Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup>: Weaving Threads of Learning and Change Into the Culture of an Organization

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Chapter 6

Cognitive Coaching℠
Online: Benefits and Challenges

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Introduction

As school personnel communicate increasingly through electronic means, the question emerges about the possibility of online coaching. Can the interpersonal skills of acknowledging, listening, and questioning be communicated electronically? Might it be possible for two people to engage in a Cognitive Coaching℠ conversation and not be in the same room, the same city, or even the same state or country? If Cognitive Coaching℠ were effective online, it would open a multitude of possibilities for expanding the influence of coaching throughout systems around the world.

Two pair of educators decided to find out how a Cognitive Coaching℠ relationship might play out online. One person in each pair, Jenny Edwards and Jane Ellison, are experienced Cognitive Coaches. One of the coachees, Yaso Thiru, was familiar with coaching through her graduate school experience; the other coachee, Laura Mitchell, has been using Cognitive Coaching℠ in her work as an assistant principal. Although the circumstances of their coaching relationships were different, their findings were similar. The most important ingredient in an online coaching relationship is the same as in a face-to-face coaching relationship—trust.
Think about how you communicate each day—in person, on the telephone, in writing, through e-mail. Now, think about how much time you spend in each type of communication. For many people, e-mail is the most frequently employed type of communication in day-to-day interactions with others. It is both efficient and effective, especially when geographical distance is involved. Many people in the Cognitive Coaching℠ community have wondered whether or not it would possible to coach online. Such a possibility would eliminate the need for 2 people to be in the same place at the same time, saving a great deal of time and increasing the long-distance relationships that could be established.

This chapter chronicles the experiences of four educational professionals who engaged in Cognitive Coaching℠ through e-mail. One pair, made up of a professor experienced in Cognitive Coaching℠ and a graduate school student new to coaching, chose to use a chat room. The other pair, a co-director of the Center for Cognitive Coaching and an assistant principal with a year’s experience with Cognitive Coaching℠, corresponded through regular e-mail. Although the circumstances were different, the experiences proved to have a great deal in common.

Coaching Through a Chat Room: Jenny and Yaso’s Experience

"Would you be willing to coach me in a chat room on the Internet? I understand that you are trained in Cognitive Coaching℠. I have heard of it, it sounds interesting, and I have some things that I would like to receive coaching on."

This was an invitation offered Jenny Edwards by one of her doctoral students, Yaso Thiru. Jenny teaches in Fielding Graduate Institute’s doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Change, and her students are dispersed around the United States, as well as in other countries. Jenny thought the challenge of coaching online sounded interesting and provided an opportunity to explore yet another venue for Cognitive Coaching℠.

The process began slowly, as Jenny had never used a chat room. When the time came for their first online coaching conversation, Yaso set up a chat room at Alaska Pacific University that was totally dedicated to their coaching chats. After finding a time when both were available, they logged on at the same time. Their first conversation was filled with comments such as, “Now how do I do this?” “In which box do I write the message?” “How am I doing?” “Testing.” “Testing again.” “Are you there?”
In using the coaching maps online, Jenny soon realized that the maps did not have to be followed exactly; and she could spend more or less time in the different neighborhoods of the conversation, depending on Yaso’s needs and the flow of the conversation. Jenny’s insight from the first conversation was that she was going through the same process of implementing and refining her coaching skills online as she had done when she learned to coach in person. She could not apply all the skills at once; learning to coach online was a process of implementing one coaching skill at a time, continuing to add skills until all were in place.

With regard to coaching tools, Jenny found that paraphrasing was even more critical online than in-person. In the absence of nonverbal cues, paraphrasing was the main way in which Jenny let Yaso know that she was listening and that she understood and cared. Paraphrasing was also the way that Jenny could reflect the emotion as well as the content of what Yaso said. Empathic paraphrases went a long way toward helping the conversation seem more natural. By paraphrasing and mirroring back to Yaso both the content and the emotions involved, Jenny demonstrated that she understood 100% of the message.

Another tool that Jenny found to be important was pausing. She used pausing online just as effectively as she did in person. Pausing and not responding immediately to Yaso’s message provided both Jenny and Yaso with time to expand even more on a thought or to generate additional thoughts. In addition to intentional pauses, sometimes pauses occurred because one party was not sure of what to say. Either way, the outcome was the stimulation of thought processes.

Jenny found that the essential coaching pattern of pausing, paraphrasing, probing, or inquiring was again equally effective online as in person. After paraphrasing, Jenny asked questions that were designed to mediate Yaso’s thinking. Since she was not able to use an approachable voice, Jenny found that plural forms, exploratory language, and especially positive presuppositions were key elements in supporting thinking.

Trust is the basis for any coaching relationship, and Jenny and Yaso consciously used strategies for building trust. One strategy was to begin by sharing something about ourselves before beginning each coaching conversation. A 5-minute “warm-up” went a long way toward building trust. By doing this, both parties were saying, “I’m human. I have lots of things going on in my life.” Over time, as they shared with each other, they developed even greater trust.

Another way that Jenny and Yaso developed trust was by being trustworthy. This meant being on time for the coaching conversation. If something came up and one party needed to log onto the conversation late, a call to the
other was made. It also meant keeping what the other party said in confidence. In order to be able to openly share thoughts and feelings, both parties had to know that the coaching partner would not divulge what was said.

Another way they developed trust was for Jenny to focus totally on Yaso and be supportive of her thinking during the coaching conversations. Jenny monitored her intentions by continually asking herself the question, "Am I saying/asking this for the benefit of my coaching partner or for my own benefit?" If the statement or question was for her benefit, then she left it unsaid.

Rapport was another key ingredient in their coaching relationship. The only element of rapport that could be mirrored online was language. Jenny matched the language, the words, the phrasing, and the terms that Yaso used. For example, if Yaso said, "I plan to revolutionize the thinking of my colleagues," Jenny picked up on the word "revolutionize" as being important to Yaso and began using it. "So what might be some indicators that the thinking of your colleagues has been revolutionized?" "What might be some strategies you will be using to revolutionize their thinking?"

Yaso’s language also gave Jenny clues about the representational system she was using. Jenny listened for words that indicated whether Yaso was processing information visually, auditorily, or kinesthetically. When Yaso said, "Help me visualize the skills I need to become a Cognitive Coach," Jenny responded with, "What might be some skills you have seen effective coaches use?" Later in the conversation, Yaso asked, "What would I be hearing in an effective coaching conversation?" Again, Jenny matched her auditory language and responded, "What types of questions might ring a bell for you?" Kinesthetic language was used in their exchanges when Yaso said, "I want to get a feel for a good coaching conversation," and Jenny responded by saying, "What do these coaching conversations feel like to you in the past?"

As Jenny and Yaso developed rapport and got into a conversation flow, Jenny was aware of Yaso's response time as an indicator of thinking. In face-to-face coaching, the coach knows that he or she has asked an effective question when the coachee gives behavioral manifestations of internal response states (BMIRS), which are nonverbal and verbal indicators of thinking before answering. With the absence of BMIRS, Jenny found herself using the amount of time it took Yaso to respond as an indicator of her thinking.

Nonverbal acknowledgment, such as nodding one's head, leaning in towards the person, tilting the head, raising the eyebrows, and smiling, could obviously not be done online. Thus, verbal acknowledging became even more important. Jenny used verbal acknowledging by writing comments such as, "uh, huh," "hmmmm," "okay" in a message by itself or before a paraphrase.
These types of verbal acknowledgments helped the conversation seem more natural.

When working with Yaso online, Jenny focused on crafting questions in order to come across in a true spirit of inquiry. Jenny wanted to ask questions designed to expand Yaso’s thinking. By paraphrasing after every statement Yaso made and by asking questions with the elements of an invitation, Jenny was able to create a climate of inquiry.

The Five States of Mind were an integral part of every coaching conversation. The written responses gave Jenny an even greater opportunity to analyze the states of mind. In each conversation, Jenny consciously crafted questions and paraphrases to increase Yaso’s resourcefulness in one or more of the states of mind. In addition, Jenny’s craftsmanship and consciousness increased as she honed her coaching skills online.

At the end of each session, Yaso and Jenny took time to reflect on their conversation. This gave Yaso an opportunity to be aware of how the coaching was supporting her thinking, and it gave Jenny feedback on how the Cognitive Coaching℠ was affecting Yaso’s thinking. This feedback helped Jenny become aware of how she was growing as an online coach.

Coaching Through E-Mail Messages:
Jane and Laura’s Experience

Jane and Laura’s online coaching relationship was an extension of in-person coaching in which they engaged during the Foundation Seminar℠. Laura had shared with Jane some issues as an assistant principal and was interested in putting those issues into a coaching setting. As Laura learned Cognitive Coaching℠, she saw the benefits of discussing important topics in a coaching session rather than just complaining about them to a friend or colleague. When the suggestion was made to engage in coaching online, Laura agreed to participate. She thought the online process would be great to try because of the limited resources of time and because of the distance between them (Denver and Houston).

Critical to the success of Laura and Jane’s experience was Laura’s understanding of and trust in the process of Cognitive Coaching℠. Laura knew that if she were honest with Jane through her responses, Jane would respond back with honesty and recognize Laura’s openness to trust. If she had not trusted the Cognitive Coaching℠ process, she might not have been able to trust Jane with many of the situations that they discussed. Laura trusted that each question that Jane asked would mediate her thinking.
Laura and Jane established rapport during the Foundation Seminar®. In addition, they had a coaching conversation during the training that started the development of their trust. Trust grew as they conversed online and understood the limitations of online coaching, especially in making inferences and interpretations. Laura learned to ask for clarification when she was not sure what Jane was asking and also to tell Jane some of the emotions that she was experiencing, rather than leaving it up to Jane to read between the lines of her writing. They talked about the difficulty of coaching online and agreed to let each other know when there was confusion or emotion that would be evident more in an in-person coaching session.

Laura found the tools of paraphrasing and questioning as well as the three conversation maps to be particularly effective in online coaching. She was initially surprised at the power of paraphrasing online. "When Jane gave a paraphrase back to me that was just right, it felt as if she was the only one who was listening to me that day." Laura's understanding of questioning allowed her to trust that a question could mediate her thinking, even though she might not understand why Jane was asking it.

When Jane worked with Laura through a highly emotional event in which Laura was stuck, Laura's understanding of the role of the coach was important. There were times when Laura wanted answers instead of more questions. She wanted Jane to tell her what to do or to solve her problems for her. She knew that as a cognitive coach, Jane did not have an agenda for or with her. Her efficacy grew as she realized that Jane was asking her to find the resourcefulness to solve her own problems.

**Challenges of Online Coaching**

Both pairs who coached online encountered similar challenges. The major challenge was the absence of face-to-face interaction. Since 65% of a message is communicated nonverbally (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1989), there is a risk in online coaching that the words might be misinterpreted. Without being able to see a person's facial expressions and gestures or hear the tonality in their voice, it is difficult to know how effectively one is communicating. Another challenge is the speed of typing of both parties. If both type quickly, then the chat room coaching conversation will go more rapidly than if they type more slowly. Also in the chat room setting, the boxes that are provided in which to type the message only hold a limited number of letters. Jenny and Yaso developed a process in which they typed until they ran out of room. If they still had more to say, they would type ellipsis points ( . . . ) to indicate that more was to come in the next message.
In the case of the e-mail coaching, a challenge was the time it took to respond to a message. Sometimes it was several days or a week before there would be a response; several times responses passed each other in cyberspace. Frequent checking of e-mail and taking time to respond when the message was received helped Jane and Laura overcome this challenge.

Another challenge to consider is the public nature of e-mail. If online coaching is to be effective, both parties have to be open and honest in their communication. This might be difficult, depending on the likelihood that others might be able to access one's e-mail.

Benefits of Online Coaching

Online coaching benefits both the coach and the coachee. One benefit for the coach is the increased craftsmanship that comes from having a written record of one's coaching to examine. For example, the coach can see what types of paraphrases and questions are most frequently used and what types of responses the different paraphrases and questions elicit from the coachee. As Jenny said, "Coaching helped me learn, validate my ideas, explore, and discover."

Another benefit of online coaching is that both coach and coachee can take longer to respond. They can look at previous entries, take time to formulate questions, or even revise questions before sending them. Online coaching allows the luxury of time to think, craft a response, reflect on the response, and then send it.

Learnings and Applications

Jenny and Yaso found that no matter what the obstacles were, the time they spent coaching online was definitely worth it! Laura and Jane agreed that the benefits outweighed the hard work and some of the ambiguity that occurred. Both pairs learned that the establishment of trust was the most critical element in the success of the online coaching. In addition, the coach's craftsmanship with language, paraphrases, and meditative questions helped ensure that messages were being understood as they were intended.

Laura summed up her learning from online coaching when she said,

I compared the growth that I had from my first year to the second year as an assistant principal (AP). The difference in the two years can best be measured by my confidence to take risks. In my first year as an AP, I was learning my role and what would be
expected of me. I focused more on doing what was expected of me. I worried about doing the right thing. I did not want to get into hot situations that I could not handle or control. I wanted to be able to work in my role as an AP without causing too many problems. Throughout this past year, I was willing to take risks. I found myself in difficult situations, and I had the confidence to take on those situations. Because of that, I did not see myself as taking risks that could lead to failure. I found that instead I had the confidence to step out into new and different situations with the tools and strategies that I needed to be successful. I think that the best way to measure my growth as an assistant principal was to say with confidence, “Yes, I can do that!” and knew that I could.

Online coaching can be used by anyone who lives at a distance from or has limited access to his or her coaching partner. Universities are increasingly implementing distance-learning programs, and coaching online gives professors the opportunity to coach their students rather than solely give information. In the new distance-learning culture, on-line coaching can become the principal tenet of learning and exploration. Distance learning is for motivated, self-directed learners. For this type of learner, coaching can be a valuable tool for learning because of its potential for encouraging exploration as a way of knowing.

The ultimate goal of coaching is for the coachee to begin to internalize the process so that he or she automatically asks the Planning Conversation questions when planning, and the Reflecting Conversation questions when reflecting on past events. Cognitive Coaching\textsuperscript{SM} online provides the coach with the opportunity to practice and refine coaching skills, while providing the coachee with time and space for thinking. With the Internet, Cognitive Coaching\textsuperscript{SM} can happen anywhere at any time.

The process of Cognitive Coaching\textsuperscript{SM} is an invitation to think. A person’s thinking can be mediated from either written or spoken text. Developing skill in coaching online can be especially beneficial in our fast-paced world.

Reference