

# Flywheel

*For Len-Mike and Olé.*

# Flywheel

*Transformational Leadership  
Coaching for Sustainable Change*

**Elle Allison-Napolitano**

*Foreword by Rob and Kathy Bocchino*





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Tools and additional materials related to *Flywheel*  
can be accessed at [www.WisdomOut.com](http://www.WisdomOut.com)  
and at [www.Corwin.com/Flywheel](http://www.Corwin.com/Flywheel).



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# Foreword

**M**ost likely you are holding this book because you are searching for something. That's probably a good sign: real leaders are almost always looking further down the road, beyond what they can currently see. Maybe the thing you are seeking is some wisdom that is just beyond your grasp or maybe it is some truth that you have lost along the way. Perhaps you see that others around you (or who report to you) have great, yet unfulfilled potential. Perhaps you are looking for ways to open the organization so the best ideas and opportunities are heard and realized instead of lost. Whatever it is, Elle Allison-Napolitano understands the journey and from her research and experience she points the way to the path with heart. For Elle, and for you, leadership means finding practical, field-tested ways to empower, to develop, and to support others.

*Flywheel* is the pathway for leaders to learn how to coach others to achieve what they could not, or would not do on their own. At its heart, this is a book about the kinds of skilled conversations and interactions that leaders can have that engage, develop, and empower; it is about how leaders can be transformational coaches.

The title of the book comes from a simple idea of what a flywheel does. In a watch, the flywheel stores and balances energy. In systems, balancing energy is one of the key functions of leadership. But how? *Flywheel* provides a constellation of practical skills, steps, and protocols for leaders to support other leaders through coaching, both formally and informally. Through examples, stories, and research, Elle Allison-Napolitano provides a set of coaching skills that are nothing short of transformational. Here you will learn how to go beyond putting out fires and managing the status quo. Leaders who embrace this practice find ways to be more conscious and present and they are more ready to help others face and meet the challenging realities of the 21st century.

To do this successfully and ecologically requires a frame of mind that is open to the kinds of game-changing initiatives that make a real and meaningful difference. Transformational coaching unearths and challenges limiting assumptions, as by definition, it must. It also means leaders

must have specific, hands-on skills and protocols right from the start. In *Flywheel* you will learn about when, where, and how to listen well, and why this is such a demanding essential leadership skill. In addition, you will learn how to deepen and assure understanding, and the power and skills of asking real questions that foster thinking, learning, and problem-solving.

Leaders step forward to start, revitalize, and champion organizational initiatives for positive change. In the Flywheel model, this means having real, concrete projects with deadlines, deliverables, and real-life effects. It also means leaders need practical protocols like the eight steps of the Powerful Coaching Conversation, and ways to initiate a coaching contract. It means developing and helping others develop the passion for doing “the greater good” instead of “business as usual.” This work provides templates, diagnostic charts, protocols, and other tools to facilitate these kinds of important coaching conversations.

We have known Elle Allison-Napolitano for more than 20 years; we first met her in her role as supervisor of school improvement. She has always been an advocate for the kinds of developmental interventions outlined and explained in this book. Her life journey has followed this path with depth, authenticity, and integrity. Her work has taken her all over the planet and has been dedicated to this, whether it has been in her role as school leader, as coach, or as an international consultant. All of these endeavors, and her work at Wisdom Out reflect not only practical hard-won lessons that she is willing to so generously share, but also her delightful, brilliant, and engaging personality. Elle is an engaging storyteller, an amazing teacher, and a wonderful person. You will get to know and learn from her in this book, and you will be better for it. And it will take work.

We recommend this work wholeheartedly and without reservation of any kind.

—Rob and Kathy Bocchino  
*Heart of Change Associates*  
Carolina Beach, North Carolina, 2013

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# Preface

**F**ollowing a conference where I led a breakout session on the topic of leadership coaching, a superintendent from the audience who was particularly enthused about the exercises on listening I conducted with the group, took me aside to share a personal story. “Joe” told me he was lucky to work in his district with so many people who were true leaders in every sense of the word. However, as Joe tells the story, this wasn’t always the case, and he takes most of the blame for it. He said, “I knew I was working with administrators and teachers who were smart, well-educated, and experienced. And yet, they were always incredibly busy and overwhelmed. They were good at putting out fires, but they did not build the future.” One day, Joe went to work with a bad case of laryngitis. He literally could not talk, he could only listen. He made a sign for his door that said, *“I have laryngitis and I can’t talk. You can still meet with me, but all I can do is listen—sorry.”*

When a few of his colleagues stopped by and joked with Joe about how good it felt to talk when he could not do anything but listen, he smiled and nodded. But, by the time the tenth person came by and made the same joke, it suddenly dawned on him: he was a poor listener. As the day went on, something else became clear to Joe. The people he worked with were full of good ideas, creativity, and passion for their work and for education. It’s just that he never listened long enough for them to get that far in the conversation. That day, Joe made a commitment to learn how to listen, and that led him to discover what it meant to be a leader who is also a coach. “I have to wonder,” Joe told me with a shake of his head, “what did I prevent people from contributing, before I saw myself as a coaching leader?”

## **WHY FLYWHEEL, WHY NOW**

Admittedly, I am a coaching geek. I love all things coaching and I never cease to be fascinated and downright thrilled by the effect coaching has on leaders who are determined to make a big difference in their organizations. In education, this translates to benefits for students—and who

wouldn't be impressed by leadership that empowers young folks to make good lives for themselves?

I invented Flywheel so that leaders can make big moves in education and in their lives. Interestingly enough, big moves that make a difference in education require incredible and sustained focus, without which deep implementation is never achieved. Mike Schmoker makes this point early in his book titled *Focus* (2011). Schmoker says that if educators really want to improve schools, they need to focus on well-known approaches, specifically, “a common curriculum, sound lessons, and authentic literacy” (p. 9). Schmoker's point is that educators already know what works. As he sees it, the problem is that “we have never fully clarified them or obsessed over their implementation.” Leadership coaching is a personalized strategy for just that—for mobilizing the energy of leaders to obsess on deep implementation of what works and for taking action to make systemic and sustainable change.

### **Flywheel?**

It was a high school physics teacher in one of my workshops a few years ago who made the observation that leadership coaching was a “flywheel” to the hard work of leaders. Flywheel? This teacher, who was at the helm of his school's transformation to a science magnet center explained to me that a flywheel is a mechanical invention that stores energy, which can be called on and used to keep things moving when the energy source is no longer available. Aha! I know about flywheels from those grueling spin classes I take at the gym. If you've ever been in a spin class, most likely the stationary bike you rode utilized a large single flywheel that you could adjust to simulate the demands of the open road, from a nice flat course (where the flywheel is transferring a lot of energy to the pedals) to a steep hill (where less energy is transferred to the pedals). For the physics teacher in my coaching class, coaching conversations created energy for him—energy for sustaining the obsessive focus that Mike Schmoker writes about.

## **WHAT MAKES FLYWHEEL DIFFERENT FROM OTHER LEADERSHIP COACHING APPROACHES**

Leadership coaching is not a new idea. Every professional field, including education, cares about developing leaders who are capable of managing complex systems. But, while traditional leadership coaching programs focus on increasing personal and organizational performance (Storber & Grant, 2006), Flywheel is an approach to leadership coaching that expands the expectations of leadership from managing the inevitable challenges of day-to-day operations, to developing leaders capable of changing the organization for the

better. Grounded in ideas from transformation theory, Flywheel is geared for leaders who are at the helm of important work, especially when they begin important projects or take current initiatives to deeper levels of implementation.

Flywheel is an approach to leadership coaching that expands the expectations of leaders from managing the inevitable challenges of day-to-day operations, to developing leaders capable of changing the organization for the better.

## A Transformational Approach

In his book *Education Unbound*, Frederick Hess (2010) candidly writes, “The biggest challenge we face is not a lack of potential practices or good ideas, but systemic rigidity that makes it difficult to execute even smart solutions with discipline and focus” (p. 130). Hess’s observation draws to mind Einstein’s famous quote, “You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it. You must learn to see the world anew.” Thus, Flywheel embraces a transformational approach to change. This means that it employs tools and processes that pierce the limiting assumptions that prevent people and systems from discovering breakthroughs and solving the most vexing problems in education. It provides a way for leaders to *do* meaningful work while simultaneously *becoming* leaders who do meaningful work and who rewire the organization to support and sustain new ways to assure that schools work for all students.

Flywheel is also different from many other leadership coaching models in that it is not limited to leaders in formal administrative positions in the hierarchy of the organization. Instead, Flywheel invites leaders at all levels in the system to step up to the helm of important work that actually shapes the future. Regardless of their position in the organization—principals, teacher leaders, administrators (you name it)—Flywheel supports people who see themselves or come to see themselves as activists, innovators, deep implementers, leaders, and change agents.

### WHAT MAKES FLYWHEEL DIFFERENT FROM OTHER LEADERSHIP COACHING MODELS

1. It develops leadership for change, not just managing day-to-day challenges.
2. It’s geared especially for leaders at the helm of crucial projects in the organization.
3. It’s designed for any leader at any level in the system, not limited to administrators.
4. It seeks to rewire the system for sustainable change—not just implement good ideas that never take hold.
5. It helps leaders deepen their leadership abilities through focus on real work and real issues in the organization.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is divided into four main parts:

Part I is called *Promise*, which includes two chapters that describe what a transformational approach to leadership coaching can produce for individuals, leaders, and organizations. The first chapter in *Promise* lays out the concepts of transformation theory and relates them to leadership and to the process of leadership coaching. In this chapter, the story of Carrie and Sarah, two leaders engaged in leadership coaching helps you see transformation theory in action. The second chapter in *Promise* focuses on the benefits that come when all leaders see themselves as coaches. These benefits include job-embedded professional development, developing leadership capacity, and leveraging and sustaining their own energy for important work.

Part II of this book is called *Projects*, and describes the transformational change work most worthy of leadership coaching. Chapter 3 explores how leadership coaches assist leaders in identifying projects that have the potential to change education for a greater good. Chapter 4 provides ideas and tools for leadership coaches to use to inspire leaders to take action and get important work moving in the first 100 days.

Part III of this book is titled *Practice*. Part III contains the most number of chapters (Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9), each one focused on the actual process of leadership coaching. My hope is that after you read the chapters in Part III, you begin to use all or some of the ideas to coach your colleagues and peers.

- Chapter 5 is an overview of the Flywheel system. It describes all of the elements to use if you provide long-term coaching to colleagues and peers.
- Chapter 6 takes one of the elements in the system, the Powerful Coaching Conversation, and provides an overview of all eight of the steps in the conversation protocol. In this chapter, there is also a pacing chart that helps you plan out coaching sessions that last anywhere from 30 minutes to 75 minutes.
- Chapters 7 through 10 focus on crucial coaching communication skills.
  - Chapter 7 is called *Listen, Just Listen* and as you might expect, it focuses entirely on the critical coaching communication skill of listening.
  - Chapter 8 is called *Question Assumptions and Deepen Understanding*, and teaches you how to use summaries, paraphrases, and to ask clarifying and detail questions in order to help the leaders you coach uncover assumptions and make potentially transformational discoveries. In this chapter you also learn how to use the mental model known as The Ladder of Inference, as a parallel tool for asking questions.

- Chapter 9 is called *Thought Leadership Questions* and teaches you to ask questions that put ideas on the table designed to inspire insight and innovation in your coachees.
- Chapter 10 is called *The Jaunty Walk*. This chapter pulls together the final stages of the Powerful Coaching Conversation that lead your coachees to make strong commitments to take action, which over time accumulate to the point where real change is visible.

Part IV, *Progress*, contains two chapters and is the final section in this book. Chapter 11 describes considerations and approaches for measuring the impact of leadership coaching. Chapter 12 ends this book with encouragement for making leadership coaching a movement in your organization. It contains myriad strategies that ultimately create a pervasive culture of leadership coaching; a culture where leaders embrace coaching for themselves and for others.

## **BENEFITS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

The main message of this book is that transformational leadership coaching is an essential strategy for supporting and sustaining educational leaders who are engaged in meaningful work in order to achieve results that change the organization for the better. The benefits from applying the ideas presented in this book are many:

- More people interacting with each other through coaching—an approach that empowers and builds efficacy in others.
- More leaders emerging from within the system to assume positions of leadership.
- More people feeling confident about tackling challenging but important projects to advance the goals of the organization.
- An engaged workforce: employees fully participating in the most important initiatives of the organization.
- Ownership and accountability for important work.
- Increased happiness in the workforce through improved relationships, conversations, and interactions on the job.
- More people interacting with each other in ways that spur innovation.
- More people accomplishing meaningful work.
- Wise and timely decisions and solutions to challenges, quandaries, and problems.
- A renewed workforce with energy to achieve even more meaningful work.

## WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is for anyone who wants to know how to use a transformational approach to leadership coaching in order to engage, influence, and support their peers and colleagues as they accomplish meaningful work. In education, leaders who want to add coaching to their leadership repertoire come from the site level, district level, state level, and university level. These savvy leaders understand that their primary job is to develop the leadership capacity of the people they work with and/or supervise, and they want to learn how to coach others on the job, and on the fly.

Specifically, these groups of leaders will find value in reading *Flywheel*:

1. Administrators and teacher leaders who want to add coaching as a leadership strategy for supporting and sustaining colleagues, peers, and direct reports. These individuals are principals, assistant principals, deans, department chairs, teacher leaders of professional learning communities, superintendents, assistant superintendents, regional directors, program supervisors, and curriculum coordinators.
2. Individuals who identify themselves as coaches and for whom coaching is one of their primary responsibilities. These coaches may work internal or external to the school/district/university/organization or they may work for an agency that provides leadership coaching to leaders in these systems.
3. Supervisors/directors/mentors of coaching programs who make decisions about the professional development they wish to provide for the coaches they supervise.
4. Senior leaders who want to create a culture of coaching to build leadership capacity throughout the organization, and who want the administrators they employ to adopt a coaching approach in their management/leadership style as they work with the people they supervise.
5. Leaders who want to know what to expect from a leadership coach, should they choose to work with one.

Download tools and access other resources at [www.WisdomOut.com](http://www.WisdomOut.com) and at [www.Corwin.com/Flywheel](http://www.Corwin.com/Flywheel).

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUED LEARNING

In addition to the many tools found between the covers of this book, I also invite you to come to [www.Corwin.com/Flywheel](http://www.Corwin.com/Flywheel) and to [www.WisdomOut.com](http://www.WisdomOut.com) to download them for handy and convenient use. When you visit the Wisdom Out website, you also have the chance to register for complimentary webinars on leadership and leadership coaching that further illuminate the ideas presented in this book.

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# About the Author



**Elle Allison-Napolitano**, Founder of Wisdom Out, specializes in leadership development and organizational learning. Dr. Allison-Napolitano works with leaders, aspiring leaders, senior leadership teams, school teams, and leadership coaches to teach them the strategies, practices, and tools they need to increase their organization's capacity for sustainable change.

Elle has been a teacher, principal, supervisor of school improvement, assistant superintendent, educational consultant, and leadership coach. She earned her PhD in Organizational Learning from the University of New Mexico. She is a graduate of the National Staff Development's Council's Academy and is a member of the National Speakers Association. She is author of several books and articles on leadership renewal and resilience and on leadership coaching.

Elle lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband Len and their 16-year-old Vizsla dog named "Olé." Contact Elle at [elle@wisdomout.com](mailto:elle@wisdomout.com) for customized workshops, leadership academies, boot camps, and keynotes. To register for the Wisdom Out newsletter and monthly complimentary webinars, please visit [www.WisdomOut.com](http://www.WisdomOut.com).