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# DOES COACHING ENCOURAGE A PROFESSIONAL GROWTH CULTURE?

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## Introduction

Professional growth and development are critical for sustaining high standards in education. One method increasingly adopted to foster this growth is coaching. Coaching involves personalised, one-on-one interactions aimed at developing an individual's skills, performance, and career progression. This research article explores whether coaching encourages a professional growth culture within educational settings, focusing on the perceptions and experiences of staff at Deira International School (DIS).

Deira International School has been implementing a coaching model for professional development, reflection, and growth for the past two years. Professional reflection coaching with the line manager focuses on pedagogical developments. Professional growth coaching, with a coach outside the department, focuses on individual growth and development.

The rationale for this study stems from the need to understand the effectiveness of coaching at DIS as a tool for professional development. Traditional professional development methods often focus on formal training sessions, while coaching provides a more individualised approach that can address specific needs and goals. This study aims to evaluate if this personalised approach translates into a culture of continuous professional growth among staff, ultimately benefiting the educational environment.

## Methodology

This study utilised a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys and qualitative insights from focus group interviews. The surveys were designed to measure staff perceptions of coaching, their sense of agency, and the impact on their professional development. Focus groups provided deeper insights into these perceptions and allowed for the exploration of themes that emerged from the survey data.

Participants included teachers and middle leaders from DIS. The survey used Likert-scale responses converted to numerical values for quantitative analysis, while the focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed thematically.

## Analysis and Results

### Survey Results

The survey data revealed strong support for the coaching system, with 82.2% of respondents agreeing that the coaching design at DIS effectively supports teachers in driving their own development. This high level of buy-in aligns with existing research that emphasises the necessity of staff engagement for successful professional development programmes (Blackman, 2010; Zwart et al., 2009).

Quantitative data showed that middle leaders had slightly higher mean scores compared to teachers regarding their engagement in professional growth. Newer staff members, with less than one year at the school, exhibited the highest enthusiasm for coaching, which may reflect their initial exposure to the system and its perceived benefits.

In terms of the nature of coaching, 93% of respondents agreed that coaching was collaborative and developmental rather than judgmental. This perception underscores the supportive environment that coaching aims to create, distancing itself from traditional evaluative methods.

## Focus Group Insights

Focus group discussions provided deeper qualitative insights. Staff members consistently highlighted the value of having dedicated time and space for reflection during coaching sessions. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that reflective practice is a key component of effective professional development (Day, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Harwood & Clarke, 2006).

However, the introduction of a second coach, who was not the staff member's line manager, revealed some mixed feelings. While 77.8% of respondents felt safe voicing their views in these coaching conversations, this was a noticeable decrease from the 93% who felt positive about coaching with their line manager. This suggests that the trust and relationship built with direct managers enhance the effectiveness of coaching, highlighting the importance of carefully selecting and pairing coaches to ensure optimal comfort and openness.

## Agency and Trust

An interesting finding was the discrepancy in perceived agency between professional growth coaching and professional development coaching. Only 71.1% of respondents felt that professional growth coaching allowed them agency in their development, a decrease of over 10% compared to professional development conversations with their line managers. This suggests that while coaching is beneficial, its structure and the nature of the coaching relationship can significantly impact staff perceptions of their autonomy and empowerment. The decrease in perceived agency indicates a potential area for improvement in the coaching model. It underscores the need for further investigation into how different coaching frameworks affect staff's sense of ownership over their professional growth. Addressing this could involve enhancing the training for coaches to better facilitate agency and ensuring that coaching practices are consistently reviewed and refined based on staff feedback.

Overall, the results indicate that coaching fosters a professional growth culture, but its effectiveness is influenced by the specific implementation and the relationships involved. Ensuring that staff feel both supported and empowered through coaching is essential for maximising its benefits and fostering a culture of continuous professional development.

## Conclusion

The study confirms that coaching fosters a professional growth culture at Deira International School, but several improvements can enhance its effectiveness. Coaching sessions with line managers are highly effective due to the established trust between staff members and their head of department. To improve, it is essential to ensure that line managers are involved and adequately trained to provide supportive, developmental feedback that aligns with the school's goals for professional growth. Mixed feelings about non-line manager coaches highlight the need for careful coach selection. Coaches should be chosen based on their ability to build trust and offer constructive feedback, with continuous professional development to enhance their coaching skills.

The study also found a lower sense of agency in professional growth coaching compared to professional development coaching. To address this, coaching sessions should encourage teachers to take ownership of their development by setting personalized goals and leading discussions about their growth needs. Structured opportunities for reflection should be included in coaching sessions, using tools and frameworks that help teachers critically evaluate their practices and identify areas for improvement.

Regular feedback from participants is crucial for the iterative improvement of the coaching process. Soliciting this feedback and conducting periodic evaluations of the coaching programme's impact on professional growth and student outcomes will ensure that the programme remains responsive to the needs of the staff. Additionally, fostering a collaborative coaching environment by organising group coaching sessions or peer observations can enhance the overall impact of coaching by creating a supportive network among teachers.

In conclusion, while coaching is effective at Deira International School, focusing on trust, empowerment and continuous feedback will maximise its benefits, creating a more supportive and effective professional development environment.

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