

Mentoring and Coaching Pilot Project: Called to Lead, Called to Serve

By **Barbara McMorrow**, Professional Learning Director



In March 2007 the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO), the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSOA), and six Catholic school boards representing urban and rural, and large and small districts entered into a partnership to design, develop and implement a formal mentoring and coaching program for school and system leaders. The six Catholic school boards are Algonquin and Lakeshore, Halton, Hamilton-Wentworth, Huron-Perth, Northeastern and Toronto. The pilot project is sponsored by the Ministry of Education Leadership Development Branch. There is a clear expectation that the *Leadership Framework* created by the Ministry be used as a foundation for establishing a shared vision and common language regarding school and system leadership. One of the first tasks of the CPCO/OCSOA Mentoring and Coaching Development Team was to draft a *Catholic Leadership Framework* that would capture more fully the vision and values of our Catholic system.

Integral to the CPCO/OCSOA Mentoring and Coaching Pilot Project is an unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration between the two associations and the six boards involved. The inclusion of supervisory officers as well as principals and vice-principals has created the opportunity of moving systems thinking and shared leadership from theory into practice. School and system leaders are learning together the skills necessary for successful mentoring and coaching. These skills include:

- setting learning goals;
- trust building;
- genuine listening;
- powerful questioning;
- providing meaningful feedback;
- problem solving; and
- reflective practice.

Building capacity in these areas clearly resonates with supervisory officers, principals and vice-principals committed to maximizing the achievement of all students. They know that the most effective way to accomplish this is through creating and sustaining authentic learning communities. The case for professional learning communities continues to grow. Educational research underscores significantly the need to move our schools and boards from environments of isolation and blame to collaborative, integrated communities of practice focused on continuous professional learning and dialogue. The conversation has shifted from *why collaborate to how do we collaborate*. In our Catholic schools we have always understood the importance of community but connecting it more deeply to ensuring that each student is served spiritually, socially and academically heightens our sense of moral purpose in committing to the tenets of an authentic Catholic learning community.

The fundamental skills of mentoring and coaching are critical to assisting educational leaders in embracing more fully the role of instructional leader and developing the expertise they need to lead and to ensure that they leave behind a sustainable legacy of shared leadership. Enhancing listening, coaching, modeling and facilitation skills is important. For successful leaders, these skills are often intuitive, or develop over time, but explicit instruction in these areas can attune mentors to these skills and give them the necessary tools to articulate what they do. The process of sharing what we know with another often clarifies our beliefs and actions. This builds confidence and a sense of efficacy. Mentorship and coaching become a mutually beneficial experience which lessens significantly the sense of isolation of school leadership.

Mentoring and coaching have their roots in both the Old and New Testaments. The stories of Eli and Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:6-22) and Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1: 39-56) are just a few examples taken from our Catholic faith tradition that illustrate poignantly the importance of being open to the wisdom and insights of another. We continually discern our path in our life's journey by seeking support and affirmation. Jesus was keenly aware of our human need for support and companionship when He "summoned the twelve and began to send them out, two by two" (Mark 6:8).

The CPCO/OC SOA pilot project will strengthen both the lateral and vertical capacity of the Catholic school system in creating mentoring and coaching cultures with a clear emphasis on facilitating learning relationships and breaking down some of the barriers that limit our ability to fully engage in meeting what Ronald Heifetz describes as the adaptive challenges of our time. A meaningful grasp of the mentoring and coaching skills, is not a process that will be accomplished in one event. Facilitating the learning of educators in a manner that will actually transform thinking and practice requires purposeful planning, practical application and inspiration. A series of symposia for the board development and implementation teams featuring such renowned scholars as Margaret Wheatley (*Leadership for Uncertain Time*) and Mark Gerzon (*Leading Through Conflict*) have been planned for the coming year. In addition to hearing from such expert scholars and practitioners, the symposia will afford opportunities for meaningful dialogue and sharing of experience between the boards involved in the project.

The project is building on the strengths of the current mentoring programs and practice by integrating the most recent research on developing and sustaining formal mentoring and coaching programs in organizations. In particular the work that has been done in the area of leadership coaching for educators has been incorporated into the training and the philosophical underpinnings of the project.


The CPCO/OC SOA pilot project reflects integrated thinking in embracing the notion of a blended approach to mentoring and coaching. We focus on combining the knowledge, skills and practices of both strategies. Our emphasis is on the mindsets and skills that promote successful mentoring and coaching because of their tremendous relevance and applicability to Catholic school

and system leaders striving to action genuine learning communities and maximizing the achievements of all students.

We know from experience and from the research that informal mentorship already takes place in all organizations. Often the informal mentorship can be an excellent source of support, growth and inspiration. It can also tend towards a form of minimal survivorship. A truly effective mentorship program must go beyond the "old folks teach the new folks". There has to be recognition that mentoring is a form of learning that requires proactive participation from the mentor and the mentee if the goal is to promote leadership and not just survivorship. Mentorship and coaching can be a powerful means of job-embedded professional learning.

A critical aspect of the project will be ensuring a process of ongoing feedback, assessment and evaluation. Examining our assumptions and developing the skill to discern assessments from assertions will be a crucial part of the evaluation. The hope is to have Catholic school and system leaders integrate the new learning into their thinking and practice so that they can make a positive difference in leading and serving and more fully embracing the Catholic School Graduate Expectations.


For a copy of the Catholic Leadership Framework and further information visit the Mentoring and Coaching website at www.cpco.on.ca/mentoringandcoaching.



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