

Colleagues Helping Colleagues: Mentoring and Coaching

Peggy A. Hopkins-Thompson

Expectations from the standards movement, reform, and advances in technology pose challenges that school leaders must be prepared to face. This article advocates principal preparation and cultivation through mentoring and coaching. It clarifies the differences, uses in succession planning, new principalships and job changers, and benefits to both the mentor and protégé.

The business of schooling has become increasingly more complex over the last decade and will certainly continue as the millennium progresses. These higher expectations come in the midst of teacher and administrator shortages; unprecedented competition in the workplace for future professionals; and the diverse learning, social, and emotional needs of today's children. This focus has applied unrealistic pressure on those who choose to lead.

How can school leaders be cultivated and readied for the challenges they will face? How can learning be accelerated and made more meaningful? How can prospective principals and others learn from their experiences and tap collegial frameworks? Mentoring and coaching processes can serve to augment the succession planning and professional development of districts. They can model a culture of collaboration and collegiality in which best thinking occurs through collective judgment. In short, they are the low-cost answer to the best way adults learn.

This article seeks to clarify what mentoring and coaching are; their uses in succession planning, new principalships, and job changers; and the benefits to principals. Survey responses from principals representing urban and rural districts in North Carolina and Mississippi are used to provide commentary on the practice of mentoring and coaching administrators.

Note: The author thanks the principals in the Wake County (Miss.) and the Nash-Rocky Mount (N.C.) Public School Systems for providing their perspectives in response to a survey and for providing written feedback regarding mentoring and coaching.

Peggy A. Hopkins-Thompson is the former director of the Wake Leadership Academy in Raleigh, N.C., and has served as the director of human resources and director of the North Carolina Assessment Center for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. She is currently a human resource consultant in three states. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to pahopkins@mindspring.com.

What Does It Mean?

Mentoring is an intense relationship in which a senior person oversees the career development and psychosocial development of a less-experienced person (Douglas 1997). Mentors impart wisdom about the norms, values, and mores that are specific to the organization (Craig 1996). They support the being of their protégés, providing advocacy, counseling, support, and protection—feedback and information that they would otherwise not have.

Coaching is a form of mentoring, but is more focused and usually shorter in duration. Coaching relies on job-related tasks or skills and is accomplished through instruction, demonstration, and high-impact feedback (Gray 1988). Coaches have a high level of knowledge about specific skills and can teach those skills by breaking them down into behaviors, modeling them, observing them, and then providing feedback. Both mentoring and coaching are important components of leadership development.

Why Do It?

The process of mentoring and coaching can “provide a compass...a right direction” for protégés. As one principal surveyed stated, “Mentoring can lead one to a greater understanding of who they are as an administrator.” Another administrator talked about the accelerated rate of learning that mentoring provides, indicating “there is no time to waste nor time for principals to gain knowledge at a slow rate—urgency to improve for the sake of children and teachers [is critical].”

What are the advantages for the person who mentors? Principals from Mississippi and North Carolina indicated that the benefits were great. One administrator wrote, “An experienced mentor can improve their own performance by working with new principals.” Others commented that among many benefits, mentoring “caused me to reflect on my own skills” and “sharpened my skills.” Some even reflected that the process “increased my status and self-esteem” by citing that it is rewarding “to help others...it makes me push harder in reaching my goals for teachers and students in my own school.”

How Do You Get Started?

Developing a formal mentoring and coaching program requires careful planning and consideration around the organization’s and the protégé’s needs. The program must have organizational commitment, a clear purpose with behaviors to be developed, feedback as a baseline for development, and a defined and communicated role for those who manage protégés on site.

The literature is replete with examples of how successful mentoring programs are established. Such programs include the following common denominators:

Organizational Support

The superintendent is critical for ensuring the success of a mentoring program; he or she sets the tone for all to follow. Mentors are more likely to schedule time with their protégés if they know this is valued in the organization. Resources will accompany such commitment. As common sense as this seems, far too many programs are given less attention because the superintendent does not commit to the process and does not ensure that those around him or her know about that commitment. Discussing the program in open forums such as principals' meetings or rewarding those who commit time to mentor or coach are among some of the important organizational tasks.

Clearly Defined Outcomes

The program goal must be clearly specified and include details of knowledge and skill to be attained. If the program is designed to support prospective administrative candidates, then certain standards and learner outcomes can be defined, the best pool of mentors can be identified, and a timeline established accordingly. Likewise, the program may be focused on supporting new principals or those who need skills in specific areas. Defining the goal allows districts' needs to be more clearly aligned with learner outcomes.

Screening, Selection, and Pairing

The selection and screening process for both mentors and protégés is a critical component. Mentors must be highly skilled in communicating, listening, analyzing, providing feedback, and negotiating. They have to be respected administrators, committed to the process, and trustworthy to be able to establish the level of candor needed for such work. They need to believe in personal and professional development and be adept at adjusting their expectations of the protégés. Determining those who serve in such roles is not an exercise in deciding who has longevity. Rather, careful consideration must be given to those who have the disposition and the skills to do the job. These components must be clearly defined in a list of criteria for selection. One respondent to the survey wrote, "Some people are more suited to mentoring than others...great principals aren't necessarily great mentors."

Protégés are the focus of this experience and as such, must also be carefully screened and identified. Specific selection criteria are essential in ensuring commitment to personal and professional growth and development. Motivation to the task is the foundation for achieving the goal.

Most mentor-protégé pairing is done through self-selection. More than half of the principals surveyed indicated that their mentoring process had been an informal one in which they selected their mentor or were selected by a protégé to be a mentor. Many formal programs use personality profiles such as the Myers-Briggs, Keirse-Bates, or True Colors to identify styles and

preferences, and thus create best matches. Other programs use simple interest inventories to create pairs according to responses on identified indicators. Still others consider proximity or issues of time as determinants. Principals agreed that no matter what the process, flexibility must be built into the program to enable changing matches that are not working. As one principal commented, “There must be a good match between the mentor and protégé” for the process to be successful.

Training Mentors and Protégés

Training for mentors and protégés should be based on program needs and skills. The NASSP mentoring and coaching module is an excellent example of a skill-based comprehensive program for training and mentoring. For mentors, skills should include communication, needs analysis, and feedback. The training should include the tools used in the process such as evaluation instruments, developmental analysis strategies, growth plans, and reflection. It should highlight observation, communication, listening, and feedback skills. Program needs should focus on organizational norms, values, and expectations. This provides the mentors with a common language about the process of mentoring. Training for protégés should center on program expectations in addition to the specific strategies of needs analysis, self-development using an individual growth plan, and reflection.

A Learner-Centered Focus

Mentoring should center on the protégé’s learning. The process should include determining strengths and improvement needs, setting goals and objectives, identifying job opportunities or places where learning can occur, providing targeted feedback, and encouraging reflection.

Developmental planning requires an ongoing commitment to meet and discuss growth, milestones, and improvement needs. Without follow up, the developmental process is nothing more than a bureaucratic exercise. For feedback to be effective, five conditions must be present: (a) the mentor or coach must be credible and qualified to comment on performance; (b) the feedback must have meaning to the protégé; (c) the feedback must address the potential for change by addressing that which the protégé can control and change; (d) the feedback must be confidential; and (e) the feedback must be timely (Dalton and Hollenbeck 1996).

At the heart of the learning experience is the need for feedback focused on reflection. Reflection requires more than just self-analysis of specific situations that are occurring or have occurred. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) warn that effective reflection requires many data sources, the perspectives of others, and purpose and context. Although protégés need developmental plans to focus their learning, situations to provide context, and multisource

data to support their growth and refine or improve their skills, they also need the support of an external, objective source to add perspective and enhance meaning of things that are occurring in their world. Principals mentoring prospective principals or their colleagues can be a powerful catalyst for learning how to learn from experience.

Continual Monitoring and Evaluation

The key components of a successful program are not linear, but cyclical. Each component is essential in maximizing the success of the next step; yet monitoring and evaluation feeds the entire model. Putting a formal evaluation process in place prior to the program implementation ensures baseline data for benchmarking progress. Attitudinal as well as behavioral evaluation is critical in revising or further developing the process.

Colleagues Support Their Own

Data support the need for “growing your own” pool of talent to fill administrative vacancies in the future. Many districts around the country have initiated “Future Leader” or “Aspiring Leader” programs by screening potential candidates who are currently in the classroom or in central offices. Over the last decade, Wake County has successfully implemented a Future Leader program as a one-year process of identifying and developing talent among classroom teachers. The recently proposed Aspiring Leaders program will be two years, rather than one year, in length and will link to a university program for purposes of credentialing. This program will identify talent through a four-tiered screening process that includes

- A rigorous application process with written responses to questions related to instructional leadership
- A formal feedback process from the supervisor and colleagues
- A Gallup Perceiver interview to identify talents
- An interview process by trained practitioners.

Once identified, candidates will participate in monthly meetings that link university training to job-specific experiences, and they will participate in summer internships. The process should include assigning a trained mentor to a three- to six-member protégé group for purposes of development planning and targeted feedback. Mentors will provide learning experiences by suggesting additional readings, by focusing protégés on specific skill training available through the Business-Industry Partnership program, or by identifying successful principals who would model specific skills. Protégés will share their reflections monthly within their learner group, thus maximizing their growth by learning from each other. Those who need one-on-one

time with the mentor could schedule that time based on mutual convenience.

Mentors further support their group by analyzing needs and redesigning the development plan annually. Mentors focus the learning of each protégé on strengths and a limited number of improvements. They assist in clarifying opportunities for these skills to be reinforced on site.

Even Champions Need Coaches

New principals should have a network of protégés and a mentor/coach who both supports their learning and ensures their understanding of the culture of the organization. Surveyed principals indicated that this process has most often been informal, if at all. Although an informal network is helpful, it does not ensure that all who need support will seek the support they need. Within the Wake County Public School System, monthly principals' meeting days are convenient times for mentors to meet with new principals. These sessions address policy, procedures, and timely information for this audience. Mentors can listen to the issues that are confronting others, offer insight, and support reflection.

Job changers or incoming principals may also need colleague support. One principal who had moved from a principalship of seven years in an alternative school to a high school principalship within the same district stated

Even [seven years] was insufficient to prepare me for the things I'd encounter at the high school. I don't know how a brand new person to the principalship can step into a high school and survive. I believe principals could benefit greatly from a formal mentorship program lasting two years. Had [my mentors] not been so accessible and such great principals themselves, I honestly wonder if I'd made it this far.

Even with knowledge of law, policy, and procedure, and with skills in teaming, collaboration, and leadership, those who move from one level to another or who are new to a district need a mentor and a support system to ensure their success. The protégé group can brainstorm and troubleshoot issues that are specific to a school. A colleague mentor can support both the analysis of specific situations and the reflection on best practices.

Overcoming Obstacles and Barriers

With time demands so great, principals often express difficulty in committing to a mentoring process. Almost all the survey respondents identified time as a major barrier to the mentoring process. One high school principal wrote, "For the past three weeks I have been at school every night except one Monday, and I've been here on Saturday to catch up on paperwork...when I get home

at 10:00 p.m., I usually work on my computer at home to do letters, reports, and so forth. I get to bed sometime after 12:00 and get up at 5:30 to return here at 6:30.” What strategies are available for better using time and available personnel?

- Assign a mentor to a group of protégés. Kaye and Jacobsen (1995) suggest that mentoring programs can be established with “learner leaders” or mentors assigned to groups of three to six protégés. In this relationship, group mentoring assists protégés in developing interpersonal and team skills as well as learning from their own and the experiences of others. This model affords districts the opportunity to use fewer mentors to support the learning process. Other principals can participate by supporting and coaching specific on-the-job skills of protégés.

- Meet less often and augment the dialogue with reflection logs. Use these logs as a focus of the mentor meeting. Mentors could meet their protégés via phone or e-mail. Although not as effective as face-to-face contact, some support is better than no support.

- Use technology to enhance and augment the mentoring process. Use e-mail to communicate with mentors or within the protégé group. Establish a list serve, discussion forum, or chat room and have those avenues monitored by an experienced principal. Discussion forums allow new principals a place to talk about issues and get feedback from others. Make sure that the forum is secure and has password protection. Also caution principals about using this venue for sensitive matters. Another use of technology is video conferencing, which can provide a mechanism for mentors and protégés to meet when distance is a problem.

- Use available meeting days that are already in the district’s calendar for mentoring. A regularly scheduled principals’ meeting day is a convenient time to add a meeting with new or new to the district principals. Work days or early release times can also be used for mentor–protégé meetings. District celebrations, curriculum meetings, level-specific meetings (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school), or other regular training/meeting dates can provide mentors with opportunities to collaborate.

- Expand the pool of mentors so principals have opportunities to do on-the-job coaching. Other personnel are available and usually supportive of the process, but careful screening and ongoing orientations are essential.

Retired administrators have the luxury of time and have the knowledge of past experiences. If using retired administrators, a few words of caution are needed. Enlist retired principals who have recently left the ranks, especially when mentoring new or experienced practitioners. Changes in policy, law, procedure, and even the context of the principalship can outdate former principals and reduce their effectiveness. Retired principals

should receive regular briefings, updates, and training to ensure that this does not occur.

Associate and assistant superintendents and directors can provide targeted feedback in key areas of budgeting and resource planning, collaboration and team-building, data analysis, evaluation and research, curriculum and instruction innovations, and so forth. Make sure that the mentor is not also the evaluator. Both protégé, who may be reluctant to ask for help in weak areas, and mentor, who has to use information in the evaluative process, share the difficulty in a situation like this.

State department consultants or university professors can provide mentoring experiences. In some cases, these personnel can be assigned to protégé groups and can facilitate meetings across district lines.

A mentoring program can provide great benefits to organizations, to mentors, and to protégés. Whether the program focuses on prospective candidates or practicing administrators, the power of such a program is evident in the results it yields. Wake County Public School System was able to place almost all of its Future Leader candidates in assistant principal or principalships throughout the last decade. The Nash-Rocky Mount Public School System has also used a Future Leader program to identify, develop, and place candidates in key administrative roles. But not to be overlooked is the power of such programs to support new principals and those who are changing levels in the principalship. 🐘

References

- Craig, R. L. 1996. *The ASTD training and development handbook. A guide to human resource development*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Dalton, M. A., and G. P. Hollenbeck. 1996. *How to design an effective system for developing managers and executives*. Greensboro, N.C.: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Douglas, C. A. 1997. *Formal mentoring programs in organizations*. Greensboro, N.C.: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Fullan, M., and A. Hargreaves. 1996. *What's worth fighting for in your school?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gray, W. A. 1988. Developing a planned mentoring program to facilitate career development. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal* 4 (2): 9–16.
- Kaye, B., and B. Jacobsen. 1995. Mentoring: A group guide. *Training and Development* 49 (4): 22–27.