



# Coaching Conversations

## *The Link to Change*

*While no conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship or a life—any single conversation can.*

—Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations*

**S**chool leaders face many challenges and wear a variety of hats during the course of one school day. In addition to the day-to-day management of a large organisation, they handle numerous tasks that never appear on their daily schedules. As they walk through their schools, leaders may notice a leak in a ceiling pipe, informally discuss instructional practices with teachers and other staff, help a pair of students settle a dispute and then receive a message to return to the office immediately for an important telephone call from an inspector or a parent.

The school community expects their leaders to be visionary, have deep knowledge about effective instruction and curriculum, create a peaceful and productive learning environment, interact with community businesses and agencies, manage limited resources carefully and be readily available at a moment's notice to handle emergencies, respond to questions, attend meetings and develop plans.

In this chapter you will learn

- what coaching conversations entail
- how coaching conversations support findings from brain research
- why some conversations are difficult
- how to move toward coaching conversations

One thing is certain about the role of a school leader—it is people intensive! Dynamic school leaders not only have the knowledge and skills to manage their schools and understand the components of effective instruction, they are also outstanding communicators. They develop a strong vision and make decisions that impact their school community. However, a vision is a lifeless document unless the school leader clearly articulates and gets buy-in for this vision from staff, parents, students and community members. A principal may delineate a multistep action plan for school improvement, but sustained growth and change are not likely to occur unless all constituencies of the school accept the plan as their own and feel supported as they implement new initiatives.

Typically school leaders have several formal opportunities during the year for professional development leading to school transformation. There may be specific professional development days on the school's calendar and some staff members may participate in workshops provided elsewhere. In addition, many school leaders utilise full staff meetings and year level or department meetings as professional growth opportunities.

More important, during the course of a single day, school leaders have dozens of opportunities to effect change through short conversations with staff, students, parents, colleagues, supervisors and community members. In *Coaching Conversations: Transforming Your School One Conversation at a Time*, our premise is that there are very specific coach-like skills that lead to organisational transformation—one person at a time.

### What Is a Coaching Conversation?

Coaching conversations are focused on the other person.

Coaching conversations differ from typical, spur-of-the-moment conversations. First, they are highly intentional rather than just friendly or informal interactions. In addition, coaching conversations are focused on the other person—her strengths and her challenges, and the attributes she brings to the conversations. A third character-

istic of coaching conversations is that their purpose is to stimulate growth and change. In other words, coaching conversations lead to action.

Of course, school leaders already employ a variety of conversational techniques to effect change. For example, they hold supervisory conferences with the goal of improving instruction. However, how often do these one-on-one interactions result in true change and growth at the organisational level? An individual staff member may change his surface behaviour as required by his administrator, yet deep and lasting change is unlikely because the teacher's relationship with his administrator may now have taken a negative direction, evoking emotions of defensiveness, anxiety, mistrust, inadequacy and possibly fear.

School leaders also engage in mentoring conversations. These interactions usually occur when someone is new to the organisation or lacks experience in implementing new skills. As mentor, the school leader takes on the role of a knowledgeable veteran who shares her skills with others. Realistically, even when the school leader is highly knowledgeable and experienced, she is unable to fully support a colleague or staff member because no mentor has the exact same background, temperament, situation or life experience of those she mentors.

### Old Thinking Versus New Thinking

So why are conversations that lead to change and transformation so difficult to manage? First, recent brain research, including work by David Rock (2006), demonstrates that motivating ourselves or others to change requires changing our long-established brain patterns. Even when we recognise that specific changes are necessary, we revert to our old patterns of thinking and acting because we already have well-established channels for old thinking. We resist change neurologically!

New patterns of thinking that lead to changed behaviour require deep reflection and intentional, ongoing practice in order to create and develop new neural pathways within the brain.

Coaching conversations foster the deep reflection necessary to establish new thinking patterns. Moreover, when a school leader engages in coaching conversations with members of her school community, she provides the ongoing support for staff and others to practise new thinking skills and behaviours. This leads to real change, not just at the surface level, but

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Our coaching colleague, Kathy Kee, has coined a phrase for this way of listening. She calls it “witnessing the struggle”. By your presence and committed listening, you convey that you empathise with the speaker. Listening without any obligation to act allows you to hear what the other person is saying rather than formulating your next response. You are willing to *witness the struggle*.

## Summary

Committed listening is foundational to all coaching conversations. It allows you to gain clarity on issues and understand the needs and perceptions of others, helps you gather data more completely and accurately, and encourages others to think more deeply. Through committed listening, you provide opportunities for building trust with others and create space for new solutions.

A committed listener tunes into numerous verbal and nonverbal cues to understand the *essence* of what is said rather than the exact words spoken. Committed listeners recognise the value of silence in a conversation. Moments of silence provide the speaker with opportunities to reflect and dig deeper, allowing them to express their thoughts more accurately and fully.

Effective, committed listening requires both an understanding of your own listening skills and dedicated practice so that you may avoid unproductive listening patterns, such as judgmental, autobiographical, inquisitive and solution listening.

In addition, a committed listener recognises the power of just listening, without any obligation to act upon what is said. Coaching conversations emphasise committed listening that builds the relationship with the speaker in an honest and authentic manner.

## Case Study 2: Marceta's Series of Coaching Conversations

In this second case study from author Marceta Fleming Reilly's experience, you are encouraged to identify the coaching strategies used in this series of coaching conversations. What does the coach say and do and what impact do her coaching behaviours have on the client?

### Background

Pat came to coaching as a referral from the board of studies, who told Marceta that Pat was an experienced principal but new to her school. She had a difficult staff and was trying to implement some big changes in the school that the board supported. She thought Pat might benefit from having a coach.

### Coaching Conversations Over Time

Pat and I established rapport very quickly, so I began probing to find out as much information as possible about Pat's perceived strengths and her core values. Through our conversations and the use of a "core values checklist" tool, Pat easily identified her strengths: organised, persistent, problem solver, knowledgeable about curriculum, loves data, cares about people, develops relationships over time, reflective.

Then I had her complete the sentence, "Things don't go well when . . ." Here were some of her responses:

- decisions aren't made and issues drag on
- people are slow to "get it" (She called this "slug" behaviour)
- people expect me to be a "cheerleader" or to "schmooze"
- relationships are phony
- passive-aggressive behaviour persists
- people play power/control games
- people play politics

From this list I could see that she was concerned about resistance among her staff members to the new ideas she wanted to bring to the school and frustrated with "games". I asked Pat, "Tell me what your vision is for your school culture." She talked about wanting her staff members to be "true collaborators" and for them to have a "strong commitment to good instruc-