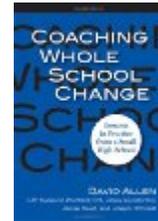


Coaching Whole School Change: Lessons in Practice for a Small High School

reviewed by Nicholas Meier – May 21, 2009

Title: Coaching Whole School Change: Lessons in Practice for a Small High School
Author(s): David Allen with Suzanne W. Ort, Alexis Constantini, Jennie Reist, and Joseph Schmidt
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David Allen's book is predicated on the theory that the sum is greater than its parts. The title, *Coaching Whole School Change*, lets the reader know that in regards to education, this means school-wide improvement. "A good school is one where good schooling is going on everywhere all day," says the book's protagonist, school coach Suzy Ort.

In the style of a qualitative collaborative action case study, Allen tells the story of Ort's work over a three-year period at Park High School, a small public high school in New York City, serving mostly low-income minority students. This approach made the book enjoyable to read, and the conclusions believable. We hear the stories, the trials and tribulations as well as the successes (though focused on the latter). Anyone who has spent time in schools will recognize the struggles Suzy goes through: teachers who are suspicious of an outsider trying to make them change, struggles over leadership, different ideas of what works best, and how a good education is defined. Allen expertly uses these stories to illustrate specific points of good coaching practices (labeled as "coaching habits" throughout).

The introductory overview is followed by a brief history of how Suzy built her presence and influence to slowly make changes in the school culture. Suzy encountered the usual staff resistance, as well as recruited early allies. We learn how she created structures to build a professional community such as "the Cabinet...", an 'ubercommittee' providing vision for and coordination among other groups" (p. 30), and regular professional development sessions.

Since this book is meant as a practical guide, we are given bullet points of *Coaching Habits Examined* at the end of periodic sections, such as "pushing for structures that support collaboration" and "modeling the norms for collaboration" (p. 35), each of which have been illustrated throughout.

Suzy Ort narrates most of the chapter on "Organizing Coaching Time." She starts out reminding us, as with good teaching and good principalship, that "Coaching is an impossible job" (p. 38). We get a look at her strategies to connect with as much of the faculty as she can. She struggles with the difficulty of only being there two days a week. Here she talks about the importance of routines and being well organized. Since building trusting relationships is so key to this work, one of the "coaching habits examined" is "*communicating regularly and openly... by making plans and schedules explicit in writing and sending them out publicly*" (p. 39), which she did through weekly emails. Most of her in-school time was spent either observing in classrooms or planning with teachers.

In the chapter "Planning for Instruction," we hear stories of her work with three teachers, which are told by the teachers themselves, and then analyzed by Allen. Each story illustrates a different type of challenge. Alexis, a veteran teacher initially resistant to working with Suzy, explains she was won over by Suzy's "methods of nagging or chipping away, but I value her persistence, as it has greatly helped my development" (p. 52).

Jennie, a new teacher, "felt resistant to any type of coaching or guidance" (p. 58). Yet, again Suzy was able to win her over, as Jennie began to see she could use Suzy's help. In the third story, Joe, a teacher who already had a positive working relationship with Suzy, resisted more direct intervention by Suzy. Still, he found her work pushed him to better teaching. The main habits of the school coach that are highlighted here are her *persistence* with each teacher, *building incrementally*—that is getting the teachers to go a little beyond their comfort zone, with her support—and *communicating*

regularly, as was mentioned before, but in this case these key elements are considered in the context of the teachers carrying out the planned curriculum.

Allen goes on to discuss “Complementary Strategies,” four other strategies that Suzy used to help teachers. These are: *observing classrooms*, *providing resources*, *checking in* and *making connections*, *sharing strengths*. Suzy’s approach to observation is distinguished from the common strategy of “providing feedback in a post-observation discussion” (p. 77). To Suzy, “planning felt much more useful . . . than simply observing and giving feedback” (p. 77), and so observations went from “being Suzy’s most frequent strategy in the first year to third most frequent” (p. 78).

Suzy was also always looking for resources for teachers, leaving them articles or materials she thought they might use. Even if they didn’t actually follow up by using these materials, it was a way of offering support by showing she was interested in what they were doing. The *checking in* aspect, part of the *communicating regularly* mentioned earlier, evolved over time. Once a “trusting relationship and common language about instruction” (p. 84) was established, she engaged in a condensed form of her coaching practices and habits via short interactions.

In “Expanding Professional Community,” the author builds to the main objective of going beyond individual teachers. She points out that when Suzy started, the school “entirely lacked these critical elements [of being a professional community]” (p. 91). Her coaching was intended to not only affect the individual teacher, but also to help share the collective strengths of the teachers, so that what she developed with one would have an effect on the whole professional community. Stories illustrating professional development committee and professional development activities show how this is built. These activities include getting teachers to examine common questions of effective practice, sharing their own practices, and looking at student work.

She again employed the “slow building” strategy, not forcing all faculty to participate initially. Over time, Suzy won over more staff and with gentle pressure convinced more faculty to share and play leadership roles. However, this chapter also reiterates what the literature points out about building such communities (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001)—it takes years. In looking over three years of her work at this school, this book is able to give us that longitudinal look. It is a useful read if for that alone: to help us avoid making assumptions based either on early difficulties, or conversely looking at a smoothly functioning system already over the development phase.

“Growing Leadership” addresses how powerful professional communities are predicated on the idea of distributed leadership (Elmore, 2000). The book shows throughout how Suzy encouraged teachers in, and created opportunities for, taking on leadership roles. These are not administrative leadership positions, but rather those of teaching and learning. She played a coaching role here as well, helping them plan, and debriefing with them after they took on such roles (such as facilitation of a professional development seminar). This chapter also mentions instances where she used outside opportunities for teachers to get training in leadership roles, such as through the Institute for Student Achievement (the “ISA”), her parent organization. Anyone who has tried to step into such roles is likely to understand the need for this type of help!

“Reflecting on Coaching” is the final chapter in the book. “Throughout this book, two reoccurring themes are feedback and reflection. [Here are] some of the ways a coach invites feedback on and reflects on her own coaching” (p. 125). Like many formal leadership roles, Suzy had no one who shared her same position at the site. Therefore, she often looked outside the school for support. For this she had the ISA, which provided regular meetings of coaches. She also invited outsiders to come and shadow her, which gave her their perspective on the school.

As a conclusion to the book, we hear from the three teachers that Suzy worked with, discussing the impact her work with them had on their professional lives. These are very personal testimonies to the power that such work can have. We are left with the conclusion that coaching is not a short-term fix for a school, but a long-term process, which really should become an integral part of the culture of every school!

Based on the empirical and theoretical literature on coaching, professional community and distributed leadership, this book does an excellent job of distilling the general principles of good coaching from concrete examples.

References

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