

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I would like to say thanks to the following people:

To Jodi, Finn, and Violet for their patience and their unconditional love.

To my parents and the rest of my family for their encouragement and support of my work.

To the Mineral Point Unified School District teachers, staff, students, and families for allowing me to document and celebrate all the positive aspects of our learning community.

To Regie Routman for her collegiality, her friendship, and her generosity with her time and talents.

To the CESA 3 team and all the area school leaders for partnering with me in this professional learning.

To Jamie Ciconetti and Rita Platt for their initial feedback on the manuscript.

To Kelly Jones and Ron Lott for providing feedback for the book along with their guidance in all things on instructional coaching.

To Mary Beth Nicklaus, Matt Cormier, Jason Drysdale, Arlis Folkerts, Allyson Matczuk, and Mario Beauchamp for their willingness to share their professional stories with me.

To Ariel Curry, Desirée Bartlett, and the rest of the Corwin team for their smart insights and their consistent encouragement to make this book the best it can be.

## PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

*Angela Becton*  
Advanced Learning Consultant  
Kinston, NC



*Ronda Gray*  
Clinical Associate Professor  
Department of Teacher Education  
University of Illinois at Springfield  
Decatur, IL

*Chanel Johnson*  
Science Specialist  
Atlanta, GA

*Courtney Miller*  
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Matt Renwick** is an elementary school principal in Mineral Point, Wisconsin. Previously he served as an assistant principal, athletic director, coach, and classroom teacher in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin. He was recognized as a Friend of Literacy by the Wisconsin State Reading Association in 2020 and received the Kohl Leadership Award in 2021. His other works include *5 Myths About Classroom Technology: How do we integrate*

*digital tools to truly enhance learning?* (2016) and *Digital Portfolios in the Classroom: Showcasing and Assessing Student Work* (2017). You can find Matt on Twitter @ReadyExample and at [mattrenwick.com](http://mattrenwick.com).

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# WHY SHOULD I LEAD LIKE A COACH?

*Identity is the mental model each of us constructs of who we are as a unique self. This is an important concept because identity informs decisions and behaviors. The most sustainable way to change behaviors is to change identity.*

—Costa et al. (2016, p. 25)

In my first year as a principal in Mineral Point, Wisconsin, I made it a point to be visible in classrooms by scheduling daily visits. The main purpose was to be present.

In one fourth-grade classroom, students were writing independently or conferring with the teacher or a classmate to get feedback about their draft so far. I stopped by one student, his eyes gazing forward, seemingly lost in thought. Assuming he was considering what to write next, I asked, “What are you writing about?” He explained his topic. Then I asked, “And who are you writing for?”

The classroom teacher was close by and overheard my questions. It resonated with her, as she brought it up later during a conversation. “You know, your questions reminded me that kids need an audience for their writing. I realized they did not have one for that task.”

I was not sure what to say. My intention had not been to critique. I was simply going off my own philosophy—that a writer should have both a purpose and an audience. I responded with a humble “Well, I am glad I was helpful,” and went on my way.

Any positive impact on teaching and learning need not be accidental. Nor should we only be present in classrooms for the sake of accountability. Let’s instead lead with intention and with the confidence that we can make a positive difference. If we believe in our potential and know it to be true, we start to live it out as if it is our current reality.

*If we believe in our potential and know it to be true, we start to live it out as if it is our current reality.*

Leaders can develop this self-confidence by adopting as default a curious, purposeful, and supportive stance when observing instruction. So where to begin? Before we can take our first step forward, we need to reimagine our position beyond “administrator,” “dean,” “principal,” or “specialist” in our schools and embrace the idea of *leading like a coach*. This chapter begins this journey for leaders: describing the specific benefits and how to embrace a coaching stance as a primary identity.

## BENEFITS OF LEADING LIKE A COACH

*Leading like a coach is not just a preferred approach; it can be the primary way we conduct ourselves, an identity we adopt in all classrooms to support everyone’s journey toward renewal.*

One of our most important roles as leaders is hiring great teachers. Yet if that were all it took to lead excellent schools, our educational challenges would be resolved. Thankfully, we are in positions to better support instructional improvement if we can rethink our roles.

Continuous improvement is the default position in successful organizations. There are conditions that once in place can cultivate this healthy growth, including trust, focus, and curiosity. “Best practices” and other dualistic ways of seeing our work become outdated. Leadership starts to be perceived as a concept that anyone can adopt versus a position.

Therefore, leading like a coach is not just a preferred approach; it can be the primary way we conduct ourselves, an identity we adopt in all classrooms to support everyone’s journey toward renewal. Consider the next four reasons for expanding our role in this way.

## BENEFITS OF LEADING LIKE A COACH

1. You will build trust and positive relationships with faculty members.
2. You will have a more positive impact on teaching and learning.
3. You will improve the quality of feedback between yourself and your teachers.
4. You will help develop collaborative independence among your staff.

### YOU WILL BUILD TRUST AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FACULTY MEMBERS

Trust and relationships are a prerequisite for schoolwide improvement. Taking a coaching stance as a leader can foster trust and build relationships while engaging in instructional improvement.

Dr. Jenny Edwards, who wrote a chapter in Costa et al.'s (2016) *Cognitive Coaching*, found that teachers who were supervised by administrators trained in instructional coaching reported feeling more supported than from leaders' classroom walkthroughs. These teachers indicated that, because of their administrators' coaching stance, they were better able to reflect on their practice and gain insights. Their trust in administration also increased, evident by their improved willingness to share ideas with building principals (Costa et al., 2016, p. 279).

When we take a less evaluative stance with many of our classroom visits and are clear about our intentions, teachers can relax more. They know what to expect. Expectations for success lead to a cycle of effective performance, important for *Creating Confidence Through Trust* (a topic we examine more closely in Chapter 3).

### YOU WILL HAVE A MORE POSITIVE IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

A prevailing myth is that an administrator or formal leader cannot engage in coaching conversations or lead any type of instructional coaching in general. This is rationalized by those who believe that if someone is your supervisor, they also cannot coach you.

Studies have shown this to be inaccurate. Again, research curated by Dr. Jenny Edwards describes the positive impact a leader can have

when taking a coaching stance, for teachers and for a leader's own practice (Costa et al., 2016):

- ▶ Administrators who were trained as coaches were asked to reflect on an experience in which they used their coaching skills as part of their positions. They believed they were able to apply these coaching skills successfully. Participating administrators also found they grew in their own practice and in their appreciation of instructional coaching in general (p. 252).
- ▶ In a study examining the effects of teachers coached by an administrator, by another teacher, or by a specialist, the results indicated that *there was no difference in who the teacher was coached by*—professional growth was a result regardless (p. 255; my emphasis).

To be clear, having an instructional coach in one's school is preferred. They can often engage in more confidential conversations with faculty members about their practice. Regardless of roles, what is critical for professional growth to occur is clarity and specificity around common beliefs and practices for classrooms. This is discussed more in Chapter 4, *Organize Around a Priority*.

## WISDOM FROM THE FIELD: ALL LEADERS CAN BE COACHES



Education is not the only profession where leading like a coach is recommended. In an article for *Harvard Business Review*, Ibarra and Scoular (2019) argue that a direct approach to business leadership is no longer effective in a highly complex world. “Rapid, constant, and disruptive change is now the norm, and what succeeded in the past is no longer a guide to what will succeed in the future. Twenty-first century managers simply don’t (and can’t!) have all the right answers.” They recommend leaders “give support and guidance rather than instructions” to be a more effective entrepreneur and supervisor.

Knowing that leadership in multiple professions is going through similar changes, does this information help validate your interest in leading more like a coach? Jot down your ideas and thoughts in your journal.

## YOU WILL IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF FEEDBACK BETWEEN YOURSELF AND YOUR TEACHERS

In working with other school leaders shifting toward a coaching stance, one of the primary reasons they cite for not visiting classrooms regularly is being unsure about what they should be doing or how they might engage with teachers about their practice. They are concerned about saying too much and offending someone, or they lack confidence about what to say at all. Subsequently, regular classroom visits often consist of either formal observations where stakes are high, or simple check-ins to say “Good morning” to the students and staff.

What teachers crave and leaders want is to facilitate feedback that moves instruction forward. In fact, “people need feedback so desperately that, in the absence of actual feedback, they will invent it” (Costa et al., 2016, p. 53). Yet the opportunity for professional learning can be inhibited by formal observations.

For example, Grissom and Loeb (2017) found that due to the high stakes of teacher evaluations, school leaders tend to give teachers higher evaluation ratings than they would necessarily merit. This is potentially due to teacher evaluation results being associated with recommendations for renewal or nonrenewal. Conversely, the researchers found leaders were more honest about a teacher’s performance when the situation was low stakes. This study supports the development of a coaching context—by being clear about our intentions when adopting a formative stance to create a safe space for professional learning.

When the stakes are low and leaders become more curious instead of critical about instruction, professional learning flourishes. Khachatryan (2015) analyzed feedback delivered from a principal to multiple teachers in one school. Her findings revealed that feedback that focused more on process was correlated with an increase in teachers’ desire for professional growth. Conversely, more judgmental feedback (a common element of formal observations) was correlated with teachers becoming ambivalent or even resistant to these interactions.

In other words, when a leader both *affirms promising practices* and *effectively communicates feedback* about how to continue to grow (later addressed in Chapters 5 and 6), teaching improves. These practices are at the heart of leading like a coach and are embedded within the instructional walk process.



## SPECIAL NOTE: WHY ALL THE LITERACY EXAMPLES?

This book will provide several real-life examples from classrooms that illustrate what leading like a coach looks like. Most examples take place within a literacy context. What about mathematics, science, social studies, or other important disciplines? Here are a few reasons.

- *My school's priority has been literacy:* Developing readers, writers, communicators, and thinkers has been the focus in the schools I have had the privilege of leading. Our assessment results have supported this direction. This information is to simply acknowledge the limits in the examples you will read here.
- *Your school's priority should probably be literacy, too:* I avoided stating “should” throughout this text, except here. However you look at it, literacy is in need of improvement in our schools. As one piece of evidence, the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress scores revealed that the majority of states had lower achievement results in eighth-grade reading when compared with 2017 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).
- *Literacy is the common thread of all disciplines:* When schools make a conscious effort to develop better readers and writers, every subject area benefits. Likewise, students' literacy skills improve when authentically integrated with other disciplines. The content is typically high-interest and provides background knowledge for students to better engage in their learning.

If you believe literacy should not be a focus of your school improvement work because you have achieved sustainable success, congratulations! I would love to profile your journey toward excellence; contact me at [mattrenwick.com](http://mattrenwick.com) or on Twitter at @ReadByExample. Thankfully, leading like a coach is not exclusive to one discipline because it is about *improving instructional practices*. You are encouraged to explore other areas for improvement. The strategies described here are applicable to any priority.

## YOU WILL HELP DEVELOP COLLABORATIVE INDEPENDENCE AMONG YOUR STAFF

The word *coach* comes from the Hungarian concept of a horse-drawn coach that takes a person from one place to another (Costa et al., 2016, p. 19). The person being coached, the client, has their “hands on the reins” and is driving the agenda for the work.

When we adopt a coaching stance in our interactions with teachers, we are in service to a larger purpose instead of an outside or personal agenda. This process of examining one's own practice with a

partner, such as collecting and analyzing student learning results to understand the impact of instruction and make changes, can be our default stance.

Yet improvement in isolation does not lead to collective excellence. We need networks and structures for mutual support, so all educators have access to effective approaches. This can be described as “both independent and interdependent” (Costa et al., 2016) or “collaborative independence” (Johnston et al., 2020). Collaborative independence means directing one’s own teaching and learning within a broader community of professionals that cultivates a safe environment for innovation and risk-taking.

Leading like a coach can foster collaborative independence among faculty. Because of the reciprocal nature of coaching, in which the coach learns as much as the person being coached, knowledge tends to spread more rapidly. For example, a leader may share what they learned in one classroom with another teacher. They can talk about someone else’s practice with a sense of reverence and admiration, instead of trying to offer advice about best practice. The possibility of professional collaboration increases as effective teaching practices start to permeate throughout the school.

Developing collaborative independence ultimately enhances the culture, where professional inquiry and growth become acceptable and eventually even expected. Questions about practice become an indicator of strength instead of a sign of weakness. Teachers become the leaders that they were meant to be and the learners they already are.

*The possibility of professional collaboration increases as effective teaching practices start to permeate throughout the school.*

## EXPAND ON YOUR CURRENT IDENTITIES

If you listed all your duties and roles as a leader, it would be quite long. Supervisor, counselor, student advocate, and parent resource come to my mind right away. When you go home, you likely have multiple roles there as well—for example, parent, caretaker, spouse, relative, neighbor, or friend. Our multiple identities describe unique roles within the different worlds we inhabit.

Related, we readily shift between one identity and another. For example, when I leave my office after a post-observation conference

with a teacher to help monitor lunch, I am flexible in my capacity to serve the needs of different situations.

So to adopt the stance of a coach as part of our larger identity as leader is attainable. Likely some faculty members in your school have already accomplished this. For example, instructional coaches and staff developers take on multiple identities while working with teachers. Lipton and Wellman (2007) make this distinction in describing three stances instructional coaches take:

1. Coaching (teacher is the primary source of information and analysis)
2. Collaborating (specialist and teacher co-develop ideas and co-analyze situations, work products, and other data, once they have clarified the problem)
3. Consulting (specialist supplies information, identifies and analyzes gaps, suggests solutions, thinks aloud about cause-and-effect relationships, and makes connections to principles of practice)

So too can school leaders move beyond the notion that their role begins and ends with managing school operations and leading instructional improvement from a distance. We can expand our leadership role and adopt a coaching stance as the situation warrants.

## ACTIVITY 1.1

### EXPAND ON YOUR CURRENT IDENTITIES

To practice embracing multiple roles within one position, break down one area of your life by its different identities and list the duties and actions. The purpose is to examine (and appreciate) the complexity of our position as leaders, as well as to consider what is possible. Here is my example from my life at home:

#### Father

- Take care of my kids and keep them safe
- Ensure they are keeping up with school tasks
- Guide them to become independent

### Husband

- Love and care for my wife
- Share the household duties
- Discuss family goals and how to achieve them, i.e., budget

### Son and Sibling

- Check in with family members regularly
- Coordinate gatherings with parents, siblings, and relatives
- Acknowledge birthdays and special days/events

I admit that I do not meet each commitment with 100% success all the time. For example, I am notorious for not checking in over the phone. But I am aware of it, I believe I can improve in this area, and so I included this aspect of being a son and a sibling. Now I am actively working on it.

After reading this example, consider where you might begin to examine your own role as a school leader. How could you start to adopt an identity as a coach? Jot down some ideas in your journal. List at least three responsibilities a coach might fulfill.

## SHIFTING TOWARD A COACHING STANCE

Our professional days feel full. Sometimes we barely have time to complete our annual observations as part of our educator evaluation systems, let alone get into classrooms for more informal visits. Time scarcity is a reality that deserves to be acknowledged.

One example: a principal I mentored was overseeing two schools. She had ample experience as a teacher prior to this position, which helped with immediate respect from the faculty. She had walked the walk in their eyes.

However, leading two buildings is challenging for anyone. During a tour of one of her schools, we found space in the library to chat. Setting our bags and coats down on a table, she announced, “Welcome to my office.” While I appreciated being surrounded by books, I expressed surprise that she did not have a space dedicated to her work.

“How do you manage student discipline, or facilitate conversations that require privacy?” I asked. She pointed to a small office space nearby. “I am letting the reading interventionist use what was formally the principal’s office; she didn’t have anywhere to teach. I can use that space if needed.” I felt reluctant to encourage her to start

engaging in coaching conversations with so much on her plate and no place to call home.

The ideas and recommendations offered here are not designed to add to one's day, but rather to rethink what our days might become. Not to throw out what we currently have, but to revisit our current perspective and adjust the lenses, like a visit to the optometrist. The next comparisons describe these distinctions as we shift toward a coaching stance.

## CO-DEVELOPING A VISION FOR SUCCESS (VS. FORMING A GOAL)

Leading like a coach involves co-creating goals, beliefs, and values that serve as steppingstones toward a larger vision. Any preferred outcomes, such as improved results from a traditional assessment, can also incorporate ways of knowing whether students saw themselves as successful. In addition, teachers and students would also be able to self-monitor their growth toward personalized goals within that vision.

The authors of *Cognitive Coaching* ask leaders to “develop a vision with your school staff and community—a vision that inspires the staff toward an important aim” (Costa et al., 2016, p. 311). This vision extends everyone's perspective beyond only proximal goals to “the future into which teachers, students, and parents gaze” and with the belief that “there is always more distance to travel” (Costa et al., 2016, p. 311).

As an example, I worked with teachers to develop a portfolio assessment process for English learners. It would be an alternative tool to the standardized exam students had to take yearly. We recognized that we were not only developing this process to determine if English learners were proficient and could graduate out of their support services. The larger purpose was to create a more culturally responsive system that better honored their language and background. Equity was the vision; a better assessment system was the goal.

This is not typical. Usually, only expected results are developed as part of an evaluation process (sometimes referred to as a “school learning objective,” or SLO). Goals are important. But without context, inspiration, or a clear plan for success, they ring hollow.

For instance, in my first year as a head principal, we set a goal of a 10% increase in our students' writing scores from fall to spring. Yet we did not examine more deeply *why* we wanted to increase writing scores, or whether the results really meant our students had learned. For example, would more students see themselves as writers than before?

The goal was technical and lacked a vision for the broader purpose of our organization.

When we adopt a coaching stance, we maintain a focus on the larger purpose while also moving toward indicators of success. And if we are not satisfied with the results, then a faculty responds together to the current reality and notes it as part of our story toward success instead of blaming others or ourselves. In my experience, coaches who help a group envision what they genuinely want to achieve, on the field or in classrooms, have been able to foster greater purpose with their efforts that transcends only results.

*Leading like a coach involves co-creating goals, beliefs, and values that serve as steppingstones toward a larger vision.*

## EMBRACING CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES (VS. IDENTIFYING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT)

When leading like a coach, we acknowledge any shortcomings within the *broader understanding of an organization's strengths, challenges, and possibilities*. Leaders as coaches start by celebrating what has been going well and why we believe that to be true, as well as what we have accomplished to reach a certain point. Every school has something to be proud of. By surfacing the stories and artifacts of our successes, we create a collective mindset that we as educators have a positive impact on our students. Obstacles become opportunities.

Yet leaders cannot simply reframe how people perceive situations. It also requires assessment and reflection. As Costa et al. (2016) note in *Cognitive Coaching*, “smart groups see encounters as learning opportunities. They use both formal and informal means of assessing what is working and what needs refinement. Reflection is the key to growth” (p. 314).

Schools determine a goal based on an area for improvement. For example, reading proficiency levels between students with and without disabilities may be a focus. This makes sense. The problem is not in improving in an area where we could grow, but that we too often approach it with a deficit mindset. When leaders state “Our students with special needs are not proficient readers,” staff may hear “We are not effective reading teachers of students with special needs,” or “Our students are not effective learners.” People start to believe they are lacking or incapable. Again, we perpetuate the “schools need to be fixed” mindset when we position ourselves in this way.

Perceiving our challenges with an appreciative lens reinforces the vision and offers a positive pathway toward success. Any object of our

By surfacing the stories and artifacts of our successes, we create a collective mindset that we as educators have a positive impact on our students. Obstacles become opportunities.

attention, such as assessment results, is the same regardless of how we view them. Why not view them as opportunities for growth?

## ENGAGING IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (VS. DELIVERING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT)

By adopting a coaching stance, we engage in professional learning. A group of leaders, including teachers, can reach consensus on next steps for professional improvement.

This learning is not just for faculty. As a leader, I find that I learn as much as anyone when acting as a coach.

It is impossible for me to know all the inner workings of instruction at each grade level and within each department—a primary reason I engage in instructional walks. By becoming curious about the teaching and learning happening in our classrooms, I can become more knowledgeable about the practices we currently employ while at the same time supporting implementation of new ideas.

One relevant learning experience for me was during a primary grade level's conversation around literacy skills. We were discussing decoding words, and someone added "encoding." I asked, "Encoding . . . you mean, writing and speaking?" I had not served at this level during my teaching career. They confirmed. Seeing myself as part of the learning experience versus delivering it helped keep my ego in check and stay open to new ideas. It also reminded me that time for collaboration and professional conversation is essential for our success.

As leaders with unique vantage points and our assigned responsibilities, we have some authority in how the school proceeds with staff development. Data trends and patterns can inform our decisions. Yet our positions alone do not ensure increased understanding. For example, have we broadened our perspective by gathering insights from the classroom experience, talking with teachers and students about their learning?

Professional learning plans are an opportunity for shared engagement. Reconsider whether it be "administered" to someone else, as if we are inoculating a school against future failure. It is disappointing to hear teachers share how infrequently their leaders visit during instruction. Leading from a distance is like teaching a science unit on water systems but never having the students touch water. We cannot fully understand anything unless we experience it firsthand and with the point of view of others involved.

## ACTIVITY 1.2

### EXAMINE POSSIBILITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL RENEWAL

This section described three shifts that leaders can make to lead more like a coach. See Table 1.1 for a visual summary.

**Table 1.1** Side-by-Side Comparison of Leading Like a Coach with Traditional School Leadership

Leading Like a Coach	Traditional School Leadership
Co-Developing a Vision for Success	Forming a Goal
Embracing Challenges as Opportunities	Identifying Areas for Improvement
Engaging in Professional Learning	Delivering Professional Development
<i>What else would you add?</i>	

What other areas within your role might have potential for a shift, to leading like a coach? Continue adding to this table on your own in your journal. This shift is mostly mental and largely involves changing how we think and talk about it.

A good place to start is to update your original job description. For example, instead of “exercise fiscal responsibility” when it comes to budgeting duties, we can reimagine this as “prioritize and invest in sound educational resources.” This is a start, and you see where it is going: rethinking our current responsibilities, still honoring some semblance of the original duty, but broadening what is possible in our positions.

## NEW WAYS OF TEACHING, LEADING, AND BEING

In my current school, students lead building tours for guests. I provide some initial training, with them following me during a tour and observing the process.



The students are so good at guiding our guests. During the tours, they can remember aspects of former classrooms as if they were there yesterday. “And in this corner of the preschool room, it used to be the ice-skating rink and the ice was wax paper.” Teachers feel affirmed and guests are impressed. These are perspectives of our school that I do not have, that only students and their teachers can recall and talk about with clarity.

Part of releasing the responsibility of school tours to students is to have someone fill in when I am absent. But another reason resides in the purpose for education: to prepare our students for an unknown future and a changing world, to provide them with the opportunities to show what they know independently. Visitors see firsthand our students’ knowledge and skills. If they make a mistake, it is an opportunity for learning.

In everything we do, we engage in a process that could lead to promising outcomes and whole new identities. And just as the teachers can become more independent and interdependent by leading like a coach, so too can students through our actions and influence.

The primary identity for leaders in this resource, as a coach, becomes more evident in the next chapter as we explore how to engage in new ways of leading through instructional walks in classrooms.



## Reflective Questions

Consider the following questions to promote reflection. You can respond to them in writing and/or in conversation with colleagues. (I will use the 3-2-1 summary protocol after each chapter.)

1. What are three key takeaways for you after reading this chapter?
2. Of the four specific benefits of leading like a coach, which two did you find most compelling? Why?
3. What one small step could you take today to start building your identity as a coach within your larger role as an instructional leader? How do you think this action might make a difference?