PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

# Examining the Impact of Leadership Coaching Designed for Public Educators: Does the Investment Enhance Teacher Engagement Levels and Their Ability to Lead Their Students?

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## ABSTRACT

As the leader of a school district, I wanted to study and focus on the impact that leadership coaching could have on educators. To focus on developing the leadership capacity of our teachers, not on enhancing their already strong knowledge of subject related content. I truly believed we could help teachers by offering coaching focused on developing their unique leadership skills and their understanding of leadership theory. The author Ryan Holiday's quote stood out to me, "Perfecting the personal regularly leads to success as a professional, but rarely the other way around" (2017). Unbeknownst to me, I would be conducting my re-

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2023, 10: 262 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v10.262

search during one of the most tumultuous times in the history of leadership and education. The COVID-19 pandemic was lurking right around the corner and would attack the morale of every profession. Exacting a heavy toll on educators' mental health and their engagement levels.

In 2019, I began my doctoral studies and left my role as superintendent to take a high school principal position at a neighboring district. Early on I focused on the work by Bass and Riggio on transformational leadership (2006; Bass & Avolio, 1994). I saw an immediate connection to the coaching that I wanted to provide my teachers. Bass and Avolio developed the Full Range Model of Leadership. This model is a continuum from transactional to transformational. Transactional strategies include consequences and rewards. The transformational components include idealized influence, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. Bass cited that transactional leadership is not inherently wrong. In fact, it is necessary. However, if a leader doesn't move past the transactional components, they are only seeking compliance, not developing leaders.

This theory resonated with me for one major reason. What type of leadership do most classrooms focus on? What if we shifted that paradigm? What if we coached our teachers to know themselves better? What if we helped them understand leadership theory and the importance of culture? Could personalized leadership coaching for educators lead to better outcomes for our students and our teachers? That was the thinking that guided my research.

I combined Bass's (2006) work with a few other sources to create a comprehensive framework for my study. Simon Sinek's book, *The Infinite Game* (2019) inspired me to educate our teachers on self-improvement having no finish line. Daniel Coyle's work, *The Culture Code* (2018) offered research that leaders who build psychological safety, create cooperation through shared vulnerability, and use stories to establish a shared purpose, have the highest rate of employee retention and career satisfaction. Finally, the work of Dr. Michael Gervais was impactful. Gervais stated, "How do we perform in an environment where mistakes are costly? By training the mind to live in the present, so you can deal with stress and help others" (2019). If this type of coaching is important for professional athletes performing in front of 80,000 fans, shouldn't leadership coaching be a critical component of performing in front of 30 students?

This research study was conducted in the Fall of 2021 at a rural district in Southeastern Ohio. The study was designed to determine how a leadership coaching program built on Bass's Full Range Model of Leadership impacted professional engagement levels (as determined by the Gallup Q12 Survey and teacher interviews) of teachers. This was designed as a mixed method study.

Our district was largely spared the initial COVID-19 wave in 2020. However, we were not as fortunate during the Fall of 2021 when this study commenced. We experienced high rates of student absences, teacher absences, and a severe lack of substitute teachers. To compound the matter, our superintendent took a personal leave of absence. I was appointed interim superintendent (a role I now currently hold on a fulltime basis). District morale was low. I viewed this as an opportune time to study the benefits of leadership coaching.

I built a 10-week Transformational Leadership coaching program built on the principles of The Full Range Model of Leadership (Bass, 2006), Infinite Game

Theory (Carse, 1986), and the key components of a strong culture (Coyle, 2018). Thirty high school teachers agreed to participate in the research study. The treatment group of seven teachers who received the coaching were selected through a stratified random sample (one from each content area). One student of each treatment group teacher was selected through a stratified random sample to participate in an interview at the conclusion of the coaching. All participating teachers completed the Gallup Q12 survey in September and again in December. The coaching sessions were led by a principal from another district with no employment history at our district. This was done to reduce bias. Coaching sessions 1 and 10 were conducted in person, while sessions 2–9 were conducted via Zoom. The coach conducted the pre- and post-coaching interviews with the treatment group of teachers. The student interviews were conducted by me. The results of the quantitative data were encouraging, while the qualitative data were inspiring.

The Gallup Organization analyzed the results of the surveys and provided summary data. Due to the proprietary nature of the Q12 Survey, I could not obtain access to the raw data. The control group of teachers' level of engagement dropped "significantly" according to Gallup (−0.28) from September to December (Table 1). The treatment group's level of engagement remained stable over the same timeframe (−0.05; Table 2). Gallup quantified that change as "not significant." The largest gain of either group, was the treatment group's response to Item 11, "Someone talks to me about my progress." That jumped (+0.69) from September to December, which Gallup deemed as "significant." An increase linked to the 10-week leadership coaching program.

For the qualitative data, codes were created to organize the treatment group's interview responses. The first code focused on transactional versus transformational language, the second centered on the three components

*Table 1*

**Changes in Control Group's Q12 Employee Engagement Surveys**

| Q12 Items | Table 1 | Post-Coaching– Control Group | ±Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Know what's expected | 4.56 | 4.11 | − 0.45 |
| Materials and equipment | 4.00 | 3.59 | − 0.41 |
| Opportunity to do best | 3.94 | 3.67 | − 0.27 |
| Recognition or praise | 3.59 | 3.53 | − 0.06 |
| Someone cares about me | 4.28 | 3.94 | − 0.34 |
| Encourages my development | 4.44 | 4.12 | − 0.32 |
| My opinions seem to count | 3.33 | 2.94 | − 0.39 |
| Purpose makes work matter | 3.78 | 3.39 | − 0.39 |
| Committed to quality | 4.00 | 4.17 | + 0.17 |
| I have a best friend at work | 3.78 | 3.89 | + 0.11 |
| Talks to me about progress | 4.17 | 3.82 | − 0.35 |
| Opportunities to learn/grow | 4.44 | 3.89 | − 0.55 |
| Average Score of 12 Answers | 4.03 | 3.75 | − 0.28 |

*Table 2*

*Changes in Treatment Group's Q12 Employee Engagement Surveys*

| Q12 Items | Pre-Coaching– Treatment Group | Post-Coaching– Treatment Group | ±Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Know what's expected | 4.29 | 4.00 | − 0.29 |
| Materials and equipment | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.0 |
| Opportunity to do best | 4.00 | 3.50 | − 0.50 |
| Recognition or praise | 3.71 | 3.83 | + 0.12 |
| Someone cares about me | 4.14 | 3.83 | − 0.31 |
| Encourages my development | 4.14 | 4.00 | − 0.14 |
| My opinions seem to count | 2.86 | 2.83 | − 0.03 |
| Purpose makes work matter | 3.86 | 3.50 | − 0.36 |
| Committed to quality | 4.43 | 4.50 | + 0.07 |
| I have a best friend at work | 3.71 | 3.80 | + 0.09 |
| Talks to me about progress | 3.14 | 3.83 | + 0.69 |
| Opportunities to learn/grow | 4.43 | 4.50 | + 0.07 |
| Average Score of 12 Answers | 3.89 | 3.84 | − 0.05 |

of a strong culture according to Coyle (2018), finally the responses were ran through a finite and infinite language code based on Sinek (2019) and Carse's (1986) work.[1]

The interview responses from the treatment group of teachers indicated that the Transformational Leadership Coaching Program was a positive experience. Treatment group members believed that the coaching program increased their level of professional engagement and increased their understanding of Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 2006). Their responses indicated the treatment group of teachers decreased their use of transactional language and significantly increased their use of transformational language.

Below are quotes from the treatment group prior to the transformational leadership coaching pro-

gram. When asked about the qualities of a strong classroom leader, Teacher A stated, "Demands the floor with their presence, with their demeanor." The word choice of "demand," is transactional. When presented with the word "coaching," Teacher B shared, "Coaching is not effective because of the barriers it creates." The term "barriers" indicates a lack of trust in the coaching process. Teacher C was asked to state what came to mind when they heard the word "leadership." Their response was, "Superintendent, principal." This is reflective of a top-down leadership mindset associated with Transactional Leadership Theory. Teacher D was asked about leadership training and their knowledge of the process. They stated, "I do not think of myself as a leader. Leaders are teachers who have been here longer." Teacher E was asked to state their thoughts on the term "coaching." They stated, "Not my favorite term. People don't like hearing it."

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1  For more detailed information on the coding or other factors related to this study, please contact the author.

Analysis of the post-treatment interviews details how the treatment group's language shifted over the course of the 10 coaching sessions. Teacher A stated a strong educational leader must be, "Empathetic, have a personality others can relate to. They must be compassionate to a variety of feelings. Every kid has their own set of problems." Teacher B was asked about their coaching experience. "There were times when it was exactly what I needed to hear. Times we needed to change our mindset." During the first interview, Teacher C thought of the administration as the leadership. After the coaching program, they stated, "By sharing the information (we learned), we were looked to as leaders. Not only as colleagues, but as someone looking out for them (other teachers)." Teacher E didn't like the term "coaching." After the 10 weeks of coaching Teacher E shared this in reference to their current engagement level, "Night and day. The (coaching) helped me to handle my personal issues too. It (the coaching) helped give me a whole new lease on life." Teacher F went into this not knowing much about leadership coaching. After the sessions, Teacher F stated, "When I started this, I saw myself as a leader for my students, not of my colleagues. We do have influence in how we model for others and how we respond."

Based on the data, there is initial evidence to suggest the Transformational Leadership Coaching Program positively impacted teacher engagement. The program provided a potential protective effect against engagement deterioration and increased their use of transformational language while decreasing their use of transactional language. The Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement survey data indicated a significant drop in the control group's mean engagement levels and no significant change to the treatment group's mean engagement levels. The student information indicated that students, with no coaching related to Transformational Leadership Theory, are engaged by teachers who exhibit transformational qualities. While the qualitative data is stronger than the quantitative evidence, this does suggest that there was a positive impact on the treatment group's level of professional engagement.

It is important to point out that a limitation regarding the study would center on the ability to replicate these results at other school districts. The study was dependent on the efforts of the researcher and coach. Social experiments are inherently difficult to replicate due to the nature of the treatment administered being dependent on the effectiveness of the specific coach(es). Not all coaches are going to bring the same leadership strengths to the table and that will impact the consistency of the program.

While that could be considered a weakness, this limitation could also be viewed as an opportunity for district leaders. The relationship between the coach and the educator is crucial to the growth process. Discerning district leaders should consider selecting a coach that fits with the personalities and interests of the educators that they will be coaching. The research across the board indicates that the relationship between a coach and those who they are coaching is an essential component to successful partnership. The fact that not every coaching program will be identical could also serve as an excellent reason to integrate leadership coaching within a school district.

Our school district is currently using the data from this study to support our expansion of coaching and leadership programs. We created an onboarding program for new teachers in their 1st–4th years. The primary focus is on leadership and mindset coaching. We also created a leadership coaching program for all athletic coaches. To take the pulse of our team, we administer our version of an engagement survey across the district. Anecdotally, our engagement numbers have increased over the course of the 22–23 school year.

Why should school districts invest in leadership coaching? Evidence from this study paints a compelling case for district superintendents to consider this potentially high leverage practice. If we look at other successful organizations, from corporations to professional sports teams, the majority of them make investments to support leadership and performance coaching to strengthen their organizations. Public education has historically been slow to adopt new methods for strengthening their professional talent. We are witnessing increasing teacher shortages across the United States and less students entering college teacher preparation programs. Investing in teachers as leaders from their first day on our campuses could lead to stronger educators who are in a better position to assist our students on their own leadership journeys. As Dr. Michael Gervais stated on the importance of personal growth, "Your responsibility is for you to be great so that you can be there for other people. It's like you are the pebble in the pond, and if you want to create great ripples, be a heavy pebble. Build something internally so that you can be there and create waves in the places you go" (2023). We must help our teachers build themselves into large pebbles, so they can create great ripples for our students. Leadership coaching is a means to building those large pebbles.

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