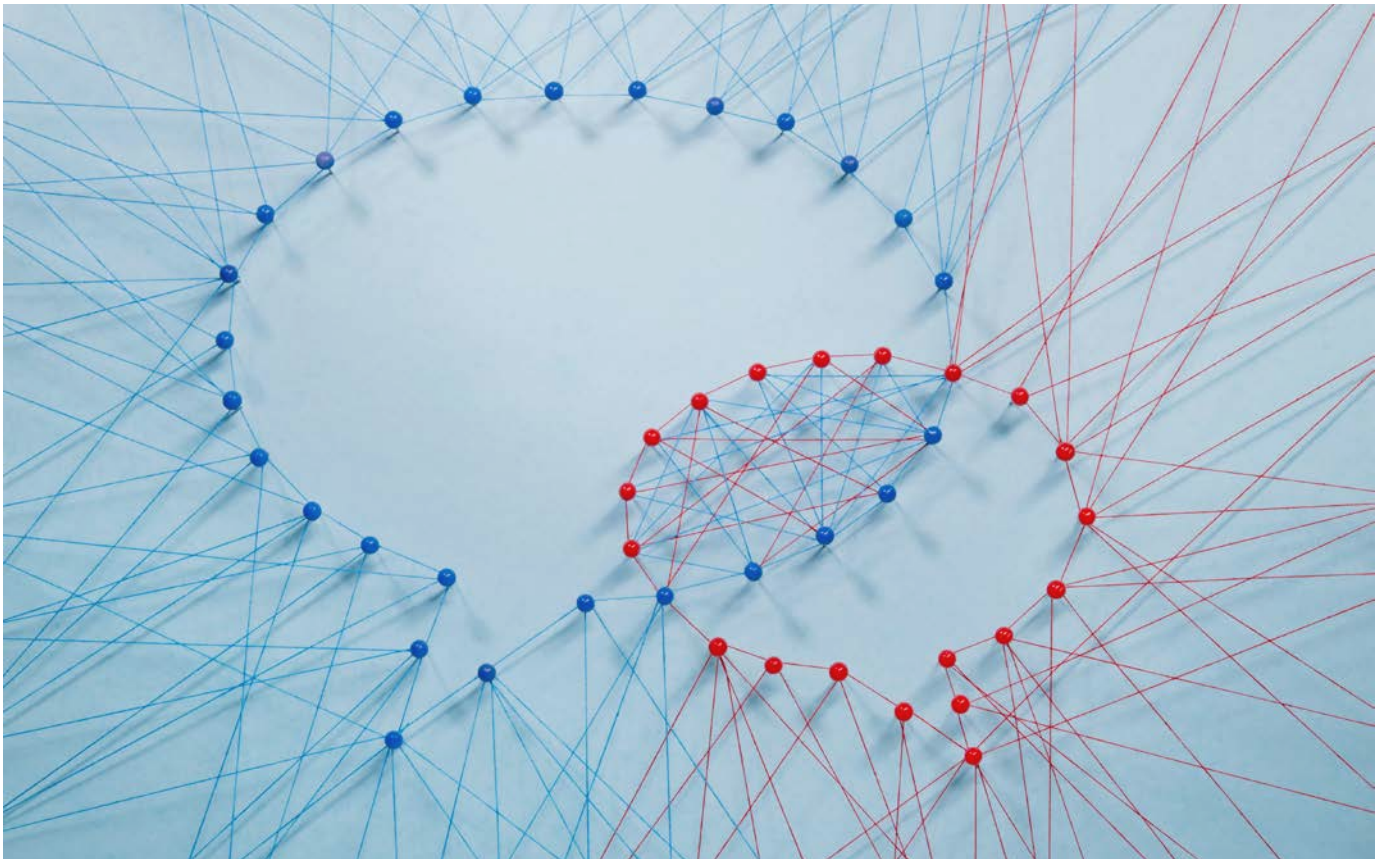# Coaching as a way of leading

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This article is intended to stimulate reflection about the nature of leadership and learning conversations in school contexts and to raise awareness of how parties to these conversations can positively influence their outcomes by adopting a "coaching approach" (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018).

Conversation, learning and leading

Every interaction between a leader and other members of a school community presents an opportunity to enhance learning, growth, and progress. More broadly, it is becoming clear that the skill of facilitating positive conversations is an important professional practice for all educators, leaders, and other staff in schools. In his book *Better Conversations*, Jim Knight (2016) describes this as being about

> … how we can get better at the kind of conversations that help us be better communicators and people. That kind of improvement is especially important in educational organisations since communication is at the heart of everything educators do. Our schools are only as good as the conversations within them. (p. 4)

These conversations are best facilitated in a way that brings the key elements of coaching into play. Indeed, it has been said that education is the natural home of coaching because coaching and education are both about helping people learn, grow, and develop (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018, p. 3).

Schools as complex human-intensive places of learning and complex adaptive systems

The assertion that the work of educators is human-intensive and complex rather than merely complicated is well established. This is supported by research and theory from non-education organisational contexts about effective leadership in "complex adaptive systems" (McDaniel, 2007). Traditional theories of leadership tend to focus on who or what the leader is, or does, and locate leadership within the individual. In contrast, conversational approaches focus on the relationship that takes place between a leader and followers (Groysberg & Slind, 2012; Walker & Aritz, 2014). This perspective on leadership proposes that leadership emerges through the interactions that both people in the conversation create. When that talk creates change, growth, and movement, that is when leadership is effective. The parallels between this shift toward conversational leadership models and what happens during coaching are not hard to see. For example, McDaniel (2007) identifies sensemaking, learning, and improvising as core elements of leadership in complex adaptive systems. He defines "sensemaking" as "turning circumstances into

a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and serves as a springboard to action" (p. 28). Sensemaking captures the essence of what happens in an effective coaching interaction. In such conversations, the coach listens, probes with questions, and uses language to bring clarity and insight. In other words,

> [w]e want workers to make sense of their worlds in ways that enhance, rather than inhibit, the organisation's ability to take effective action and to learn from that action. (McDaniel, 2007, p. 30)

Learning, according to McDaniel (2007), needs to be constant and ongoing to spark innovation and progress. As he says, "people don't know what to do not because they are incompetent but because they have not seen the present situation before. They must constantly figure it out" (p. 21). By intentionally utilising coaching skills in everyday interactions, educators can facilitate this process of "figuring it out" by making significant contributions to sensemaking and learning.

Finally, Barrett suggests that improvisation is the process of "fabricating and inventing novel responses without a pre-scripted plan and without certainty of outcomes, discovering the future their action creates as it unfolds …" (cited in McDaniel, 2007, p. 12). The trial and error of small step actions provoke feedback and learning, and then more improvised actions from which more learning develops, so a virtuous cycle is created.

Conversations and leadership

Conversations are the medium through which leadership is lived out in schools. Regardless of organisational structure or policy backdrop, influence, learning and progress happen through conversation. Fundamentally, change will be enabled or inhibited by how we talk, and what we talk about. Kegan and Lahey (2002) reinforce this idea when they say:

> All leaders are leading language communities. Though every person, in any setting, has some opportunity to influence the nature of the existing language rules, leaders have exponentially greater access and opportunity to shape, alter or ratify. (p. 8)

The concept of a "continuum" of learning conversations (Munro, 2020) has emerged as a helpful way of thinking about the contexts, roles, and intent of the conversations that take place in educational settings. The "conversation leader" adopts a range of intentional "stances" along this continuum to best support the learning and progress of their conversation partner at any given time. The term "conversation leader" is used here to indicate the person leading the conversation to show that this can be either party and is not dictated by role title such as coach, mentor, principal, or head of department. Figure 1 represents this continuum as a horizontal line that represents all conversations.

At one end there are completely non-directive conversations and at the other are highly directive conversations. In this context, the terms directive and non-directive refer to the extent to which the conversation leader influences the conversation. This may be undertaken by providing direction, advice or instruction, or not. In other words, it refers to the degree to which the conversation leader's voice and agenda feature in the conversation, intentionally or otherwise.

At the non-directive end, there are times when the conversation partner just needs to be heard and of course there is a need for unstructured, agenda-free social interactions such as this. At the directive end, there are times when there needs to be a firm agenda and transmission of information in certain conversations. These highly directive conversational contexts may not start out as learning opportunities, but they can end up there when managed intentionally and sensitively. These conversations have the potential to lead the conversation partner becoming what Jackson and McKergow (2007) call "a customer for change" (p. 28) – someone who now sees a compelling need for something to be different *and* wants to do something about it.

This leaves a significant portion of the continuum where the intent of the conversation *at the outset* is to facilitate learning and growth for the conversation partner.

Taking this idea a step further, Figure 2 shows a continuum of "learning conversations" where the conversation leader may respond in a *less* directive or *more* directive way in response to the needs of their conversation partner.

Figure 1: All Conversations in Education Settings
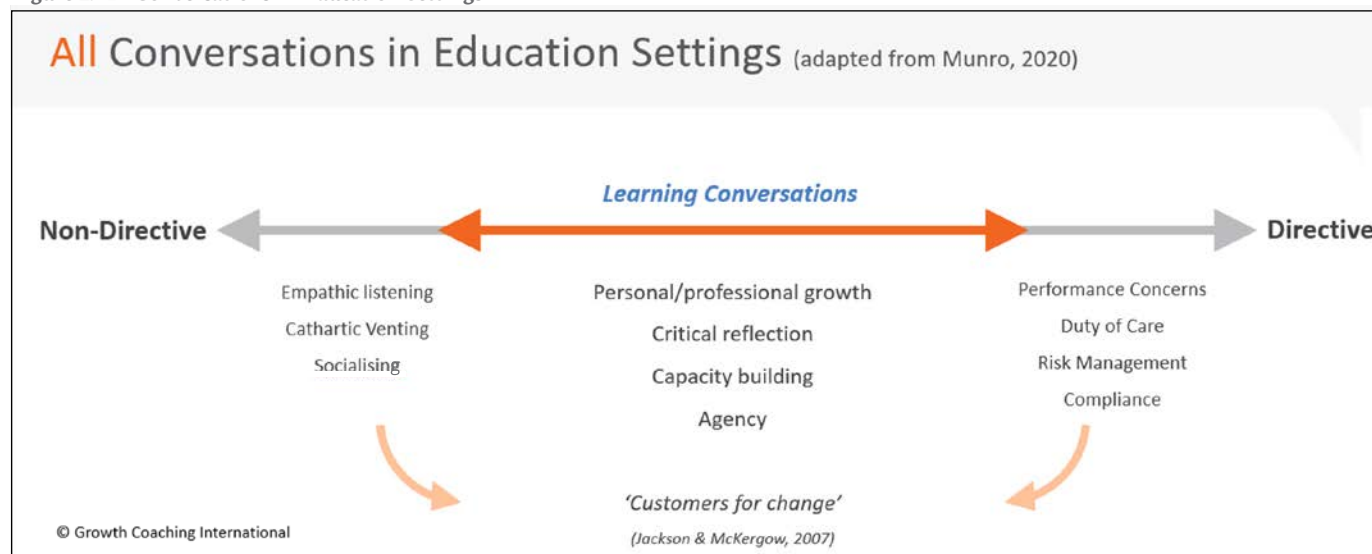
Adapted from "A Continuum of Professional Learning Conversations: Coaching, Mentoring and Everything in Between," by C. Munro, 2020, *CollectivED Working Paper, 11*, p. 39. (https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/carnegie-school-of-education/research/working-paper-series/collected/-/media/4025ce6ddfb949d4aa96a454249da878.ashx)

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The model presented in Figure 2 is where the majority of professional conversations with and between school colleagues are ideally situated. The conversation leader shifts stance in the conversation to *best serve* their conversation partner's thinking and progress.

Shifting stance

A dictionary definition of the word "stance" offer two meanings, both of which are appropriate in this context. The first is a way of standing or being placed, or one's posture or pose which could literally mean how one positions oneself during the conversation. In relation to the concept of *shifting* stance along the continuum of learning conversations, stance should be interpreted more figuratively as to how one positions oneself in terms of one's contribution to the conversation as it unfolds. This may be influenced by the second meaning of the word: stance as an intellectual or emotional attitude or way of thinking about something.

Stance in a learning conversation is a combination of how the conversation leader consciously "shows-up" – their *way of being*; and what they *do* in the conversation – how they use coaching techniques to support the thinking and progress of their partner.

The three key stances shown in Figure 2 are discussed here and presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Facilitative

A facilitative stance is where the conversation leader's main "mode of discourse" (van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2019) is one of *inquiry*. It is where they seek to tap into the partner's strengths and resources and build on these to generate momentum and options for forward movement. In a facilitative stance the conversation leader consciously adopts a "beginner's mind," where they set aside their own expertise and thinking in order to be fully open to the possibilities coming from their partner and their context.

Table 1: Facilitative Stance Tips

Facilitative Stance Tips
• 'Tune' your listening – What are you listening for? What's wanted (instead)? Strengths? Resources? Emotion?   • What are you listening with? Curiosity? Respect? Humility? Empathy?   • Use expanders - "and what else?" and "tell me more about…" to amplify what's wanted.   • Help find resources and options with questions like "what's working now?", "who else do you know who does this well?" and "tell me about a time in the past when you have been successful at this or something similar."   • Use paraphrasing to reframe the current reality in terms of what's wanted (in the future).   • Summarise and organise to create momentum.   • Hold the silence when it occurs – it signifies thinking!

Directive

Moving to the *directive* stance, the mode of discourse is one of *advocacy*. This stance can be necessary when the conversation partner is genuinely stuck, is in new or novel circumstances, or simply does not have the experience or resources to find a way forward. Here, the conversation leader advocates specific ways of doing things, gives direction, offers advice and, in some cases, provides training. At this point the conversation partner is no longer positioned as the key decision maker, effectively putting them in the metaphorical passenger seat (for a time at least).

"Conversations are the medium through which leadership is lived out in schools."

Table 2: Directive Stance Tips

Directive Stance Tips
• Move to the directive stance with caution!   • Ask permission – "can I share something that might help here?" or "would you like some suggestions from me?"   • Present your own knowledge and experience tentatively and in small doses.   • Beware the "advice monster" on your shoulder - if you are listening to it, you are not fully present for your partner.   • Get back out of the "driver's seat" as soon as you can by inviting your partner to make sense of what you've shared through their own contextual lens.   • Encourage clarification and adaptation of your suggestions.   • Resist the temptation to "sell" your best idea – offer genuine choice.

Dialogic

Between the less directive and more directive ends is a dialogic stance. A dialogic stance is a balance between maintaining the discourse of inquiry that empowers the conversation partner to find their own way, exploring options and, where helpful, offering *suggestions* based on our own knowledge and experience. As the conversation leader strives to keep their partner in the "driver's seat" they must carefully manage their own contribution so as not to create an unhelpful status difference. The two parties are thinking *together*. Schein (2011) expresses this well:

> At the beginning, every helping relationship is in a state of imbalance. The client is one down and therefore vulnerable; the helper is one up and therefore powerful. Much of what goes wrong in the helping process is the failure to acknowledge this initial imbalance and deal with it. (p. 35)

Table 3: Dialogic Stance Tips

Dialogic Stance Tips
• Dialogic does not mean 50-50 turn taking. Our conversation partner should still be doing most of the talking and thinking – aim for at least 70-30 (and 80-20 is even better!)   • Suggestions (if needed) are offered provisionally – you are simply adding options to the "pool" of available ways forward.   • Always ask permission.   • Offer more than one suggestion.   • Depersonalise the suggestion with something like "what I've seen work for others in the past is…".   • Raise awareness by noticing and reflecting back key terms, patterns or emotion.   • Avoid leading questions – if you are trying to get your partner to guess what's in your head then "park" the idea in your notes and come back to offer it as a suggestion if it is needed.   • Use your notes to manage your internal voice – remember you think faster than your partner can speak so you might race ahead and start thinking for them.

Figure 2: A Continuum of Learning Conversations

Adapted from "A Continuum of Professional Learning Conversations: Coaching, Mentoring and Everything in Between," by C. Munro, 2020, *CollectivED Working Paper, 11*, p. 40. (https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/carnegie-school-of-education/research/working-paper-series/collected/-/media/4025ce6ddfb949d4aa96a454249da878.ashx)

The key components of stance

Our conversational stance is a combination of how we intentionally *show up* and what we *do* in the conversation. The latter is where the skills and techniques associated with coaching can be utilised to support the thinking and progress of our conversation partner.

A core component of how we show up in professional conversations is our "way of being." A "coaching way of being" has been defined and elaborated by Christian van Nieuwerburgh in the third edition of *An Introduction to Coaching Skills* (2020). The key attributes of a coaching way of being are summarised here:

- *Humility and respect*

A conversation leader demonstrates humility by setting aside their own expertise until it is absolutely needed. They are respectfully curious and aim to keep their conversation partner in the "driver's seat" by seeking to privilege and amplify their voice in the conversation. Doing this well requires self-awareness and self-management – "dialling down" our tendency to judge and form conclusions and allowing our conversation partner to have the space to think aloud. Even when moving towards a more directive stance as conversation leaders, humility is demonstrated in the emotionally intelligent and respectful way we present our views and suggestions. We invite our partner's contextual viewpoint and listen attentively, acknowledging and building on what they contribute.

- *Belief in others and empathy*

As conversation leaders, we need to believe that our conversation partner has the capacity to make progress. If we believe that our conversation partner has the potential to grow and be successful, then we will be less inclined to adopt a directive stance and will stay more facilitative for longer. If we do not truly believe this, then it is likely to surface at some point. It may manifest itself as being too forceful, lacking empathy, or asking leading questions. Empathy is about recognising how our conversation partner is experiencing their current situation. It can be signalled in the way we listen without judgment and clarify how they seem to be feeling.

- *Integrity*

Integrity underpins how we demonstrate our trustworthiness. When we act with integrity our conversation partner will place more trust in us and talk with increasing levels of candour. Conversation leaders demonstrate their integrity in a wide range of ways, from the way they listen, and the quality of attention given to issues such as discretion and reliability.

- *Confidence*

The most effective conversation leaders are confident in their ability to manage conversations to best serve their conversation partner. This involves a high level of skill in deploying coaching techniques as well as self-awareness and self-management in order to responsively manage the pace and direction of the conversation.

- *Intercultural sensitivity and capability*

To establish and maintain a positive relationship, the conversation leader needs to competently manage different cultural norms, beliefs, and lifestyles. Beyond being sensitive, cultural capability focuses on what you know, what you do, and how you are when interacting.

Discerning: A key skill of an effective conversation leader

Adopting and shifting stance in any given conversational context requires the conversation leader to be discerning. Discerning means the ability to notice the context and adopt an appropriate stance. Conversation leaders need to be able to accurately discern what is needed both at the outset *and* as the conversation unfolds. Being discerning also helps the conversation leader to be clear on the purpose or intent of different conversations in different contexts. A discerning conversation leader demonstrates high levels of emotional intelligence, particularly self-awareness, and has finely tuned noticing skills that enable them to subtly shift their stance in the moment.

Key questions that help the conversation leader discern the stance required are:

- What kind of conversation does this need to be? (for example, more or less directive / more or less formal)

- What is my intent in this conversation?

- What does my conversation partner want or expect?

- What does my conversation partner [really] need from me?
- Is this an opportunity to amplify learning?
- What am I noticing as the conversation progresses? About myself? About my conversation partner?
- Do I need to shift stance?
- Does this need to become a different kind of conversation?

The benefits of becoming a more effective conversation leader

Developing a coaching approach to leadership offers many benefits to school leaders and members of their communities. Leaders and their teams are better equipped to navigate complexity and support change through the application of key coaching skills and a coaching way of being across the range of conversational contexts that occur on a daily basis. This people-centred way of leading enhances relational trust, empowers others, and enhances wellbeing through more agency-enabling conversations that support progress.

Moreover, *anyone* can be a conversation leader regardless of their position in the organisational hierarchy and perceived or actual differences in status or power. A key proposition of this article is that the most effective learning conversations are highly nuanced conversations that require the leader to be conscious and intentional in their role. Everyone can learn to do this more effectively and, in turn, foster more trusting relationships that support progress-oriented dialogue resulting in positive impact on the success and well-being of students, staff, and their communities.

New ways of perceiving human-intensive organisations like schools opens up new ways of thinking about how best to exercise leadership within them. When we view organisations as living, dynamic networks of people communicating with one another to pursue common goals, then it makes sense to focus on improving those conversations.

As Judith Glaser (2014) has commented:

> To get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of our culture, which depends on the quality of our relationships, which depends on the quality of our conversations. Everything happens through conversations. (p. 5)

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John Campbell is a Founding Director of Growth Coaching International (GCI). From 2004-2018, John was at the leading edge of the development of coaching and coaching approaches in educational contexts as he led GCI work across Australia and internationally. Recognised as a global leader, he has written and presented widely in the field of coaching in education and co-authored, with Christian van Nieuwerburgh, *The Leaders' Guide to Coaching in Schools: Creating Conditions for Effective Learning.* He currently spends his time writing about and researching "coaching in education" related topics.