



CHAPTER

1

Introduction



Dan Lyons was kind of an accidental school leader. A popular wrestling coach and social studies teacher in a rural desert town, Dan was asked to serve as assistant principal at the middle school. Although he had no formal administrative training, he passed the administrative licensure exam, which was all his state required for certification, and assumed his leadership duties at the middle school. The following summer he was asked to fill an opening as assistant principal of Desert Flower High School—a dubious honor, as Desert Flower had a terrible reputation as being a rough, dangerous place for students and teachers alike. Rival gangs provoked fights during almost every passing period, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Suspension rates were among the highest in the state. The teachers were demoralized and held a low opinion of both the capacity and future prospects of their students. Without effective direction or governance, teachers did as they pleased when it came to instruction. The school secretary pretty much ruled the roost, doling out insults and foul language to get things done. The school was out of compliance with state and federal regulations, and no one could remember a time when the high school had been fully accredited.

Early one morning, just a week before the opening of the school year, Dan got a call from the superintendent. Late the night before, an e-mail trail had revealed an inappropriate romantic relationship between the high school principal and another employee in the district. The principal had been fired, and Dan had been named the new principal of the high school. The only bright spot was that he was offered a leadership coach, Diane, to help him navigate the turbulent waters ahead.

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Dan was feeling pretty overwhelmed the first time he and Diane met. Diane listened to the story of his journey as an educator and the turn of events that had led to his new leadership role. Throughout, Diane offered Dan empathetic reflections of the many feelings and needs stirred up for Dan by both the challenge and the promise in what he faced. Diane then began exploring what Dan perceived to be his own outstanding strengths as well as the strengths, however latent, of the school itself. Diane invited Dan to make three wishes for the school. His first wish was to create a sense of safety and calm in the school so as to overcome the climate of fear and intimidation. He also wanted to increase student engagement by improving the quality of instruction. Finally, he wanted to put the school on the path to state accreditation.

In collaboration with Diane, Dan decided building positive relationships in the school would be his first focus. He began by interviewing each staff member, asking strengths-based questions similar to those Diane had asked him. Dan took careful notes during these meetings, and from these collective wishes he framed a vision of the school culture to share at his first staff meeting. Diane and Dan carefully planned that first staff meeting and subsequent meetings to model the kind of engagement he hoped to see in the classrooms. For example, Dan stood at the door of the meeting and greeted each staff member by name with a smile or a handshake. Dan then invited the teachers to do the same with their students. This one small change cut down on fights during passing periods, thus reducing the number of suspensions.

With Diane as his thinking partner, Dan began to transform the school culture. He instituted a well-supervised intramural sports program and a debate club. The first debate nearly ended in a fistfight, but with training the students' discipline and the clarity of their arguments grew. The debate team began to debate at regional and state events, increasing their confidence and pride. During a field trip to a local courthouse, the judge came out in his robe to greet the students and told them, "I am where I am today because of my high school debate team." As Dan and Diane walked the school, visiting classrooms, they also noted the need to improve the instructional skills of the teachers. Diane helped Dan identify resources focused on levels of rigor and the Common Core. Teachers were introduced to the four Cs of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. They were then asked which they would like to focus on first. Greater student engagement fueled greater innovation and risk-taking on the part of teachers.

With a state accreditation visit looming in January, Dan appointed a team of teachers different from those who had served before. Diane assisted Dan in carefully planning for these meetings. She also assisted Dan with planning a presentation to the school board outlining the initiatives underway at the school. They rehearsed the points he would make and how he would respond to questions. On the night

of the presentation, Dan stood before the board well prepared and confident. In January, just five months after that early-morning phone call, the school passed its accreditation visit and the faculty and staff celebrated the changes that were occurring. At the end of the year, a faculty member marveled that as a school they had begun to have hope and to believe in themselves again. From such a discouraging and desolate place, she noted, the school was turning into an amazing place!

Results like those Dan achieved with Diane are what have made coaching such a popular approach for fostering skills and performance improvement. Coaching facilitates learning that sticks. Educators increasingly recognize the limitations of traditional forms of professional development, such as trainings and demonstrations. Regardless of how inspiring and memorable such experiences may be, they seldom translate into sustained attitude and behavior changes. Leadership coaching has arisen, then, to fill the professional development gap. It does this not only by getting leaders to think about their own experiences and to practice new behaviors but, more importantly, by getting them excited about the prospect of learning new things and becoming masterful educational leaders.

Leadership coaching can be a powerful intervention. At its best, coaching enables people not only to make incremental improvements in technique but also to make quantum leaps forward in their ways of working and being in the world. And it does so through the age-old art of conversation. In partnership with a trained coach, educational leaders who aspire to greatness can achieve that goal for both themselves and the schools they serve. Evoking greatness from people describes the primary task of leadership as well as of leadership coaches. We stand ready, willing, and able to evoke the best from, through, and with the people we serve.

THE PROMISE AND PRACTICE OF COACHING

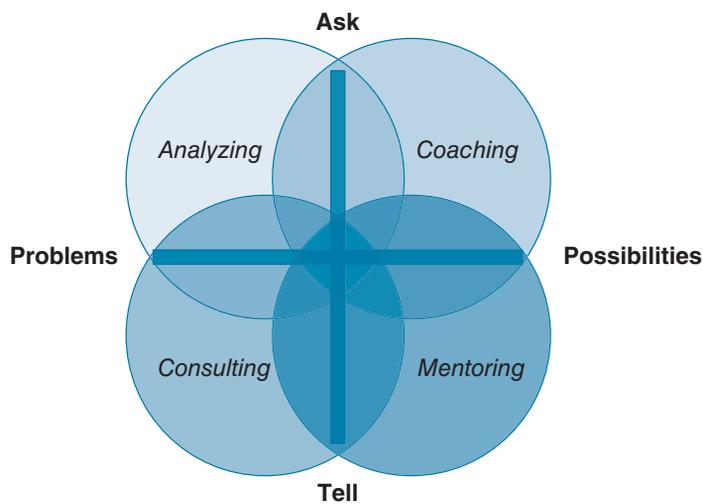
If ever there was a setting ripe for the new possibilities and energy that coaching conversations have to offer, it is the one we are living in now. Our world is inviting us to reinvent schooling and the learning that takes place in schools. It is time for a change in leadership practice that coaching can help bring about. That promise can only be realized, however, when leadership coaches develop strong partnerships with those they coach. Traditional “tell-and-sell” approaches to coaching interfere with adult learning, undermine the quality of relationships, limit the scope of conversation, and diminish the effectiveness of coaching. When it comes to adult learning, a different approach is required. That approach is what this book is all about.

Leadership coaching is individualized, job-embedded professional development. Coaching is one form of relationship-based professional development (RBPD).

These methods stand in contrast to large-group methods of professional development. While seemingly an efficient way to deliver information about new methods and approaches to a sizeable group of people at once, large-group methods have consistently fallen short in their ability to produce sustained changes in professional practice. The dimensions of RBPDP fall along two continua—ask-tell and problems-possibilities—creating a two-by-two matrix, as depicted in Figure 1.1. When we ask about problems, we show up in the role of *analyst*, whereas when we give advice about how to solve those problems, we show up as a *consultant*. When we shift our focus from problems to the possibilities inherent in a situation or in the capabilities of the person we are working with, we move to the right side of the matrix. When we offer advice based on our own experiences and propensities, we may be in the role of a *mentor*. To serve in the role of a *coach*, however, is to move to the upper right-hand quadrant and to do more asking than telling and to focus more on possibilities than on problems. Notice that the circle representing each role extends beyond the boundaries of its quadrant. This indicates there are times when an analyst might inform about possibilities, a mentor might ask about problems, or a coach might talk about possibilities. The diagram is just a reminder that the primary job of a coach is asking rather than telling, with a focus on possibilities more than on problems.

The evocative approach aims to inspire motivation and movement without provoking resistance or power struggles. To do this, it honors both the autonomy needs of educational leaders and the educational standards of their schools. It is challenging but not impossible to do both. That’s the tightrope evocative coaches seek to walk, and it happens only when they treat leaders as though they have the inherent creativity, intelligence, and tacit knowledge to figure out for themselves how to be

FIGURE 1.1 Relationship-Based Professional Development



successful. Rather than taking a consultant approach, evocative coaches emphasize listening more than talking, asking more than telling, and reflecting more than commenting. Such coaching is not about giving advice, demonstrating techniques, solving problems, or offering constructive criticism. Although these occasionally become part of the process, they are neither the starting point nor the primary method we employ. We prefer to listen with empathy and to inquire appreciatively into the strengths of the person we are coaching. These inquiries open up clients to the prospect of change and engage coachees in their own unique performance-improvement processes.

Evocative coaching connects leaders to the best of what is and moves them to the best of what might be. In even the worst of circumstances with even the most problematic of schools or districts, evocative coaches LEAD (listen—empathize—appreciate—design) to shake loose something new. Evocative coaches respect the individuality of clients and collaborate with them by exploring their stories, understanding their feelings, appreciating their strengths, and enhancing their designs. These four steps make up the dynamic process of evocative coaching conversations, enabling educational leaders to reconnect with their passion and move to increasing levels of personal and professional mastery. The process of evocative coaching can be viewed as a dance that builds self-efficacy through awareness, trust, and experimentation.

Evocative coaching develops growth-fostering relationships that challenge and support people along the journey of professional growth. Instead of taking over and directing traffic, evocative coaches assist educational leaders with clarifying and defining their own paths of development. It keeps the responsibility for professional growth with the coachee, exactly where it needs to be for sustained learning and performance improvement. We coach with the awareness that we will not always be there to support our coachees, so it is crucial our focus remain on building capacity so they can flourish on their own. Once we abandon the role of change agent, we can build trust and rapport and engage the leaders we coach in nonjudgmental conversations about their experiences, feelings, needs, ambitions, and goals. We can help them outgrow negative behaviors by working with positive data regarding their strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and resources. Doing so enables us to see them come alive, right before our very eyes, as they brainstorm new ideas and experiment with new approaches. When learning is a self-directed task, it becomes more enjoyable *and* productive.

It takes courage to start a conversation. But if we don't start talking to one another, nothing will change. Conversation is the way we discover how to transform our world, together.

—Meg Wheatley (2002, p. 31)

THE FIVE CONCERNS OF COACHING

Coaching becomes evocative when it taps into five animating factors of adult learning: consciousness, connection, competence, creativity, and contribution. Without attending to these five concerns, the promise of transformational change is unlikely to be realized. With attention to these concerns, educational leaders may rise to new heights of ambition and ability, discovering powerful new solutions to the persistent and complex challenges they often face.

CONCERN FOR *CONSCIOUSNESS*

Coaching becomes evocative when the coach's concern for consciousness generates increased self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-monitoring on the part of the coachee. This lays the groundwork for all experiential learning. Mindfulness—nonjudgmental, attentive awareness of what is happening in the present moment—represents both the consciousness that makes conversations evocative and the consciousness generated by such conversations. When coaching conversations entail pressure, demands, and implicit finger-wagging, educational leaders take that consciousness into their efforts to improve performance. When coaching conversations entail empathy, requests, and curious “what-ifs,” educational leaders become more willing and able to play with different variables and to make appropriate and meaningful innovations.

Understanding this, evocative coaches lean in to listen to stories, express empathy, ask questions, and cocreate experiments that increase mindfulness. By demonstrating an appreciative interest in the whole person, including the fullness of their experience, evocative coaches expand awareness to include what is happening in the moment, what needs are being stimulated, and what strategies or approaches are working better than others. Assisting educational leaders to attend to such matters facilitates natural learning. Paulo Freire (2000) called such facilitation the raising of a critical consciousness that engages learners in reading their world. The goal of such critical consciousness, according to Freire, is for people to become active agents in the creation of their own lives and the democratic ideal in society at large.

A clear and accurate appreciation of the present moment, without generalizations, exaggerations, or evaluative judgments, is critical to continuous skill and performance improvements. One must recognize what is really going on. Evocative coaches learn to listen for the observational core behind stories and then, through empathy and inquiry, make those dynamics known to the leader. It is not a matter of pointing them out but of getting coachees to recognize and understand those dynamics for themselves. As Zeus and Skiffington (2000) noted, “Coaching involves helping individuals access what they know. They may never have asked themselves the questions, but they have the answers. A coach assists, supports, and encourages individuals to find these answers” (p. 3).

As part of the self-awareness that grows from an evocative coaching relationship, educational leaders come to a greater consciousness of their readiness to change. When coachees are feeling ambivalent about how best to meet a leadership challenge, for example, evocative coaching can assist them to appreciate what that ambivalence is all about and what they can learn from it. When coachees express resistance or defeat, communicating either an “I won’t” or “I can’t” attitude, the adroit use of empathy and inquiry, rather than analysis and pressure, soon translates these attitudes into “I might,” “I will,” “I am,” and “I still am” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2002).

Fostering greater awareness is a key work of evocative coaching. Effective coaching “helps clients to discover for themselves the new thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and moods that strengthen their ability to take action and achieve what is important to them” (International Coach Federation, 2008b, p. 3). Masterful coaches assist clients to process in the present in order to “expand the client’s awareness of how to experience thoughts and issues at the level of the mind, body, heart and/or spirit” (International Association of Coaching, 2009, p. 2).

CONCERN FOR CONNECTION

Coaching also becomes evocative when we establish a life-giving connection between ourselves and those we are coaching. As with consciousness, this connection spills over into the way leaders connect with themselves and with others in the educational environment. The carrot and stick may goad and prod people into action, but only life-giving, high-trust connections have the ability to inspire greatness. Such connections free clients to venture out and take on new challenges by virtue of the safety net they provide. When the connection is strong, the adventure of learning and performance improvement becomes an enjoyable game rather than a punishing task. Absent such connections, coaches and educational leaders inevitably fall short of accomplishing their mission to promote student success (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). With such connections, a zone of possibility opens for leaders and their schools and districts to accomplish the mission at hand in new and satisfying ways.

Human beings are hardwired for connection. Incentives are not required to generate the motivation for people to want to connect in productive ways with themselves and with others. Evocative coaches recognize the power of listening, empathy, and inquiry to establish connection and foster growth. Freire (2000) noted that “dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants” (p. 77). It is rather an act of cocreation that comes from the connection itself. Dialogue, in Freire’s sense of the word, is engaging and energizing, enrolling people in the search for the best in themselves and in their methods. That happens only when nobody is trying to win. When coaches are trying to win over educational

leaders to their point of view or strategy of action, dialogue is disrupted. Evocative coaches set aside the desire to be right, seeking instead to establish the quality of connection that makes learning and growth possible.

CONCERN FOR *COMPETENCE*

Evocative coaches work from the belief that coachees are whole, creative, resourceful, resilient, and able to master the art and science of leadership, even though they may be out of touch with these abilities in the present moment. The concern for competence, then, is not to “make” educational leaders competent. That approach gives priority to the expert knowledge of the coach. The concern is rather to discover, recognize, and celebrate the competence these leaders already have. By appreciating that competence, both obvious and latent, evocative coaches prioritize the process of adult learning. Assisting leaders to clarify what they want and need, to identify and build upon their strengths, and to conduct no-fault learning experiments in the service of mutually agreed-upon goals is the key to assisting coachees to make quantum leaps forward in the identification of designs and strategies that work for them. The challenge for coaches is to suspend the desire to demonstrate our expertise. As well intentioned as it may be, the expert approach communicates judgment and undermines the confidence of leaders in their own abilities. Professional competence is not just a matter of knowing the right way to do something; it means adaptively applying skills to meet the changing needs of emerging situations.

There is no one universal path to competence in any profession, apart from a love of learning and a commitment to continuous performance improvement. Until and unless that passion is evoked, the process of coaching will likely revert to the telling of war stories and the giving of advice, and the competence of coachees will go both unrecognized and unfulfilled. Once that passion is evoked, however, coaching enables leaders to develop and better use their intrinsic competence for performance improvement. By paying attention to strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and resources, leaders find the motivation and self-efficacy for taking their competence to another level. Instead of a remediation of problems, evocative coaching generates an appreciation of possibilities. This shift, from a focus on incompetence to competence, changes both the tone and the outcomes of coaching.

CONCERN FOR *CREATIVITY*

In addition to paying attention to consciousness, connection, and competence, coaching must also unleash creativity if it is to be evocative. That calls for a light-hearted and playful approach to the coaching dynamic. Although the work of coaching is serious business, with a serious agenda—performance improvement—that does not make seriousness the method of choice when it

comes to evocative coaching. Indeed, pressing too hard for and getting too attached to an outcome are sure-fire ways to cook up resistance and spoil both the experience and outcomes of coaching. Overly intense pressure can block creativity and get clients fixated on doing things “right” rather than on entertaining new interpretations and possibilities through brainstorming and exploring a wide variety of hypotheses. Although evidence-based methodologies are worth learning and practicing to see how they go and how they feel, true performance mastery emerges only when people creatively adapt and appropriate these methodologies for themselves.

Creativity starts with curiosity, a natural human trait that needs only to be unleashed and encouraged. Just as little children leverage their built-in curiosity to learn, adults also have a natural inclination to explore new frontiers, to test their limits, and to make just-in-time adjustments in the service of desired outcomes. Instead of trial and error, we frame it as trial and correction—win-learn rather than win-lose. Judgments of failure, both internal and external, block the creative impulse. Understanding this, evocative coaches use empathy and inquiry to turn the coaching dynamic into a playground where coaches and coachees alike can explore freely what they want on the way to performance improvement. Performance anxiety is replaced by positive energy as the conversational space is filled with humor, delight, and wonder. Whether things work well or not, evocative coaches respond with fascination and joy. No experience is so terrible as to have no redeeming aspects, nor is any experience so perfect as to have no improvable aspects. All experience is cherished for what it has to teach.

CONCERN FOR *CONTRIBUTION*

Most educational leaders entered the field because they wanted to make a contribution to the learning and well-being of students, families, and communities. However, that interest too often gets lost under the stresses and strains of life and work. The pressures of schooling, exacerbated in the era of data-driven accountability, can cause leaders to lose sight of the reason they became educators in the first place. Evocative coaches always communicate respect for that original inspiration. When the need for contribution is recognized, honored, and met, people gain the satisfaction that comes from connecting the dots between everyday realities and transcendent aspirations.

That is the powerful gift evocative coaches give to overwhelmed and discouraged educational leaders. By honoring the contribution of these leaders, evocative coaches awaken their passion. When the need for contribution is dismissed, minimized, ridiculed, or caught in the crossfire of conflicting interests, leadership becomes a chore and simply surviving to retirement becomes the goal. Evocative coaches turn the tables on this dynamic by their own certainty that a meaningful contribution can yet be made.

THE DYNAMIC DANCE OF EVOCATIVE COACHING

To understand why we have come to call this approach to coaching *evocative*, it helps to consider the root meanings of the word. It comes from the Latin *ēvocāre*, meaning to call out and to give voice. This captures both the power and the promise of a coaching process that respects and fully applies the insights of adult learning theory and positive psychology. Building on this root meaning, we define evocative coaching in this way:

Evocative coaching is to call forth motivation and movement in people, through conversation and a way of being, so they achieve desired outcomes and enhance their quality of life.

When we *provoke* someone, we do something *to* them in a way that provokes a reaction. To *evoke*, on the other hand, means that we do something *with* someone that unleashes or calls forth his or her full potential in transformational shifts rather than mere incremental improvements. Instead of generating resistance, such coaching assists people to get to where they want to go by unleashing their innate cognitive, emotive, aspirational, and experiential processes. It enables people to find their voice, to answer their calling, and to impact the systems in which they live and work.

Evocative coaching is a person-centered, no-fault, strengths-based coaching model that departs in significant ways from what often goes on under the guise of mentoring or coaching. Rather than focusing on improving the performance of educational leaders through advice-giving, evocative coaches focus on how we can equip those leaders to improve their own performance. We ask and trust clients to take charge of their own learning and growth and are careful not to take too much responsibility ourselves. To do this, we make sure coachees are talking more than we are. We give coachees our full, undivided attention and accept them where they are right now, without making them wrong. Evocative coaching uses empathy and inquiry to appreciate stories and generate new designs. We enable coachees to appreciate the positive value of their own experiences and harness the strengths they have to meet challenges and overcome obstacles. We reframe difficulties and challenges as opportunities to learn, and invite our coachees to discover possibilities and find answers for themselves. We dialogue with our clients regarding their higher purpose and uncover their natural impulse to engage with those they lead and to collaborate with those followers to design and conduct appropriate learning experiments. We assist coachees to draw up a personal blueprint for professional mastery, inspiring and challenging them to go beyond what they would do alone. We support clients in brainstorming and trying new ways of doing things, and we assist them to build supportive environments and teams. We maintain an upbeat, energetic, and positive attitude and use humor to lighten the load when appropriate.

All this constitutes the distinctive elements of evocative coaching. As we shall see throughout the rest of this book, evocative coaching is a dynamic dance that can be choreographed with four steps: listen—empathize—appreciate—design. The first two steps, which assist educational leaders to appreciate the best of what is, turn naturally into the second two steps, which enable coachees to generate the best of what might be. The process then loops back for additional iterations, which are portrayed on a Möbius strip to reflect the dynamic and expansive interplay of these elements in the service of continual learning and growth (see Figure 1.2). The steps are easy to remember, albeit challenging to practice. Coaches are so accustomed to traditional “tell-and-sell” methods that they may find it hard to trust more evocative, client-centered approaches. Yet traditional methods have not produced desired results. To turn that around, it is time for a new vision, model, and framework for transforming schools, one leader and one conversation at a time. Person-centered, no-fault, strengths-based conversations are more likely to generate openness to change and less likely to generate resistance than traditional coach-centered, high-stakes, problem-focused conversations. We introduce each of four dance steps below.

LISTEN

Coaching begins when people share their stories. These stories reflect the sense people make of their experiences. They are never the experiences themselves; they are rather attempts to understand, value, and shape the experiences in ways that make sense and guide future actions. Because coaching works with the stories educational leaders tell to themselves and to others, it is possible to change everything in the twinkling of an eye. Tell a new story and we get a new experience. That is especially true when we begin to work with the attributions of cause and effect explicit and/or implicit in most stories. Coaches listen for those attributions because they illuminate a client’s path of development. For example:

- What is the overarching theme? Does it lie more with threat or opportunity?
- Where is the locus of control? Does it lie more with the leader or on blaming others?

FIGURE 1.2 The Möbius Model



- How is the problem defined? Does it frame others as enemies or allies?
- What is happening with energy? Is it diminishing or increasing?
- What is happening with values? Are they being honored or compromised?
- How is the objective defined? Does it lie more with metrics or morale?

There is a panoply of attributions we can listen for and find. The secret is to listen mindfully, without judgment or haste, and then to ask new questions that explore the way things might be. How else can the story be told? What might have happened if different decisions had been made? How does the experience advance understandings of and aspirations for professional praxis? Reframing stories in this way, and exploring client stories with curiosity, is what we call *imaginative story listening*. It is an attempt to flesh out the details and meanings of stories in the service of client learning, growth, and change. It may be tempting to rush through stories to get to strategies, but that often generates unhappy results. Quick fixes rarely work, and if they work they rarely stick. Unappreciated stories tend to undermine behavioral change efforts. That's why evocative coaching starts with listening for stories.

Storytelling needs to be in the tool kit of the design thinker—in the sense not of a tidy beginning, middle, and end but of an ongoing, open-ended narrative that engages people and encourages them to carry it forward and write their own conclusions.

—Tim Brown (2009, p. 158)

EMPATHIZE

Most of the time, the stories educational leaders tell include a mix of empirical observations and subjective evaluations, including attributions about what is going on, what works and doesn't work, who is to blame, and how things might improve. When things are going well, the story has a more upbeat, generative, and joyful energy. When things are not going well, the story has a more downbeat and discouraged energy. Either way, coachees need to feel understood, appreciated, and accepted in order to release their energy and channel it in creative directions. Until and unless this happens, not much will come from coaching. The tension of negative evaluations will likely escalate into a distracting din, making it harder for coachees to find a way forward. That is why empathy represents such a critical part of story listening. Empathy clears the palette, inviting new interpretations and ideas to emerge.

Authentic empathy is a respectful, no-fault understanding and appreciation of someone's experience. It is an orientation and practice that fosters radically new change possibilities by shifting the focus from particular strategies to universal needs.

People tell stories to make meaning of their experiences, attempting to describe and account for things that happen through their narratives. Often, however, we misattribute our feelings to particular strategies rather than to what is happening with the underlying needs. As a result, people get caught up in a self-defeating cycle of interpretations, judgments, criticisms, blame, and diagnoses (Rosenberg, 2003, pp. 52–54). This cycle is counterproductive to both the coaching dynamic and to performance improvement. Evocative coaches learn to work with the distinction between strategies and needs in order to facilitate the movement and flow of both the coaching conversation and the developmental progress of clients. To do that, coaches learn to make use of the Nonviolent Communication model developed by Rosenberg (2003) and others over the past 50 years. Upon hearing a story, coaches notice and reflect the client’s feelings and needs in ways that release tension, facilitate calm, and expand awareness. Expressing empathy and connecting with clients on this level is the second step in the dynamic dance of evocative coaching.

APPRECIATE

Once educational leaders have told their stories and explored the richness of those stories, and once they have received empathy for their feelings and needs, the flow of evocative coaching turns naturally to inquiry and design. Educational leaders come to understand themselves in new ways and become open to the consideration and observation of new possibilities. They eagerly want to notice what works and to learn how to make things work better. The first two steps of evocative coaching are designed to broker that eagerness. Once there, the next two steps are designed to translate that eagerness into action. That happens best when we inquire into a client’s strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and resources rather than into their weaknesses, deficiencies, requirements, and avoidances.

Coaching does not become evocative as long as coaching conversations revolve around how educational leaders can fix their problems. This is not to say that coachees have no problems, but that it is easier to outgrow problems when leaders focus on strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and resources rather than on weaknesses, deficiencies, requirements, and avoidances. Both adult learning theories and positive psychology support this approach. Research indicates that appreciative, strengths-based inquiries are more effective and empowering than analytic, deficits-based ones (Fredrickson, 2009). Positive inquiries also represent a much more enjoyable way to learn and provide yet another way to reframe stories and engage in story listening. It is wonderfully reorienting and empowering to ask open-ended, strengths-based questions such as the following:

- What is working with your approach? What else is working? What else?
- What talents and abilities are serving you well? What else?
- What fills you with energy and hope? What else?

- What enables you to do as well as you are doing? What else?
- What is the positive intent of your actions? What else?
- What would success look like? What else?

The more aware clients are of their problems, deficits, and limitations, the less likely they are to imagine and pursue new possibilities. The point of asking “What else?” on multiple occasions is to evoke other ways of telling the story. Strengths-based questions remind coachees that stories of hardship, frustration, and failure do not represent the whole picture. Appreciative, strengths-based inquiries turn that around. They remind coachees they have what it takes to learn what they need to know. With the knowledge that in every situation something is always working, no matter how bleak or discouraging things may appear, coaches can be courageous in their inquiries as to high points worth celebrating. Such inquiries elevate the focus, self-efficacy, resourcefulness, and wherewithal of educational leaders.

Along with appreciating educational leaders’ strengths and opportunities, evocative coaches also inquire into the aspirations coachees hold. Aspirations power change. Assisting educational leaders to visualize where they want to lead their school or district increases self-efficacy and motivation. Coachees become engaged with their visions, open to new possibilities, and eager to try new approaches. Such questions beckon clients forward. Asking educational leaders what and how they want to learn, rather than telling them what to do, enables them to discover and design that learning for themselves through observation and exploration.

DESIGN

When the stories educational leaders tell are received and reframed through listening, expressing empathy, and appreciative inquiry, ideas bubble up and coachees become inspired to design ways to turn their aspirations into actions and their opportunities into realities. Little to no instruction or incentives are required to get this going. Instead, once educational leaders become detached from both the fear of failure and the illusion as to how bad and impossible things are, they become fearless in the self-directed pursuit of that which will enable them to learn and grow. We forward the action by designing learning experiments to test the hypotheses that leaders hold about themselves and their organizations. In this way, they attend to both the process and impact of their actions. By assisting clients to become confident and optimistic about their ability to conduct learning experiments, coaches become catalysts for growth and change. The old adage, “Where there is a will there is a way,” can be flipped to reveal an important insight into the power of self-efficacy: “Where there is a way there is a will.” As clients see a way forward for improving their skills and performance in their schools and districts, motivation and movement naturally follow.

Brainstorming is an essential part of design thinking. This process involves generating many new ideas as to how to do things better without regard to their desirability, feasibility, or value. Sharing in the process of generating new ideas—taking turns with the coachee as one idea morphs into another—can open up the process even further. Some central questions to brainstorm around are “What could I pay attention to that would improve my performance in this situation?” “How could I build on what’s worked in the past in some new ways?” and “What untapped resources do we have available that might help in this situation?” Such questions foster learning that is both self-directed and enjoyable. By getting educational leaders to identify what’s important, coaches nudge them to make new choices and to try new behaviors with a minimum of resistance. The nonjudgmental generation and exploration of possibilities can quiet negative self-talk and free up creative energy. Evocative coaches assist educational leaders to review the options generated through brainstorming, choose the most interesting and doable ones, and field-test their ideas through learning experiments that are challenging, yet not overwhelming. We can play with different possibilities, pick the ones that appear intrinsically interesting and valuable, design experiments, and align resources to make those experiments more fruitful.

The key in the design phase is for coaches to avoid bringing out judgmental frames as to how things are to be done “right” or even “better.” We are not the experts telling educational leaders what to do. We are the cocreators with coachees of experimental designs that may or may not work out as expected. Either outcome represents success as long as the experiments are conducted, data are collected, learning is captured, and results are incorporated into future experiments. Skill and performance improvements are continuous, iterative, personalized, and evolutionary. What works for one person, in one place, at one time, may not work for another. Coaches and clients, therefore, design experiments that coachees find interesting, doable, and relevant to the challenges they face.



In her new role as director of special education, Maureen was having difficulty with a behaviorist who could be very assertive in department and IEP meetings. She was finding herself being reactive to his input and felt like she was being thrown off her goal to facilitate open communication. So we designed an experiment in which she tried giving him greater input outside of the meetings. She would e-mail him and ask for agenda items before the meetings and talk to him about his perspective on issues that would be coming up. She found that the meetings ran much more smoothly, with broader participation by others. When another issue came up later in the year, she asked me, “Can we do another experiment?”

—Linda, Leadership Coach

WHY EVOCATIVE COACHING WORKS

Evocative coaching works because it applies the principles of adult learning theory and positive psychology. It not only supports self-directed learning, it also draws upon the increasing evidence of the impact of positive relationships, images, energy, and emotions in fostering positive actions (Cooperrider, 2000; Fredrickson, 2009). By respecting the underlying interests and abilities of educational leaders, empathizing with them, appreciating their experiences, and building on their strengths, evocative coaching enables people to achieve better results than they would on their own or with the use of more traditional methods.

As children most of us were taught through a combination of two processes: instruction and incentives. Parents and teachers told us what to do and how to do it correctly. They may have also offered incentives, such as rewards, compliments, punishments, and reprimands to get us to do the work and master the domain. Although it is not uncommon to use these same processes with adults, especially when it comes to training and knowledge transfer, educational and psychological research documents the limitations of this approach. Adults seek to figure things out for themselves, for their own reasons, in their own way, on their own schedule, and with their own resources. For coaching with adults to be effective, it needs to take these and other adult-specific factors into consideration. Timothy Gallwey (2000), an early leader in the modern coaching movement, called for a limit to the use of instruction and incentives in coaching due to their oftentimes debilitating impact on the internal dynamics that optimize skill development and performance improvement. Ironically, he noted, the more important the stakes (i.e., external requirements and reinforcements), the more instruction distracts people from their own natural learning style. Gallwey's insights build upon a century of research and practice in adult education and learning theory (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), from which the following characteristics of adult learners have come into focus:

- Adults are autonomous and self-directed.
- Adult learning builds on a wide variety of previous experiences, knowledge, mental models, self-direction, interests, resources, and competencies.
- Adults want to know the relevance of the content to be learned to their goals and roles before they will invest the attention and effort needed for new learning.
- Adults are focused on solutions. Instead of being interested in knowledge for its own sake, adult learning seeks immediate application and problem solving.
- Adult learning needs to be facilitated rather than directed. Adults want to be treated as equals and shown respect both for what they know and how they prefer to learn.
- Adults need specific, behavioral feedback that is free of evaluative or judgmental opinions.

These characteristics of adult learners explain why instructions and incentives often interfere with performance. Although it is tempting to tell people how to do things better, this can undermine motivation, provoke resistance, usurp responsibility, rupture relationships, discourage risk-taking, limit imagination, and restrict results. Such methods may “work” in the short run, if “work” is understood as compliance, but they seldom work in the long run, if “work” is understood as mastery. Instruction may undermine autonomy and self-direction. It builds more on the instructor’s experience than the client’s. Incentives set up a dynamic of enforcement rather than support. In short, the use of instructions and incentives violates much of what has been learned about how adults learn.

People don't resist change; they resist being changed.

—Irving Borwick (1969, p. 20)

While educators were studying and developing adult learning theories, psychologists were seeking to understand and improve the dynamics of growth-fostering relationships. The traditions that evocative coaching rests most directly on include humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and social-cognitive theory. Drawing upon these traditions, the following recognitions undergird evocative coaching:

- People are inherently creative and capable.
- The human brain is hardwired to enjoy novelty and growth, which explains the inherent joy of learning.
- Learning takes place when people actively take responsibility for constructing meaning from their experience, either confirming or changing what they already know.
- The meanings people construct determine the actions they take.
- Every person is unique, and yet all people have the same universal needs.
- Empathy, mutuality, and connection make people more cooperative and open people up to change.
- The more people know about their values, strengths, resources, and abilities, the stronger their motivation and the more effective their changes will be.

These recognitions explain why evocative coaching represents such a promising model for generating performance improvements in educational leaders. By assisting coachees to explore their experience with empathy and inquiry, evocative coaching produces freedom, increases positivity, stimulates curiosity, elevates self-efficacy, and leverages latent competencies in the service of desired outcomes. Such coaching does not try to change clients or to persuade them to do things the

“right” way. Rather, evocative coaches dance with educational leaders as they consider their options and invite them to become fully engaged in the process of discovering their own unique strategies for doing better.

You cannot teach a person anything. You can only help him find it within himself.

—Galileo

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Key Points in This Chapter

1. Coaching becomes evocative when it taps into the five animating concerns of coaching: consciousness, connection, competence, creativity, and contribution.
2. Coaching is one form of relationship-based professional development. RBPD can be arrayed along two continua—the ask-tell continuum and the problems-possibilities continuum—forming a four-quadrant model of analyzing, consulting, mentoring, and coaching.
3. Evocative coaching is to call forth motivation and movement in people, through conversation and a way of being, so they achieve desired outcomes and enhance their quality of life.
4. Person-centered, no-fault, strengths-based conversations are more likely to generate openness to change and less likely to generate resistance than traditional coach-centered, high-stakes, problem-focused conversations.
5. The flow of LEAD (listen—empathize—appreciate—design) is understood as a dynamic dance between coach and coachee in which the coach attends to and is responsive to signals about the coachee’s willingness and readiness for change.
6. Given its foundation in adult learning theory and positive psychology, and its demonstrated success when it comes to skills and performance improvement, evocative coaching holds great promise as it sets the stage for high-quality professional learning experiences.



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What makes learning enjoyable for you? Why is it valuable to incorporate fun into the coaching process?
2. What is the best learning experience you have ever had as adult? What made that experience so wonderful? How has that impacted the ways you work with others?
3. What principles of adult learning theory are most relevant to your own experience of learning as an adult? How are those principles different, if at all, from the pedagogy of children?
4. What do you make of Irving Borwick's claim that "people don't resist change; they resist being changed"?
5. How does evocative coaching differ from your experience of traditional mentoring and coaching?
6. What happens to the coaching conversation when coaches get attached to an outcome? How can you release attachment and engage curiosity?
7. Call to mind a particular educational leader you know or have worked with. How might evocative coaching enable that leader to achieve performance improvement in ways that other approaches have not?