

# Leading Coaching in Schools

## Primary case study:

### Developing the learning organisation through coaching

**School:** Horsell Village School

**Headteacher:** Pat Denison

#### Background

Horsell Village School is a three-form entry infant school of 270 children and 24 staff. The school's standards are consistently high, but there is no complacency; staff want the school to be the best of its type.

#### Why coaching?

Headteacher Pat Denison and her team believe that the knowledge, wisdom and artistry of teachers should be available to all. Excellent teachers operate at such a profoundly unconscious level that there is a danger that much of what they know remains locked within them. In order to build the intellectual capacity of the school, the leadership team decided some time ago that they needed to create and develop a culture of continuous dialogue ~ a kind of 'how do you do that?' unpicking of unconsciously competent practice which would make the tacit explicit and therefore more accessible.

School leaders have also worked hard to convince the teachers that they are in charge of their own practice, despite the prescription of national strategies. They wanted to help them move from dependence ~ seeking permission, doing what they 'ought to', 'have to' and 'should' ~through independence ~ making choices, decisions from a range of options ~ and into interdependence ~ able to think, work and grow within a climate of mutual support, equality and generosity.

They strongly believe that people who have clear and well-formed goals, who feel that they have choice and ability to change negative beliefs and ineffective behaviours in order to achieve what they set out to do, are much better placed to realise hopes and aspirations.

## **What sort of coaching?**

The underpinning principle of a coaching model is that people have the potential to maximise their own performance. They have the resources within them; however, sometimes, particularly when stressed, they can find themselves in an unresourceful state. The skilful coach can unlock the stalemate and through perceptive questioning help the coachee change state and discover solutions. Quite simply, the coach helps the coachee get what they want.

## **How has coaching developed?**

The school was already using a peer observation approach, which enabled anyone to observe and engage in dialogue with a colleague. This was seen to be effective; it facilitated discussion and debate, encouraged openness and trust and influenced an action-based, experiential model of learning which was not top-down but based on a do, reflect, review and modify process. Teachers were beginning to be convinced that they had the means to make decisions about learning and teaching unconstrained by national prescriptive models.

In September 2004, all teachers engaged in a two-day residential course in coaching. They were introduced to the model (GROW) and given the opportunity to learn and practise some of the skills associated: deep listening, questioning for understanding, sensory acuity and building rapport.

## **How is coaching practised?**

All staff feel that they have acquired some useful life skills, which are enabling them to feel greatly empowered in all areas of their life. They are able to use a common vocabulary that breaks down barriers and facilitates understanding. They have a strong sense of their own responsibility, but instantly recognise in themselves any kind of block on resourcefulness; in those circumstances they will seek a coaching opportunity with a coach of their choice. They will set up quick meetings, often of short duration, which will help them look at options and decide on action. The notion of team leaders feeling that they should know answers has gone. People who ask for help expect to be questioned, not given solutions.

Problems are seen to be opportunities for exploring strategies, not indicators of in-built failure or personal inadequacy.

This fluid arrangement provides a responsive and flexible climate for coaching to flourish; the coachee is in the driving seat and takes responsibility for making it happen. All staff have signed up to a commitment ~ if they agree to coach, meetings will be arranged and not cancelled.

Coaching is used to:

- support a colleague in solving a problem
- conduct a performance review
- motivate an underperforming member of staff
- help a colleague manage workload
- tackle a personnel issue

- plan a team project
- resolve an issue with an unhappy parent
- gain insight into the attitudes and perceptions of pupils

## **Leading coaching**

Coaching is used powerfully to build the capacity of the school and is a key factor in growing and developing leadership throughout the organisation.

### **Benefits/impact**

The concept of teacher as coach is helping to move the school forward in the personalisation agenda; individual dialogue with pupils enables teachers to develop full understanding of the emotional state of even the youngest pupils and to get to grips with the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters initiative. It facilitates evaluation of what the school is doing for every child in terms of their perceptions of how they are feeling about personal safety and well-being, learning and achievement and the fitness for purpose of the school's provision. The coaching model is enabling children to develop the crucial skills of metacognition, deepening their awareness of themselves as learners and helping them to articulate their needs.

### **Collaboration, networks and wider benefits**

The head has belonged for a number of years to an action learning network of like-minded leaders. Recently the school has begun involvement in the primary leadership project and is poised to work within two further networks, one to develop learning and the other to develop tools for self-evaluation. The coaching model will be used extensively in these contexts.