



Coaching for Leaders in a Children's Services Context

What is the return on investment?

A think piece by Kate Mckenna
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Introduction

Few can argue that we have been living in, and continue to live in, times of unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty. Turbulence associated with crisis, such as that seen during the early days of the pandemic, may have led to the need for a ‘command and control’ style of leadership. Leaders were required to act swiftly, respond to multiple iterations of guidance, and ensure that staff and the communities served were kept as safe as possible.

The climate was not necessarily right for fostering creativity and innovation but as we ‘bounce forward’ perhaps it has never been more important to release the capacity and innovation of staff teams, both to reinvigorate their enthusiasm and passion for their work and to enable organisations to be creative and resourceful.

The Staff College wanted to explore this further, and this think piece was commissioned on behalf of the upon¹ Consortium. The research behind this think piece was carried out by Kate Mckenna, the coaching lead for The Staff College, between August 2022 and March 2023.

Primary research consisted of a survey with past participants on The Aspiring Directors of Children’s Services and the New Directors programmes, a range of individual interviews and an analysis of anonymised evaluation data.

The outcome of our research indicated that, nationally, the climate is now right for creating coaching approaches in the children’s services sector.

Leaders told us:



I wanted to explore the establishment of a coaching culture for all leaders and managers in their day-to-day work, create a sustainable resource and an environment of reflective personal support for individuals. My coaching has helped me to achieve this.



Themes emerging from the research have been extracted and are considered in more detail in the remainder of this think piece:

- **Theme 1: Coaching or mentoring?**
- **Theme 2: Return on investment of coaching for an individual**
- **Theme 3: Returns on investment in coaching for the organisation**
- **Theme 4: Coaching cultures and inclusion**

We have identified a number of questions in each theme to help you determine if coaching is right for you and your organisation right now. These are summarised at the end of this think piece on page 7.

We hope this is helpful and thank all those who participated in the research.

¹upon is a national programme which delivers both an aspiring Directors of Children’s Services and a new Directors of Children’s Services programme. Its designed to grow the talent pool of future Directors and support newly appointed Directors to thrive. Its co-created and delivered by a consortium of partners: The Staff College, The Institute of Public Care, Skills for Care and GatenbySanderson.

Theme 1: Coaching or mentoring?

It is our view that coaching and mentoring operate on a continuum of support. Organisations and individuals may need a single or combination of all elements to support conscious reconstruction and solution focused problem solving. We offer the following descriptions to enable decisions to be made on what might be most appropriate for an individual or organisation.

The Staff College describe a **coach** as someone who will work alongside someone being coached, the 'coachee', to help and support them in achieving goals that the coachee has identified. The coach is an expert in the skills of coaching and the subject matter or professional background of the person being coached is less relevant. What is most important is that the coach is skilled in the art of coaching and that coach and coachee can establish a rapport and relationship that creates a climate within which the coachee is empowered to reflect and craft actions. Coaching is generally most impactful when the coachee has chosen to be coached and is able to identify the area they wish to discuss rather than it being determined by their manager. This creates ownership and agreed actions are more likely to be carried out as they have been identified and owned by the coachee, supported by the skills of the coach.

Consideration needs to be given to the power of an external or objective coach who is not positioned within the accountability structure of the coachee. Our research indicates that an external coach provides the conditions where difficult or challenging topics can be discussed in confidence and in a space that is psychologically safe.

Leaders told us:

"Having the time to think with someone who was objective and independent was very powerful and gave me the opportunity to stand back, analyse and make sense of tricky situations."

Where there is a shared subject, situation or priority, **group coaching** can be beneficial as it provides an opportunity to harness collaborative advantage and bring multiple perspectives and joint ownership to a shared situation. In this instance a coach will work with a group or team to help them to explore and generate solutions. Additional benefits of group coaching are that it can develop team dynamics and relationships and improve shared processes.

Where a **mentor** differs from a coach is that the mentor will most likely share a professional heritage or experience with their mentee. The mentor may be a more experienced member of staff in the same organisation or an external mentor who has a similar experience or background. A mentor is someone who can give advice and support which is specific to a role or organisation.

We are witnessing an increased interest in developing **reverse or inclusive mentoring** schemes. This is where individuals with a particular lived experience or protected characteristic mentor more senior members of staff to enable them to better understand the challenges they face. This is an important feature in creating a culture that is truly inclusive and create a climate where colleagues share, learn and develop together.

In summary a coach can work with someone who is at a point in their personal and professional life where they have capacity and innovation that can be released. A mentor can best support someone who has a more specific area that they wish to develop and would benefit from experience of someone who shares that lived or professional experience.

Now we have explored the similarities and differences between coaching and mentoring we need to explore the '**return on investment**' for both an individual and their organisation.

The rest of this think piece will explore this through the lens of coaching. Further information about The Staff College mentoring offer can be found [here](#).



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Theme 2: Return on investment of coaching for an individual

Historically, coaching may have been perceived as a 'remedial' support intervention offered when an individual has an identified problem. This may have been linked to the performance management cycle. Now, coaching is being understood as **developmental and supportive** to those who may have a challenge they wish to explore or an opportunity they want to exploit. Coaching generates a protected space to explore and develop fresh perspectives, improve decision making and develop greater personal and professional effectiveness.

Our research indicated that coaching for an individual is most beneficial when the coachee selects the topic to be discussed. This creates ownership and any agreed actions are more likely to be carried out, as they have been identified by the coachee, supported by the skills of the coach.

Our research indicated that topics regularly explored during coaching include, but not exclusively:

- career development,
- managing professional relationships,
- enhancing partnership working skills,
- developing strategic thinking,
- improving confidence,
- tackling imposter syndrome,
- managing competing priorities,
- managing challenging conversations,
- improving team performance,
- supporting the wellbeing of self and team,
- exploring what visible leadership in a blended operational approach looks like

As we '**bounce forward**' into a continued blended operational approach, including working in the virtual and physical worlds, coachees are increasingly identifying the need to consider 'visible leadership' and where visibility is best placed. Leaders need to leave space for managers and colleagues to step into as part of their development. If leaders always occupy the space, then it is not left available for others.

As mentioned previously, leaders are emerging from a time of a potentially increased need for 'command and control' style of leadership and are considering how to create 'empowering leadership' strategies with a workforce that may have recent experience of a more 'authoritative' leadership style.



My coach held a mirror up to me, it was up to me if I chose to look in it.



Coachees have found that coaching was invaluable in helping them to consider a shift in their leadership behaviours, stating that their coach held a mirror up to enable them to reflect on the impact of their leadership behaviours on others and the culture of the organisation.

We talked previously about how coaching can **release the capacity of individuals**. Releasing capacity is a 'two-way street' so we need to consider how organisational culture needs to shift to enable the capacity of an individual, once released, to be harnessed and not simply be suppressed. It is important to consider if the organisation has freedoms to create and innovate in a learning culture or whether there is a more compliance-based culture that may pose some restrictions on scope of creativity.

Leaders told us:

"Coaching helped me focus on the right areas in relation to confidence and imposter syndrome. We explored some interesting areas around leadership in a complex world and an increasingly virtual environment. My confidence has been boosted and I feel I have survived and grown."

Theme 3: Returns on investment in coaching for the organisation

An organisation that invests in coaching for its individuals is increasingly seen as one that is positively investing in its workforce and the future of the organisation. When financial incentives are neither desirable nor possible, we need to consider other elements to make the organisation an attractive place to be part of. An organisation that invests in coaching for its workforce is demonstrating that individuals are valued, empowered, and supported which can in turn improve **recruitment and retention rates**.

In order to respond to, and thrive in spite of continued turbulence, organisations need to consider the benefits of **releasing individuals' capacity and potential**. To achieve this, organisations, and leaders within them, need to shift from 'command and control' to 'empowering leadership'. Change today is a constant and as we respond to rapid and disruptive evolution, what worked in the past can no longer be seen as necessarily appropriate or reliable. When operating in this type of climate, leaders cannot have all the answers as they are facing challenges rarely faced before. A model in which organisations provide support, including coaching and guidance rather than instructions, will help to develop a culture with 'learning' at its heart rather than 'compliance'.

Sharing leadership in the complex and demanding context of children's services and ensuring there are **sufficient** future leaders in the system to secure **succession** when the current generation moves on, are both live and complex challenges. A 'learning' organisation is better able to succession plan. Talent can be spotted early, and individuals nurtured and supported to develop their skills, knowledge, and capacity for future leadership. Coaching sits at the heart of succession planning, providing individuals with a space where they can explore how to be effective in their current role while considering what comes next for them. This approach provides an organisational 'pipeline' and coaching for leaders and managers provides opportunities to explore when deliberate external recruitment might add value.

Delivering **quality, effective** and **efficient** services and provision for children and families, will always be a priority for those who choose to work in the children's services sector. The capacity of leaders to provide high challenge and high support point to the importance of coaching as a leadership style.

Leaders developing a coaching approach can be mutually beneficial to both coachee, the 'Leader as Coach' and the organisation as a whole.

Benefits of a 'Leader as Coach' approach for the coachee include opportunities to integrate coaching conversations routinely and regularly rather than only when their scheduled coaching takes place and consider how they can adopt a coaching approach to conversations they hold. A 'Leader as Coach' approach will help the workforce feel value and empowered.

Michael Bungay Stanier² told us that:

"When you build a coaching habit, you can more easily break out of three vicious cycles that plague our workplaces: creating overdependence, getting overwhelmed and becoming disconnected..."

Creating Overdependence - *Building a coaching habit will help your team be more self-sufficient in increasing their autonomy and sense of mastery and by reducing your need to jump in, take over and become a 'bottleneck'.*

Getting Overwhelmed - *Building a coaching habit will help you regain focus so you and your team can do the work that has real impact and so you can direct your time, energy, and resources to solving the challenges that make a difference.*

Becoming Disconnected - *Building a coaching habit will help you and your team reconnect to the work that not only has impact but has meaning as well. Coaching can fuel the courage to step out beyond the comfortable and familiar, can help people learn from their experiences and can literally and metaphorically increase and help fulfil a person's potential."*

Benefits of a 'Leader as Coach' approach for the organisation include the ability to target resources and expertise more effectively. If leaders are not creating dependence, getting overwhelmed or becoming distracted, and coachees are feeling valued and empowered and having their capacity released, we can be more confident that the organisation's workforce are effectively and efficiently engaged with those who are best placed to do the work, doing it.

²The Coaching Habit, Michael Bungay Stanier

Theme 4: Coaching cultures and inclusion

While it's a moral imperative to become and stay an inclusive, diverse and fair leader, it also adds huge value organisationally too. Research³ identifies that high performing teams are both demographically and cognitively diverse, and together come up with superior judgements, better predictions and wiser strategies, so why wouldn't you actively work to bring people together with different experiences and perspectives to manage complex problems, lead change and maximise organisational advantage and community benefit?⁴

Perhaps developing a coaching culture is related to 'becoming and staying an inclusive, diverse and fair leader'. Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Equity are at the heart of a coaching culture as a coaching approach should always start with the individual.

Leaders told us:

"Inclusion starts with 'Self', coaching helped me to do that."

The Staff College recently completed some research with its coaching community to develop its thinking about the relationship between coaching and **intersectionality**, a term created in the 1960s by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap. This is the output from that research which is helpful in seeing the relationship between adopting a coaching culture and inclusion:

Coaches tell us:

10 things coaches do to look through an intersectional lens:

- 1. Recognise each client as whole and resourceful.*
- 2. Create a safe, contracting conversation and space, built on mutual trust, and understanding, where the coachee can be themselves.*
- 3. Work through and recognise an individual's labels and privileges and how they may show up in the coaching space.*
- 4. Use labels for understanding, not stereotyping, sharing labels to equalise power.*
- 5. Notice what a coachee is not saying alongside what they are, both verbally and non-verbally.*
- 6. Remain open, compassionate, and curious.*
- 7. Actively build relationships, connections, and trust.*
- 8. Work to ensure that a coachee is able to be and become at the individual they are.*

9. Be able to see the world through the eyes of others and be open to different ways of knowing, feeling, and belonging.

10. Leave the coachee with a legacy of courage and resilience, confident about the unique contribution they give and safe to be themselves and take risks.

Perhaps we should consider what we can learn from 'Ubuntu', a humanistic philosophical concept that is rooted in the history of Africa and is also found in many indigenous cultures of South Africa. The word Ubuntu means "humanity," at the heart of which emerges the idea that "an individual learns to be a person through other people." The word was popularised in the 1990s by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela in the 1990s as they compared apartheid, which means literally to be "separate" to Ubuntu, which in the African conception states that "persons depend on persons to be persons." It is by belonging to the community that we become ourselves.⁵

Leaders told us:

"Coaching helped me to see myself, my place in the system, the impact I have on others, both positive and negative, and strive to be a more inclusive leader."

Professor George J. Sefa Dei (2000) tells us:

"Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists: It is making a new space, a better space for everyone."



Coaching helped me to see myself, my place in the system, the impact I have on others, both positive and negative, and strive to be a more inclusive leader.



³ 'Rebel Ideas, the Power of Diverse Thinking', Matthew Syed, John Murray 2019

⁴ Leading-in-Colour-the-fierce-urgency-of-NOW.pdf (thestaffcollege.uk)

⁵ (PDF) Ubuntu Leadership - An explication of an Afrocentric leadership style (researchgate.net)

Key Findings

From the research undertaken, it is clear that, in a children’s services context:

- Coaching is impactful at both individual and organisational levels.
- Coaching supports a broad range of issues including, but not exclusively, career progression, operational management, relationship management, interpersonal and leadership skills, self-confidence, and wellbeing.
- Coaching is not limited to performance issues, although it is felt that coaching supports effective leadership, releases and maximises the capacity of the workforce and has the potential to support improved child and family outcomes for the children’s services population.
- Developing coaching skills in senior leaders provides organisations with an opportunity to consider the development of organisational coaching cultures, which in turn can create learning environments that aid recruitment, retention and empower the workforce to be resourceful and resilient.
- The development of coaching approaches are helpful considerations as you develop Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Equity approaches and strive to develop and embed inclusive leadership as the standard for yourself and organisation.

Theme 1: Coaching or mentoring?
Q1. Coach or mentor, which one is right for you, right now?
Theme 2: Return on investment of coaching for an individual
Q2. Would coaching help you to reflect on where you need to be visible and to whom and where others in your team need to occupy this space?
Q3. What behaviours are needed, yours and others, to create an organisationally empowering coaching culture that enables individuals to explore and flourish?
Q4. How do you build an environment of trust, ensuring that your staff feel listened to and heard, and what types of conversations could you have and what questions can you ask?
Q5. Can coaching help you to identify and maximise opportunities for staff to lead and innovate and what are the negotiables and non-negotiables?
Q6. How do you ensure that equality, diversity, inclusion, and equity are at the heart of your organisational culture, including considerations for working in both virtual and physical environments?
Theme 3: Returns on investment in coaching for the organisation
Q7. What are the desirable and possible financial and social returns on investment that creating a coaching culture could bring for your organisation?
Theme 4: Coaching cultures and inclusion
Q8. How can coaching for leaders in a children’s services context help them to become more inclusive?
Key Findings
Q9. Where can you get support for creating coaching and inclusive cultures, developing ‘Leader as Coach’ skills and access to quality assured coaches and mentors?



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