

Leadership Coaching: Coaching Competencies and Best Practices

ABSTRACT: Leadership coaching is now seen as a valuable tool to assist school leaders. Through a survey of school principals, this study identified specific coaching competencies used by leadership coaches that were perceived by principals to influence key best practices for schools. These best practices have in turn been correlated to increased student achievement in the literature. The findings have been incorporated into an instrument that can be used by coaches and clients to focus and refine their work together.

A new principal begins his 1st day in an elementary school. He recently graduated with his master's degree in school leadership, but his university administrative credential program did not adequately prepare him for the reality of this school. His school is mired in low achievement scores; many of the teachers are burned out; and he has just learned that the budget shortfall will force him to immediately cut several support positions. The principal wonders, *The teachers have academic coaches—why don't I have a coach to help me?*

This article discusses leadership coaching to help leaders such as the new principal. This study has broken down leadership coaching into specific competencies related to key best practices for successful school leadership. The need for leadership coaching is presented, followed by background information on coaching. Next, the theoretical underpinnings of leadership coaching are presented. Finally, the results of the study are shared, along with an instrument that leadership coaches and clients can use to assess and enhance the effectiveness of their coaching relationship.

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THE PROBLEM

Today's educational leaders face a myriad of challenges on a daily basis, often finding themselves in a reactive mode to fragmented information and complex issues. Increasing accountability, coupled with decreasing financial resources, has forced leaders to seek new solutions (Krajewski, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2009). With a hyperemphasis on test scores brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the job of leading a school is far different from that of a few short years ago (Bossi, 2007; Gardner, 2008; Gronn, 2003; Protheroe, 2008). New and experienced leaders face issues never before seen and need new types of support. A new president and secretary of education have brought further attention to school accountability. How do school leaders improve the achievement of each and every student while running extremely complex human organizations? Leadership coaching may hold the answer.

COACHING AS A SOLUTION

Although leadership coaching is a recent arrival to the educational arena, teacher mentoring and coaching have been relatively common in classrooms for a number of years. Indeed, Joyce and Showers's (1982) initial research on peer coaching between teachers took place some three decades ago.

Teacher mentors are often assigned to work with novice teachers to assist their entry into the profession. The hope is that experienced teachers will serve as both mentors and models, assisting beginning teachers to learn new strategies, as well as socializing them into the professional norms of the profession (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Since being introduced in the early 1980s, teacher mentoring has spread throughout the United States as one means to reduce the rate of attrition and support new teachers (Little, 1990). Research indicates that teacher mentoring has indeed had a positive effect on lowering the attrition rates of beginning teachers; however, the impact on their teaching practices is not clear (Feiman-Nemser, Parker, & Zeichner, 1993).

Classroom coaching is more directly related to teaching practice. There are different models and names for coaching in classrooms that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, *instructional coaching*, one of the overarching terms for *classroom coaching*, "provides intensive differentiated support to teachers so that they are able to implement proven

practices" (Knight, 2009, p. 30). The skills and activities of instructional coaches include excellent communication skills, assisting teachers in planning lessons and units, observation skills, modeling instructional practices, and engaging in ongoing reflective conversations with teachers (Knight, 2009). These same skills and activities or some variation may be found in virtually all classroom coaching models.

Cognitive coaching, a popular coaching model developed in 1984, has the mission to "produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for high performance both independently and as members of a community" (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 16). The Socratic-type questioning techniques that form the basis of cognitive coaching have been linked to increased teacher efficacy and thinking (Costa & Garmston, 2002) and increased test scores (Edwards, 2005).

A common model currently found in one form or another in all 50 states is literacy coaching (Toll, 2009), which exhibits many of the characteristics of instructional coaching. Literacy coaches focus on improving teaching in the areas of reading and language, thus are knowledgeable in specific teaching practices in those areas. The value of literacy coaching has been well supported in the literature (Joyce, Murphy, Showers, & Murphy, 1998; Knight, 2004). Research has also indicated the benefit of literacy coaching in terms of enhancing teaching practices (D. Brown, Reumann-Moore, Hugh, du Plessis, & Christman, 2006), shaping teacher behaviors linked to reflection and collaboration (Toll, 2005), increasing teacher collaboration (Symonds, 2003), and teacher professional development (National Staff Development Council, 2010).

Yet another model is content coaching, grounded in principles set forth by Resnick (1995) that all students can learn but that learning requires great effort, which brings about increased intelligence. Content coaching's central focus is on effective instruction as evidenced by student learning (Resnick & Hall, 2000). This model sits in contrast to the ability-based view of intelligence, which has influenced educational policy for decades (West, 2009).

Leadership coaching has been common in the business world for many years. In business, coaching has been a useful tool to enhance the performance of leaders and the productivity of organizations (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Coutu & Kauffman, 2009; Fielden, 2005; Nyman & Thach, 2009).

Leadership coaching is becoming more common in schools across the nation (Reeves, 2009). The websites of the three major school leadership organizations in the United States—the National Association of Elementary School Principals (naesp.org), the National Association of Secondary

School Principals (nassp.org), and the American Association of School Administrators (aasa.org)—all have references to leadership coaching within their websites.

There is limited research on leadership coaching, although it has been identified as a tool that can assist leaders (Kostin & Haeger, 2006; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008; Robertson, 2009; Silver, Lochmiller, Copland, & Tripps, 2009; Simkins, Coldwell, Caillau, Finlayson, & Morgan, 2006). New and experienced educational leaders are beginning to see that having a coach to support them may be beneficial in their work (C. J. Brown, Stroh, Fouts, & Baker, 2005; Ertmer et al., 2005; Knight, 2009; Lovely, 2004; Moore, 2009; Reeves & Ellison, 2009; Robertson, 2009; Steiner & Kowal, 2007). Developing strong instructional leaders is seen as the key to success in schools (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Fullan, 2001, 2006; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Reihl, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

If leadership coaching can bring about the use of educational leadership best practices that are correlated with increased achievement, then increased achievement should follow. Coaching to best practices is sometimes known as coaching to leading indicators (short-term observable behaviors) that in turn bring about trailing indicators (long-term measurable goals) (Jay, 2009; Mishook, Foley, Thompson, & Kubiak, 2008). Robertson (2008) summarized the conclusions of four studies of leadership coaching, noting the relationship to particular leading indicators: "Their collective perception is that a model of professional development involving leadership coaching . . . can successfully provide the essential components of professional development in which praxis and transformative practice are the desired outcomes" (p. 16).

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP COACHING?

Two recent studies of leadership coaching of school principals shed some light into the specifics of the coaching relationship. Wise (2010) found that principals receiving coaching spent approximately 1 to 2 hours twice a month in coaching sessions. The sessions almost always took place at the school site (94.5%) but were often complemented with e-mail or telephone conversations. The coaching sessions were carried out in an atmosphere of trust and openness and generally involved discussions around setting and monitoring goals related to practices that would bring about increased student achievement. Wise found that trust was considered an essential element, if not the most essential element,



Figure 1. A Model of Leadership Coaching

in successful coaching relationships. Coaches and principals also spent time debriefing recent situations and issues, and the coach tended to ask probing questions to push the principal to deeper reflection and understanding. The coaches were often "seasoned experts who have knowledge and experience in key areas" (p. 5).

In a study of 325 elementary principals, Hammack (2010) found that females, ethnic minorities, principals in their first few years at the position, and principals of schools with lower achievement scores received coaching in higher percentages than did their colleagues. Principals received coaching generally once or twice a month, and approximately 64% of the principals receiving coaching were assigned a coach and 36% requested a coach. Coaching was provided by employees of the same district (47.5%), private agencies (36.0%), or the local county office of education (16.5%).

Figure 1 represents the underlying assumption of how leadership coaching works in schools. A coach provides leadership coaching to the school leader, utilizing coaching competencies to establish the coaching relationship, communicate effectively, and facilitate learning and performance of the leader. The content of the coaching conversations is based on research-based best practices that are often found in schools with high student achievement. As the leader puts best practices into place in the school, the eventual result is increased student achievement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching objective of this research study was to identify and validate specific leadership coaching competencies that lead to best practices associated with increased student achievement. This study addressed the following research questions:

What are the specific competencies used by leadership coaches that help school principals improve their performance?

Which research-based best practices do leadership coaches focus on? To what degree are the selected competencies of leadership coaching related to best practices?

This study seeks to further the findings of a previous study undertaken by Wise (2008) to determine the competencies used by leadership coaches in their work with school leaders and the extent to which these competencies lead to particular best practices linked to improved performance.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF COACHING

In generic terms, the purpose of a coach is (1) to expand an individual's or group's capacity to obtain desired results and (2) to facilitate individual or organizational development (Hargrove, 2008). In educational coaching, the most important goal is bringing about successful teaching and leadership practices that will lead to enhanced student achievement; thus, coaching must necessarily focus on such practices (Knight, 2009; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Reeves, 2009; Reeves & Ellison, 2009; Robertson, 2008, 2009).

While there are many influences on coaching, some have had greater effect than others. Socratic questioning, developed in the height of ancient Greek civilization, forms a foundation for effective coaching. The key to distinguishing Socratic questioning from questioning per se is that Socratic questioning is systematic, disciplined, and deep and it usually focuses on foundational concepts, principles, theories, issues, or problems (Paul & Elder, 2006).

Vygotsky (1978) referred to a learner's zone of proximal development, defined as the area that is in close proximity to current knowledge. Thus, learning in this area should stretch the person but not be overly difficult or easy. Coaching often works to expand or "stretch" the client's knowledge and actions (Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007). Within the context of leadership coaching, the coach must take into consideration the learner's zone of proximal development when moving the client toward solutions to problems.

Argyris and Schon (1978), in their classic work on organizational learning, wrote about single-loop learning, in which the learner is often making small adjustments to basic rules or procedures to fix a problem or issue. This line of solution thinking offers a procedure or rule without taking into account any other factors; it is simply an action offering up a result based on past solutions.

The alternative is to question the governing variables themselves, and this is where coaching comes into play. This alternative, described by

Argyris and Schon (1978) and later expanded by Senge (1990) and others (Kahane, 2004; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, & Kleiner, 2000), is double-loop learning. Double-loop learning may then lead to a modification of the governing variables, thus in a new way of thinking and acting about a particular issue or issues.

A final alternative, triple-loop learning, enacts certain principles. While single- and double-loop learning require insight and patterns, triple-loop learning involves context. This requires a shift in point of view (Kahane, 2004). Triple-loop learning requires the learning to take a step back and analyze how past behavior and decisions have led to the current state of being. It allows decision making to be more purposeful, with an emphasis on creating a deeper understanding of why we choose to make the decisions we make (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

A complementary element associated with coaching has been the work of Bandura (1997) in the area of social learning theory. Bandura's theory included the concept of self-efficacy, the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner to attain certain goals (Ormrod, 2006). Bandura pointed to four sources affecting self-efficacy. One of the sources is social persuasion, which relates to encouragement or discouragement. A major role of the coach is to help clients find the strength within themselves to make sometimes-difficult decisions. The coach encourages the client to believe that she or he is capable of making the right decision or taking the correct action in a given situation.

These theories and their practical application provide coaching with its potential to make changes, not only in individuals, but also in organizations. The client—in this case, a school leader—receives coaching that helps her or him to be a more effective leader. It is up to the client to take the new learning and turn it into action within the school context.

COACHING COMPETENCIES

Coaching competencies are those abilities, behaviors, and skills that are utilized in the coach–client relationship to further established goals. As such, the coaching competencies are the “tools” utilized by coaches to attain goals. In leadership coaching, the goals are almost always related to individual or organizational performance. Boyatzis (2008) defined a competency

as a capability or ability. It is a set of related but different sets of behavior organized around an underlying construct, which we call the “intent.” . . . For example, listening to someone and asking him or her questions are several behaviors. (p. 6)

It is helpful to group the coaching competencies into categories to better understand the role they play in the coaching relationship. For this research study, the coaching competencies selected have been placed into three categories: establishing the coaching relationship, communicating effectively, and facilitating learning and performance. These categories were developed by the authors, but are based on previous research and drawn from categories defined by the International Coach Federation (2009), Reiss (2006), Ennis and colleagues (2008), and others (Boyatzis, 2008; Hall, Hollenbeck, & Otazo, 1999; Kilburg, 1996; Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008).

ESTABLISHING THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP

The first set of competencies deals with initiating the coaching relationship between the coach and the client in a positive and productive manner. In this set of coaching competencies, the role of the coach is to clarify expectations and roles, develop an environment of trust, and mutually establish with the client a coaching plan that is results based.

From the first moments of the very first meeting, the coach should clarify the expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the coach and the client. This is the time that the coach clarifies that the discussions that take place during sessions with the client are confidential. If the coach is contracted by the school district, it is especially important to clarify the confidential nature of the sessions so that the client understands that the coach will not share the details of the coaching conversations. Since school districts will often assign a coach to a principal without input from that principal, the coach may have to overcome initial resistance to the negative connotations associated with being assigned a coach. Coaches will often clarify that they will share only the times and dates that they have spent with clients (in their coaching time log), or at most, coaches may share topics that they are discussing related to district initiatives or the coaching contract with the district (Wise, 2010). The coaching literature is clear on the need to establish a relationship of trust within clear norms or agreements (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Boyatzis et al., 2006; Hargrove, 2008). One cannot enter into a coaching relationship and expect trust to occur immediately. It takes time and a safe environment to develop trust.

In the first meeting, the coach will often clarify that the coaching sessions are dedicated time; that is, the coach and the client are bound not to allow interruptions during the sessions, except in case of emergencies. A school principal will often have difficulty with the concept of dedicated time at the beginning of the relationship, but this will become less of an

issue as the relationship develops and the principal sees the value of dedicating time to the reflection, planning, and goal setting that take place in a typical coaching session. As Robertson (2008) pointed out, "a particular benefit . . . with coaching is that leaders become much more willing and able to focus on their educational leadership role" (p. 43).

The coach will often develop a coaching plan during the first few sessions. This plan includes the coach's and client's actions that will take place to attain specific goals. For example, school districts will often contract a coach to work with principals to increase student achievement in their schools. The coaching sessions then have the overarching focus of improving student learning. Some coaches utilize a template with overall coaching goals and will close a session by focusing on next steps or "homework" activities for the client or coach to accomplish before the next coaching session (Wise, 2010).

Getting the coaching relationship started in a positive and productive manner is important, but it is just as important that the coach and the client maintain high expectations for each other and keep commitments made. This means a constant checking on the relationship, which can simply be the coach asking at the end of each session, "How are we doing?" and opening the door to constructive critique.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

Communicating effectively is essential to effective coaching. The ability to listen attentively, to paraphrase when necessary, and to ask effective open-ended questions to the client are all skills that have been shown to enhance the coaching relationship (Costa & Garmston, 2002). Coaches must be effective listeners, using one of the seven habits from Stephen Covey (1989): to seek first with the intent to understand, then to be understood. Active listening means to pay attention to more than just the words being said by the client but also to the gestures, facial movements, and other body language that the client displays while talking. The active listener will ask clarifying questions, will often paraphrase briefly before asking a question, and sometimes will just nod her or his head in an affirmative manner while listening (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

Providing feedback in an effective manner is not always easy, especially when the feedback is not positive. However, honest feedback and the ability to push the client to new levels of understanding at key moments are both critical skills for the effective coach (Akoury & Walker, 2006; Hargrove, 2008; Robertson, 2008). A study by Wise (2010) indicated that coaches push clients to think and act in new ways. A typical comment in

that study came from a middle school principal: "My coach is an extremely effective listener and is especially good at asking probing questions that require me to question my practice, but in a way that allows me to grow professionally" (p. 4).

However, communicating effectively is more than active listening and asking good questions. The effective coach must also be able to provide feedback in clear and concise language that is seen as constructive criticism. Coaches must listen for underlying assumptions when a client speaks and acts, and they may need to bring some assumptions to the surface either through questioning or providing feedback. An example would be a principal who makes statements about students not having the background knowledge and skills to achieve academically. The coach's task in this case is to challenge the principal's perceived assumption that not all students can be successful (Wise & Jacobo, 2010).

FACILITATING LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

Facilitating learning and performance is a category of coaching competencies related to helping the client set goals, monitor them, manage change, and enhance overall performance. Goal setting and monitoring is a common approach used by leadership coaches (Reiss, 2006). Helping a client in a leadership position not only understand the change process but to manage it effectively in her or his organization is another crucial coaching competency (Akoury & Walker, 2006; Bossi, 2007; Ellison & Hayes, 2006).

In education, at least some performance goals should be related to critical best practices that function as leading indicators to the accomplishment of the long-term goal of increasing student achievement. A coach must work with a school principal to put into place behaviors and programs that have been shown to correlate to student achievement (Wise & Jacobo, 2010).

Also, within this category of competencies are specific goals related to new paradigms for student learning. Issues of equity and cultural diversity are often found to be at the core of existing educational paradigms, and these must be addressed for clients to see new possibilities (Lindsey, Martinez, & Lindsey, 2007). An effective coach must be able to inspire the client to believe and act in new ways to move the organization to new paradigms (Hargrove, 2008; Zander & Zander, 2002).

BEST PRACTICES

While coaching competencies may generally represent the tools of the coach, best practices represent the content of the coaching. Best practices

are defined as "techniques or methodologies that, through experience and research, have reliably led to a desired or optimum result" (<http://www.dictionary.com>). In K-12 education, best practices generally have the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement. The National Center for Educational Achievement (2009a) presented the practices of high-performing schools in each state and referred to them as "the practices of educators in schools that were consistently outperforming their peers" (§ 2). Coaches cannot merely coach to "increase achievement" but must focus on client behaviors and practices that will lead to increased student achievement. These best practices then are the leading indicators that coaches can utilize to provide clients with the means to arrive at the trailing indicators of increased student achievement.

In a previous study by Wise (2008), the best practices from the National Center for Educational Achievement (2009b) were presented to an expert panel, and the 16 that were considered as key best practices (through a rating system) were used in that study. This study utilized the 8 best practices that had the highest mean scores in that previous study.

In terms of best practices contributing to student achievement, Springboard Schools (2008) noted that schools that emphasize continual improvement and place a strong emphasis on professional development, focusing on the needs of students as determined by data analysis, are correlated with higher student achievement, even when students' socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds are diverse.

Most best practices selected for this study are related to these areas just mentioned. In a review of the literature, Steiner and Kowal (2007) found, "There is broad consensus in the literature that effective school leaders focus on tasks related to improving classroom instruction in addition to the time they spend on the managerial aspects of their jobs" (p. 1). Therefore, best practices should necessarily relate to ways in which teaching can be continually improved. Note that best practices may not be utilized exactly in the same way in different schools. However, for this study, an attempt was made to select the key best practices seen in a variety of high-performing schools.

METHOD

In related research preceding this study (Wise, 2008), a total of 154 coaching competencies were drawn from a broad base of the literature on coaching and reduced to 54 through content analysis and use of an expert group. In a similar manner, 16 best practices were determined. In that study, a survey with the 54 competencies and 16 best practices was sent

to 315 school principals receiving coaching throughout California, with a return of 94 usable surveys. The results of that study provided ratings of the perceived importance of each competency with regard to bringing about best practices.

The present study consists of a refined list of the coaching competencies and best practices that were developed in the earlier study. To further reduce the list of 54 competencies, a factor analysis was performed. Factor analysis can provide information about interdependencies that can be used to reduce the set of variables in a data set (Darlington, Weinberg, & Walberg, 1973). The factor analysis provided some clarity on the relationship between some of the competencies and assisted in reducing the number of competencies but not in all cases. Therefore, the results of the factor analysis and the mean for each competency from the previous study were used to further reduce the number of competencies as much as possible, with the goal of arriving at a minimal number of key coaching competencies. As a result of the reduction process, 20 coaching competencies were selected for further analysis. These competencies were distributed in three categories: establishing the coaching relationship (5 competencies), communicating effectively (6 competencies), and facilitating learning and performance (9 competencies).

The same procedures were used for the 16 best practices from the initial study, reducing the total to 9 key best practices. No categories were used for the best practices, as the final list did not lend itself to categorization.

While statistics played an important role in the reduction process, the judgment of the author, as a practicing coach with 7 years of experience in leadership coaching, was the determining factor in some cases. To increase the validity and reliability of the selection process, the author also consulted with two other leadership coaches, who served as an expert group for the final selection of variables.

The resulting 20 key coaching competencies and 9 key best practices (see Table 1) were placed on a survey instrument along with demographic information. The surveys were sent electronically to 172 school leaders in California who were randomly selected from a list of principals assumed to be receiving coaching throughout the state. Eight persons reported that they were not receiving coaching and thus could not complete the survey, leaving a total possible sample of 164. A total of 65 surveys were returned sufficiently complete to be used in analysis, for a return rate of 39.6%.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Statistical analysis of the results consisted of calculating the mean of each coaching competency, the standard deviation, and the correlation to

Table 1. Coaching Competencies and Best Practices Selected for the Study*Coaching competencies**For establishing the coaching relationship*

1. The coach clarifies expectations, roles and responsibilities of the coach and client.
2. The coach establishes a specific, results-oriented coaching plan.
3. The coach fosters a confidential, safe environment during our coaching sessions.
4. The coach keeps commitments she/he has made with me.
5. The coach holds high expectations for our coaching relationship and for me.

For communicating effectively

6. The coach listens attentively to everything that I say.
7. The coach paraphrases and summarizes key points/patterns in a condensed fashion.
8. The coach asks open-ended questions which help me clarify my thinking.
9. The coach delivers feedback in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner.
10. The coach provides feedback that is specific rather than general.
11. The coach knows when to push me and under what conditions.

For facilitating learning and performance

12. The coach helps me identify my goals and prioritize them.
13. The coach helps me set up a monitoring system for achieving my goals.
14. The coach helps me understand and manage the process of change.
15. The coach helps me brainstorm possibilities.
16. The coach is knowledgeable about best practices that enhance student learning.
17. The coach helps me to implement intervention programs that meet student needs.
18. The coach helps me articulate a vision of cultural responsiveness.
19. The coach helps me focus on the big picture.
20. The coach inspires me to believe in new possibilities.

Effect of coaching on best practices

1. There is an emphasis on continual improvement at the school.
2. Professional development for instructional improvement is ongoing.
3. Teachers differentiate instruction such that all students have access to the same rigorous curriculum.
4. School leaders review student achievement data regularly with each teacher.
5. School leaders hold teachers accountable to help their students reach clearly articulated goals.
6. School leaders recognize noteworthy efforts and accomplishments of students, staff, and community.
7. Teachers learn and use appropriate intervention techniques and skills.
8. Student intervention needs are met mainly within the regular classroom.
9. Teachers regularly meet in teams to discuss common curriculum and assessment.

best practices. Initial correlation analysis consisted of calculating the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient between each coaching competency and each best practice, providing 180 individual values. However, no significant correlation was found through this method. A second computation was undertaken that involved calculating the mean of each coaching competency with the overall mean of all best practices combined. The

justification for this second method was that it was unlikely that respondents perceived a relationship between a specific coaching competency and a specific best practice; however, individual coaching competencies may be perceived as influencing best practices in general.

The overall mean for each of the three categories of coaching competencies was calculated and then correlated to the overall mean of the best practices. In the same manner, each best practice was correlated against the overall mean of all coaching competencies combined.

Demographic information was summarized and calculated against the competencies and best practices. Preliminary analysis of the results necessitated some additional calculation, and an analysis of means was performed using a one-way analysis of variance against the overall means of the coaching competencies and best practices. Results are presented here in both tabular and narrative format.

PARTICIPANTS

Table 2 provides demographic information about the respondents, including gender, level (elementary, middle, or high school), and years they have received coaching. Of the 65 persons responding, 41 (63.1%) were females and 24 (36.9%) were males; 62 (95.4%) were school principals and

Table 2. Survey Respondents: Level, Gender, and Years Receiving Coaching, *n* (%)

<i>Level: Years Receiving Coaching</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Total</i>
Elementary			
1	2	0	2
2	19	5	24
3	5	6	11
4	1	0	1
Subtotal	27	11	38 (58.5)
Junior high / middle school			
1	1	0	1
2	8	1	9
3	1	4	5
4	1	0	1
Subtotal	11	5	16 (24.6)
High school			
1	0	1	1
2	1	4	5
3	1	2	3
4	1	1	2
Subtotal	3	8	11 (16.9)
Total	41 (63.1)	24 (36.9)	65

3 (4.6%) were vice principals; and 38 (58.5%) were at the elementary level, 16 (24.6%) at middle school or junior high, and 11 (16.9%) at high school. Four (6.2%) were in their 1st year of coaching; 38 (58.5%) had received coaching for 1 to 2 years; 19 (29.2%) had received coaching for 2 to 3 years; and 4 (6.2%) had received coaching for more than 3 years.

RESULTS

COACHING COMPETENCIES

To determine the perception of the school leaders regarding the coaching competencies utilized by their leadership coach, the school leaders were asked to respond on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *low*, 5 = *high*) to the following question: "How much has each coaching competency below helped your overall performance as a leader?" Table 3 includes the mean ratings and standard deviation for the five coaching competencies in *establishing the coaching relationship*. In addition, the response for each coaching competency was correlated with the overall mean of the responses of the best practices to determine the degree of relationship of that specific coaching competency to the best practices overall.

For the question "How much has each coaching competency below helped your overall performance as a leader?" the highest mean rating was for *The coach keeps commitments she/he has made with me* (4.60), closely followed by *The coach holds high expectations for our coaching relationship and for me* (4.59) and *The coach fosters a confidential, safe*

Table 3. Coaching Competencies for Establishing the Coaching Relationship

<i>Coaching Competency</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlation With Best Practices</i>
1. The coach clarifies expectations, roles and responsibilities of the coach and client.	4.14	0.99	.729
2. The coach establishes a specific, results-oriented coaching plan.	4.06	1.03	.650
3. The coach fosters a confidential, safe environment during our coaching sessions.	4.57	0.90	.396
4. The coach keeps commitments she/he has made with me.	4.60	0.79	.408
5. The coach holds high expectations for our coaching relationship and for me.	4.59	0.75	.546
Overall	4.39	0.74	.663

*All correlations in this column were significant at the $p < .01$ level (two-tailed).

environment during our coaching sessions (4.57). The lowest mean rating was for *The coach establishes a specific, results-oriented coaching plan* (4.06). The standard deviations were not notable in their differences. The third column represents the degree to which respondents' ratings of each competency correlated to their perceptions of its effect on best practices. The coaching competency with the highest correlation to the overall mean of the best practices was for *The coach clarifies expectations, roles and responsibilities of the coach and client* (.729), which was the highest correlation of all of the 20 coaching competencies. The lowest correlation was for *The coach fosters a confidential, safe environment during our coaching sessions* (.396). Of note is that all the correlations are significant at the $p < .01$ level, but all but the highest correlation indicate a low to moderate correlation between the particular coaching competency and the overall mean of the best practices.

The next set of questions included the six coaching competencies in *communicating effectively*. Table 4 provides the results from the survey respondents. For the question "How much has each coaching competency below helped your overall performance as a leader?" the highest mean rating was for *The coach listens attentively to everything that I say* (4.66), which was the highest overall rating of the 20 coaching competencies; the lowest was for *The coach knows when to push me and under what conditions* (4.25). The third column represents the degree to which respondents' ratings of each competency correlated to their perception of its effect on best practices. The coaching competency with the highest correlation to the overall mean of the best practices was for *The coach asks open-ended*

Table 4. Coaching Competencies for Communicating Effectively

<i>Coaching Competency</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlation With Best Practices*</i>
6. The coach listens attentively to everything that I say.	4.66	0.71	.631
7. The coach paraphrases and summarizes key points/patterns in a condensed fashion.	4.35	0.82	.572
8. The coach asks open-ended questions which help me clarify my thinking.	4.54	0.77	.649
9. The coach delivers feedback in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner.	4.52	0.82	.471
10. The coach provides feedback that is specific rather than general.	4.37	0.86	.525
11. The coach knows when to push me and under what conditions.	4.25	0.97	.540
Overall	4.45	0.71	.651

*All correlations in this column were significant at the $p < .01$ level (two-tailed).

questions which help me clarify my thinking (.649). The lowest correlation was for *The coach delivers feedback in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner* (.471).

The next set of questions included the nine coaching competencies in *facilitating learning and performance*. Table 5 provides the results from the survey respondents. For the question "How much has each coaching competency below helped your overall performance as a leader?" the highest mean rating was for *The coach is knowledgeable about best practices that enhance student learning* (4.60); the lowest was for *The coach helps me to implement intervention programs that meet student needs* (3.75). The third column represents the degree to which respondents' ratings of each competency correlated to their perception of its effect on best practices. The coaching competency with the highest correlation to the overall mean of the best practices was for *The coach helps me focus on the big picture* (.668); the lowest correlation was for *The coach inspires me to believe in new possibilities* (.420).

Of the three areas of coaching competencies, the highest overall rating was in the area of communicating effectively. Compared to the other two areas, this one also showed less variance in mean ratings, standard deviation, and correlation with best practices. The greatest variance was in the coaching competencies for facilitating learning and performance. Of note is that in many cases a coaching competency with a high mean rating may

Table 5. Coaching Competencies for Facilitating Learning and Performance

<i>Coaching Competency</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlation With Best Practices*</i>
12. The coach helps me identify my goals and prioritize them.	4.29	0.88	.506
13. The coach helps me set up a monitoring system for achieving my goals.	3.92	0.96	.484
14. The coach helps me understand and manage the process of change.	4.14	0.93	.651
15. The coach helps me brainstorm possibilities.	4.35	0.80	.655
16. The coach is knowledgeable about best practices that enhance student learning.	4.60	0.68	.509
17. The coach helps me to implement intervention programs that meet student needs.	3.75	1.02	.448
18. The coach helps me articulate a vision of cultural responsiveness.	3.92	0.97	.618
19. The coach helps me focus on the big picture.	4.30	0.92	.668
20. The coach inspires me to believe in new possibilities.	4.37	0.91	.420
Overall	4.19	0.74	.657

*All correlations in this column were significant at the $p < .01$ level (two-tailed).

have a low or moderate correlation with best practices ratings. Thus, no clear patterns of responses are evident between mean ratings and correlations to overall best practices.

The results overall do indicate that participants (school leaders) generally perceived that the coaching competencies were helpful in their performance as leaders, with some competencies having more influence than others. The results also indicate that the participants perceived that the coaching competencies positively affected the implementation of best practices.

BEST PRACTICES

School leaders were then asked to respond to the following question: "How much has coaching affected the presence and/or implementation of the following best practices?" As mentioned previously, the following nine best practices were selected through a process to determine the key practices associated with schools that have high student achievement. Each best practice was correlated with the overall mean of the coaching competencies. Table 6 contains the responses for the results for the nine best practices.

Table 6. Effect of Coaching on Best Practices

<i>Best Practice</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlation With Coaching Competencies*</i>
1. There is an emphasis on continual improvement at the school.	4.40	0.83	.699
2. Professional development for instructional improvement is ongoing.	4.11	0.86	.671
3. Teachers differentiate instruction such that all students have access to the same rigorous curriculum.	3.46	0.96	.485
4. School leaders review student achievement data regularly with each teacher.	3.95	1.02	.462
5. School leaders hold teachers accountable to help their students reach clearly articulated goals.	3.97	0.92	.597
6. School leaders recognize noteworthy efforts and accomplishments of students, staff, and community.	4.05	0.90	.523
7. Teachers learn and use appropriate intervention techniques and skills.	3.58	0.95	.556
8. Student intervention needs are met mainly within the regular classroom.	3.56	0.96	.521
9. Teachers regularly meet in teams to discuss common curriculum and assessments.	4.18	1.05	.544
Overall	3.92	0.77	.680

*All correlations in this column were significant at the $p < .01$ level (two-tailed).

For the question "How much has coaching affected the presence and/or implementation of the following best practices?" the highest mean rating was for *There is an emphasis on continual improvement at the school* (4.40), and the lowest was for *Teachers differentiate instruction such that all students have access to the same rigorous curriculum* (3.46). The best practice with the highest correlation to the overall mean of the coaching competencies was for *There is an emphasis on continual improvement at the school* (.699). The lowest correlation was for *School leaders review student achievement data regularly with each teacher* (.462). The overall correlation of .680 between best practices and the coaching competencies was higher than the correlations of the three areas of the coaching competencies.

The best practices generally had lower mean ratings than the coaching competencies, possibly indicating that the respondents perceived that the best practices were affected less by the coaching competencies than the coaching competencies themselves affected overall performance. This is not surprising. The presence or implementation of specific research-based best practices is a more specific inquiry than the generic question asked about coaching competencies affecting overall performance. However, since these best practices are related to increased school performance, it may indicate the need to further focus coaching competencies in these areas.

OTHER ANALYSES

To further analyze the responses to the coaching competencies and the perceived implementation of best practices, the composite means for all the coaching competencies and all the best practices were compared by school level based on a one-way analysis of variance. Table 7 contains the results.

High school leaders had the highest mean (4.39) and the lowest standard deviation (0.53) for the coaching competencies, while elementary

Table 7. Analysis of Variance: Means by School Level

Level	All Coaching Competencies		All Best Practices	
	M	SD	M	SD
Elementary	4.28	0.80	4.00	0.82
Middle/junior high	4.36	0.60	3.83	0.75
High School	4.39	0.53	3.79	0.64
Overall	4.32	0.71	3.92	0.77
	$F = 0.147, p = .864$		$F = 0.430, p = .653$	

Table 8. Correlations of Level, Years Coached, Mean Competencies, and Mean Best Practices

	<i>Level</i>	<i>Years Coached</i>	<i>Mean Competencies</i>
Level	—		
Years coached	.133	—	
Mean competencies	.066	.159	—
Mean best practices	-.114	.236	.680*

* $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

leaders had the highest mean (4.00) for the best practices presence/implementation and the highest standard deviation (0.82). Based on a one-way analysis of variance to compare the means, no significant difference was found for the means of the coaching competencies, $F(2, 62) = 0.147$, $p > .05$, nor for the means of the best practices, $F(2, 60) = 0.430$, $p > .05$. Thus, the school leaders at all three levels responded in a statistically similar manner to the coaching competencies, although there was some variation (standard deviation) in their responses. The school leaders also responded in a statistically similar manner to the best practices; however, the responses in all cases were lower for the best practices than for the coaching competencies.

Further analysis was conducted to determine the correlation of the level of the school leader, the number of years receiving coaching, and the overall mean for each respondent to the coaching competencies and best practices. Table 8 contains the results of this analysis.

According to the table, only one correlation was significant; the overall mean of the coaching competencies for each respondent with the overall mean of the best practices for each respondent. The correlation was .680, which is significant at the $p < .01$ level (two-tailed). Thus, the only significant relationship in this portion of the analysis was the ratings of the respondents on the coaching competencies portion and the best practices portion. No other significant relationship was found among the level of the respondent, the number of years receiving coaching, the ratings on the coaching competencies, and the ratings on the best practices. This analysis strengthens the earlier findings of a strong relationship between the use of coaching competencies in general with the implementation of best practices.

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Two open-ended questions were included in the survey, one at the end of the section on coaching competencies and one at the end of the survey. The questions were "Please write any comments you have about coach-

ing competencies" and "Please write any final comments, questions, or suggestions for the researcher." A total of 35 open-ended responses were received for the two questions, and the results were combined for analysis. Of the responses that included comments regarding the value of the coaching, more than 90% were positive; that is, only 3 comments were negative. The rest were overwhelmingly positive.

Content analysis was performed on the responses. Of the 35 responses, 8 (22.9%) mentioned that coaching provided a knowledgeable person to talk to that helped solidify the leader's thoughts. An additional 8 (22.9%) expressed gratefulness for their coach; 4 (11.4%) commented on the coach's knowledge of effective practices.

Other comments emerged from the analysis, including the satisfaction of having someone to talk to that listened intently, the importance of confidentiality, ways to move the change process forward, the ability to focus on and think reflectively and deeply about important issues, planning for and debriefing difficult situations, and the coach's affirmation of the principal's efforts.

An elementary principal commented on the coach "pushing": "My coach knows when to push me and under what conditions. The commitment to developing a professional relationship to improve student learning as the foundation for what we do with our time." A middle school principal commented on both effective listening and questioning skills: "My coach is an extremely effective listener and is especially good at asking probing questions that require me to question my practice, but in a way that allows me to grow professionally." A rural high school principal commented, "As a new principal, coaching has definitely played an important role in helping me articulate and align my site vision with that of the district."

One comment from an elementary principal in particular seemed to sum up the feelings of many respondents:

All of the competencies are essential in the coaching/client relationship. I feel the most important are the listening and feedback elements that assist the client in solidifying thoughts before committing to an idea. The ability to assist a client in thinking globally is also essential since we often get caught up in the detail and the general plan becomes blurred. I also enjoy when my coach backs my ideas up with supporting research or suggests options that are research based.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to determine key coaching competencies and best practices and to develop an instrument to assess and improve

the effectiveness of coaching for school leaders. The research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

What are the specific competencies used by leadership coaches that help school principals improve their performance?

Which research-based best practices do leadership coaches focus on?

To what degree are the selected competencies of leadership coaching related to best practices?

From the findings of this study, it is apparent that the respondents felt positive about the leadership coaching they receive. Almost all 20 coaching competencies either had a high mean rating by the respondents or a moderate correlation to best practices, with few exceptions. Using an arbitrary cut point of a 4.00 mean rating (80% of the highest possible score of 5.00), only three responses fell below 4.00. Of these, one was eliminated from the survey, as it had both a low mean rating (3.92) and a low correlation with best practices (.484) (*The coach helps me set up a monitoring system for achieving my goals*). The authors made the decision to not remove the lowest item on the survey (*The coach helps me to implement intervention programs that meet student needs*) due to its direct linkage to two best practices, despite a low mean rating (3.75) and a low correlation to the overall mean of best practices (.448). The authors believe that school leaders will realize the value of this coaching competency as they receive further professional development regarding research-based best practices.

Probably the most important findings of this study are (1) that school leaders do perceive that coaching competencies and best practices are important and (2) that coaching competencies are related to the implementation of best practices. It is the author's hope that coaches and clients will use the findings to guide their work of improving schools, improving teaching, and increasing the achievement of all students.

Further studies of leadership coaching are in order. Is the coaching relationship significantly different when coaching is mandated by the school district as opposed to the principal requesting coaching? How do the principal's experience, ethnic background, and other personal and professional factors affect the coaching relationship? To what extent do the demographics of the school population have on the specifics of the coaching conversations and competencies? What about the coaches themselves in terms of their training and experience as coaches? Are there factors, as yet undiscovered, that may influence the effectiveness of coaching? These are a few of the many questions that provide fertile ground for further research into school leadership coaching.

LEADERSHIP COACHING COMPETENCIES INVENTORY

Leadership coaching in education is relatively new. Coaches and educational leaders need tools to assess the work they are doing together. As a result of the findings of this study, an instrument was constructed using the coaching competencies and best practices identified. The instrument, titled the Leadership Coaching Competencies Inventory (Appendix A), is a formative tool designed for coaches and their clients to (1) assess the use of the competencies and best practices in their coaching relationship and (2) provide input to the coach with the goal of improving the effectiveness of the coaching relationship.

This instrument is available to anyone wishing to use it. However, we request that the findings of research conducted using the instrument be shared with us for the sole purpose of building a body of evidence and findings around its use.

The instrument is not designed to be used at the very beginning of the coaching relationship, since the coach and client are still developing trust; rather, this instrument should be used in only a relationship where trust has already been developed. The client and coach should have a frank discussion of the perceived effectiveness of the competencies and best practices after the client has completed the instrument. The instrument can be helpful in determining next steps for the coach and client. The instrument, or sections of the instrument, can also be used at regular intervals as a formative tool to ensure ongoing effectiveness of the coaching relationship. Once the coach and client have used the instrument several times, they may wish to modify the open-ended questions at the end. In the final analysis, the instrument will only be as effective as the coach and client want it to be and are sufficiently committed to open and frank discussions designed to enhance the coaching relationship.

The greatest limitation of the instrument is that it measures a respondent's perceptions, which are subjective. This is the greatest limitation of the study and the instrument developed. However, the emerging field of leadership coaching holds rich promise for supporting school leaders in their quest for excellence. It is our hope that this study and the resulting instrument are helpful in this quest.

APPENDIX: LEADERSHIP COACHING COMPETENCIES INVENTORY

An instrument to assess the use of research-based coaching competencies leading to best practices implementation. *The best use of this survey is to complete all questions and then share with your coach.*

A. Coaching Competencies

Please rate the following coaching competencies in relation to how much . . .

1. Competencies for Establishing the Coaching Relationship

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The coach clarifies expectations, roles and responsibilities of the coach and client | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. The coach establishes a specific, results-oriented coaching plan | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. The coach fosters a confidential, safe environment during our coaching sessions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. The coach keeps commitments she/he has made with me | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. The coach holds high expectations for our coaching relationship and for me | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your total _____ of 25

2. Communicating Effectively

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. The coach listens attentively to everything that I say | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. The coach paraphrases and summarizes key points/patterns in a condensed fashion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. The coach asks open-ended questions which help me clarify my thinking | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. The coach delivers feedback in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. The coach provides feedback that is specific rather than general | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. The coach knows when to push me and under what conditions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your total _____ of 30

3. Facilitating learning and performance

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12. The coach helps me identify my goals and prioritize them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. The coach helps me understand and manage the process of change | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. The coach helps me brainstorm possibilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. The coach is knowledgeable about best practices that enhance student learning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. The coach helps me to implement intervention programs that meet student needs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. The coach helps me articulate a vision of cultural responsiveness | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. The coach helps me focus on the big picture | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. The coach inspires me to believe in new possibilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your total _____ of 40

B. Best Practices

Please rate how much the coaching you receive affected the presence and/or implementation of the following best practices?

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. There is an emphasis on continual improvement at the school | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Professional development for instructional improvement is ongoing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Teachers differentiate instruction such that all students have access to the same rigorous curriculum | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. School leaders review student achievement data regularly with each teacher | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. School leaders hold teachers accountable to help their students reach clearly articulated goals | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. School leaders recognize noteworthy efforts and accomplishments of students, staff, and community | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Teachers learn and use appropriate intervention techniques and skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Student intervention needs are met mainly within the regular classroom | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Teachers regularly meet in teams to discuss common curriculum and assessments | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Your total _____ of 45

Based on your scores for the Coaching Competencies, which coaching competency(ies) would you like your coach to emphasize more?

Based on your scores for the Best Practices, which best practice(s) would you like your coach to emphasize more?

Are there other coaching competencies and/or best practices that you would like your coach to emphasize more (or less)?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank Amber Jacobo, research analyst at Fresno Unified School District, for her invaluable assistance with this study.

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