



Middle Leaders in High Performance Schools: Coaching For Performance & Building Collective Efficacy

Published on February 25, 2020
With Dr. Pete Stebbins PhD.

While it's undeniable that Principals are critical to a school's overall performance and success, what's often overlooked, and what's even more critical for school success is the capability and performance of the school's Middle Leaders.

Middle Leaders in High Performance Schools: Unsung Heroes

In every High Performance School there is a group of unsung heroes, the middle leaders, who are *absolutely essential* in building a school culture where staff and student can flourish. And, these middle leaders are often *EQUALLY IF NOT MORE UNDER PRESSURE* than their senior leadership colleagues. Middle leaders have a range of roles and job titles – from those aspiring leaders without titles who put their hands up to take on extra responsibilities to the Year Level Coordinators, Heads of Curriculum, Heads of Departments, Heads of Special Education Services, and Deputy Principals. In a High Performance School, Middle leaders are recognised as the lynch pin for school success because they are the ones who execute on the wider school strategies through the direct relationships that they build with frontline teaching and non-teaching staff, students and families in the school community. Middle Leaders are critical in coordinating the efforts of staff on a day-to-day basis while also infusing these actions with the school's vision and values. In doing so, many Middle leaders must manage the additional pressure of having to 'split' their energy, time, and attention between the pressures of leading staff while themselves being led by senior management (becoming the proverbial 'Meat in the Sandwich') on one hand, and doing their best in the classroom on the other.

Supporting Middle Leaders to develop their capability should be in the top tier of priorities for every School Principal, because enabling a lift in school performance from the middle creates the most sustainable strategy for long-term success. So, the big question is: *How then can we best support our Middle Leaders to develop their capability?*

Strategies to Build Middle Leader Capability

There are a number of strategies Middle Leaders can engage in to grow and develop. These include: informal mentoring from trusted colleagues and peers; self-directed learning through reading and watching videos from 'thought leaders' in education and leadership; structured professional development programs; and individual and group coaching programs.

Although peer mentoring, self-directed learning and structured professional development programs each have their own advantages and limitations, effective use of 'coaching programs' is by far the most valuable and reliable strategy for getting a lift in both Middle Leader capability AND school performance. However, it is not simply 'coaching' as a generic strategy but rather a specific type of coaching we call 'performance focused' used in a 'structured program' in either individual or group (preferable) format that has the most impact on a school and its leaders. Let's unpack each of these elements now...

Middle Leader Coaching Programs: Critical Success Factors

Leadership coaching is widely understood to help build awareness, motivation, strategies, and accountability in the coachee to enable them to move from the way things are today towards a desired future state. When establishing a school-based coaching program for Middle Leaders, there are three critical success factors to consider:

1. *Focus – Personal Growth vs. Leadership Performance*
2. *Format - Group vs. Individual*
3. *Formality - Ad Hoc vs. Structured*

1. Focus - Personal Growth vs. Leadership Performance

Above all else, the *Focus* of a coaching program will dictate its outcomes. In schools, Coaching Programs for Middle Leaders designed to target *Personal Growth* needs (such as improving communication, assertiveness, emotional intelligence etc.) are probably the most common, however they may not necessarily be the most impactful in terms of their overall value to the school or the careers of the Middle Leaders themselves.

While personal growth focused coaching programs may be helpful in building Middle Leader confidence and addressing individualised skills gaps, they may not lead to a significant positive impact on School Performance (nor should they as they are primarily focused on personal growth).

In stark contrast to personal growth focused coaching sit *Leadership Performance* focused coaching programs which focus on supporting Middle Leaders to build their capability in leading teams, embedding systems, and pursuing accountable goals to positively transform school culture within their sphere of influence. Through performance focused coaching programs Middle Leaders inevitably build higher leadership capability and implement clearly visible strategies and structures to promote positive school culture.

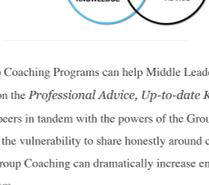
2. Format – One-to-one vs. Group

Regarding *Format*, in schools it is most common that Coaching Programs for Middle Leaders are individualised (one-to-one between the coach and the leader). This arrangement ensures the ultimate focus on the Middle Leaders' issues and the surety of confidentiality that allows them to drop their guard and speak openly and honestly. And, generally speaking, whilst the confidentiality of the one-to-one format can be a real benefit (especially for anxious or novice coachees), the use of one-to-one coaching formats among middle leaders in a large school does have some limitations. Firstly, the confidential nature of most one-to-one coaching means that unless the Middle Leader chooses to share, the content and outcomes of the Coaching session stay between the Middle Leader and their coach – perhaps not the best scenario for creating a shared language and expectation among Middle Leaders to work together to drive school improvement.

Secondly, due to the individualised nature of most one-to-one coaching the agenda is almost always set by the Middle Leader being coached which may or may not reflect the school's wider focus and priorities for which the coaching investment is being made. Further, someone being coached 'doesn't know what they don't know'. Because of this, the speed of a Leader's development will always be limited by their own present-day knowledge and skillsets, increasing only incrementally without outside input from their colleagues.

Finally, while many experienced coaches could offer some fantastic advice to the leaders they coach one-to-one, this too may miss the mark. This is because coaches will only ever hear 'one side of the story' and therefore always lack the vital multi-perspective context of what is going on in the school that could better shape their advice.

The issues present in one-to-one coaching can be addressed by taking a different tact – *Group Coaching*. In contrast to one-to-one coaching sessions Group sessions draw upon both the needs and collective genius of the group. Once robust ground rules are set around confidentiality, Group Coaching Programs can help Middle Leaders rapidly accelerate their growth by drawing on the *Professional Advice*, *Up-to-date Knowledge*, and *Personal Experience* of their peers in tandem with the powers of the Group's Coach to sharpen personal reflection. Further, the vulnerability to share honestly around challenges and growth areas demonstrated in Group Coaching can dramatically increase empathy and levels of trust within a leadership team.



Group Coaching turbo charges individual development because sessions are context rich – Group members can provide each other with feedback based on real life observation, and accountability to action next steps is often more assured due to commitments being made in front of peers. Finally group coaching sessions often result in collaboration and tangible support between sessions, with powerful outcomes observed when the whole group focuses on issues of school transformation - A problem shared is a problem halved.

3. Formality - Ad Hoc vs. Structured

The *Finality* when implementing a Coaching Program for Middle Leaders is *Formality* - Ad Hoc vs. Structured. Many schools favour the Ad Hoc coaching on tap method where coaching is available if and when a leader needs it. While this level of flexibility is nice in theory, we know that in practice all school leaders have an overcrowded schedule, and most feel guilty about allocating time for themselves (even when it's good for them). This is where structure coaching programs that are built into the school calendar and involve all Middle Leaders from across the school shine because leaders are more likely to participate so as not to let their colleagues down.

A further advantage of a structured program is using a robust coaching agenda framework. This ensures that every session is Inclusive, Supportive, Proactively Focused, Strategically Focused, and that group members are Accountable for their goals.

HPTschools Leadership Coaching - Group Agenda 4Px (60min)

Item 1 Inclusion	Welcome <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mission: Every Team in Every School is a High Performance Team</i> • <i>Attitude (Learning Pit, Dig Deep)</i> • <i>Chair/Moderator & Ground Rules (esp. Confidentiality)</i> Warm Up <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>One word Barometer & Level 2/3 Conversation Starter</i> 	Chair All	4 mins
Item 2 Support	Individual Leadership Updates (4 x 3 min each) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Each person shares a summary from their update tool mainly focusing on "Team Development" and "Action Plan" sections</i> 	All	12 mins
Item 3 Proactive	Hot Issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Check for issues raised in updates and call for any final items – select top 3 – majority rule (2 min)</i> • <i>Step 2: (3 x 7 mins) Top 3 issues discussed in 7 minute cycles (1 min explain, 1 min clarify, 4 min discuss and 1 min takeaways)</i> 	All & Led by nominated individual	23 mins
Item 4 Strategic	HPT PD Quick Share <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Artefacts Showcase / Data / Toolkit / Journal Article or Case Presentation (5min share / 5 min discussion)</i> 	Sponsor (rotating)	10 mins
Item 5 Accountable	HPT Leadership Actions – Rightsizing Next 30 Days <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>2 minute updates on key leadership activities to Level Up school performance over next 30 days (4 x 2min each)</i> 	All or nominated presenter	8 mins
Item 6 Accountable	Next Steps: Barometer & Takeaways Each Px: Barometer, Takeaway Action & Satisfaction (1-10) Close: Moderator Feedback & Next Meeting Plan/Roles Moderator feedback: Next meeting date/time: Roles: Chair: Moderator: PD Quick Share:	Chair & Moderator	3 mins

A final benefit of structured coaching programs is that their intent and outcomes are linked through the tools used in the program (like monthly update tools discussed here), making it easy to measure their impact (focuses on issues of school transformation). When tools like these are used well, all participants arrive prepared to get the most from their session.

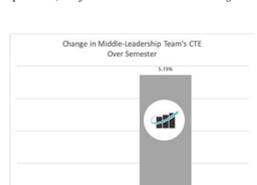
Return of Investment: Middle Leader Coaching & Collective Efficacy

So far we've explored the considerations of *Focus*, *Format*, and *Formality* when implementing a school-based Middle Leaders coaching program. In previous articles we've discussed *Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE)* - the single largest factor that influences school achievement. With the main role of Middle Leaders centring around improving school achievement and performance what better outcome measure to investigate than CTE across a semester when comparing different approaches to coaching.

In our analysis we'll compare the outcomes of two teams of Middle Leaders from different schools. Each Leadership Team is from a large regional High School, and while each school and the typical challenges faced there were largely similar, when it came to supporting their Middle Leaders each school took a very different approach to their coaching program:

- School A – *Traditional Approach (Ad-Hoc, One-to-one, Personal Growth Focused Coaching Program)*
- School B – *Structured, Group-based, Performance Focused Coaching Program*

We know that as a semester progresses the pressure on Middle Leaders increases. Because of this we might expect CTE scores to decline over time. However, the Middle Leaders from School A who had access to a Traditional Coaching Program (Ad-Hoc, One-to-one, Personal Growth Focused) actually increased their CTE by 1.20% across the semester, indicating that they benefited from participation in the program. Middle Leaders from School B who participated in a Structured, Group-based, Performance Focused Coaching Program appeared to have fared even better. Over the semester the Middle Leaders from School B achieved a CTE increase of 5.73%, just over 4x greater compared to the alternate more traditional coaching program approach.



Bringing it Together

I'm a huge fan of coaching. It's a powerful tool that can be used to both support and develop the capability of our schools' Middle Leaders – those unsung superheroes who are the lynch pin for school success. But as we've seen, not all coaching programs are created equal. Because of this when implementing a Middle Leaders Coaching Program it's wise to stop and consider your goals and what this means for the program's *Focus*, *Formality*, and *Formality* rather than automatically sticking to the traditional approaches to coaching in schools which may be selling our Middle Leaders and Schools short.

So if your school has a Leadership Coaching Program, or is thinking about starting one consider this:

1. What is the best *format*, *focus* and *formality* for a Leadership Coaching Program at your school?
2. At your school how does/could your Leadership Coaching program actively focus Middle Leaders on achieving key school improvement objectives as well as maximise sharing and learning amongst Middle Leader peers?
3. At your school how do/could you measure the impact that Leadership coaching has on school performance? (Is it Collective Teacher Efficacy – CTE - the single largest factor that influences school achievement, or something else?).