

Help Is on the



Way

How to get the most out of principal coaching

By Jerenze A. Campbell

I am so stressed! I can't believe one of my teachers is posting negative information about me on social media. She doesn't want to implement our new special education initiative, but I don't care if she's the special education chair—I'm the principal. I set the vision for the school. Why isn't she doing her job? This is slander, I think. I will get her.

Then, I decide to call my coach. He'll understand exactly how ridiculous this situation is and help me figure out how to get rid of the troublesome teacher.

Instead, he asks me a bunch of questions: How was this initiative rolled out? Do you think they had buy-in? Your strengths are ... are you operating in the "basement" of those strengths? How could you have involved the teachers more in the design of this new process? What do you think is the best way to address this matter with the teacher?

His questions help me realize that my actions may have contributed to low teacher morale and this mess of a situation. My first year as a principal has really challenged some of my assumptions and beliefs, so I'm thankful that my district assigned me a leadership development coach. I don't always like the questions he asks, but he challenges me to think about my practice and prompts me to solve some of my own issues within the building.

Principal Support Can Improve Principal Retention

The above is one of many common scenarios that principals working with a coach may face. According to School Leaders Network, principals often leave because they are too isolated, and little is done to provide these school leaders with ongoing support after their second year in the position to maintain a long-term commitment.

According to an article published in a 2005 edition of *Principal* magazine, principals identify the primary driver of exodus as their inability to make a difference for children given four key obstacles:

- “Workload and extensive managerial tasks prevent more meaningful instructional leadership efforts.
- “Expensive personal costs; long hours and a significant toll to their physical and psychological well-being.
- “Local and state policies that tie principal hands in making critical decisions such as hiring, firing, and funding allocation flexibility.
- “Profound isolation on the job.”

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individuals assigned to support you.**

Other factors that lead to high principal turnover include a lack of relationships between the building leader and the instructional faculty. Historically, principals have been trained to be task-oriented and lead from the front. Instructional leadership has been thrust upon them, with a focus on data, accountability, and assessments. In an attempt to keep up, many administrators have neglected the interpersonal skills that are necessary to building and sustaining a quality culture that leads to longevity.

In some school districts, there has been a concerted effort and millions of dollars dedicated to establishing and sustaining principal pipeline programs. A lot of research, both quantitative and qualitative, has been done.

For example, in 2011, the Wallace Foundation granted six urban school districts resources to begin the “principal pipeline” initiative. In their initial report, the foundation found that in order to focus support for each novice principal, districts are using evaluation instruments that identify gaps in skill, knowledge, or behavior, and they are employing supervisors and coaches/mentors whose jobs include helping principals address these gaps. To guide novice principals’ learning and development in ways that address their diagnosed weaknesses, each district has at least two cadres of individuals in place: supervisors, and mentors or coaches.

Principal Coaches vs. Principal Supervisors

A strong component of some principal pipelines is the use of principal coaches and mentors.

According to The Fulcrum Group, a coach helps people achieve their goals, with goal-setting, encouragement, and questions. Coaching should energize the coachee to solve the problem, instead of the coach providing expert opinions and turn-key solutions.

Principal supervisors serve a dual role; they are responsible for coaching *and* evaluating principals. In many districts, coaches aren’t available, so principal supervisors juggle both roles. They may have one eye on judging the principals’ competence, but they also support principals’ learning. In fact, according to a survey by The Wallace Foundation, “coaching principals” is among the top five tasks performed by principal supervisors.

The principal’s seat can be a lonely place. That’s why it is important to lean on the individuals assigned to support you. If you have not been assigned a principal coach, you should seek one out. It could be an experienced principal in your district or a consultant for hire. Once you have one, it is vitally important to build and maintain a healthy and productive relationship so you can grow professionally.

A principal coach or supervisor can assist you with task growth; when you need to improve within a specific area, they can facilitate your mastery of that area. Whether you are

struggling with establishing a positive culture or implementing a new data analysis protocol or traffic pattern for daily dismissal, a quality coach can help.

Here's how to make the most of your relationship with a principal coach or supervisor:

Play #1: Be Humble. Novice principals often feel as if they have arrived when they are appointed to the principalship. After all, they have worked extremely hard to achieve their goals along the way. Most, if not all, have attained a master's degree; many have earned a doctorate. They were amazing classroom teachers and supported their principals as assistant principals. They have served as lead administrators.

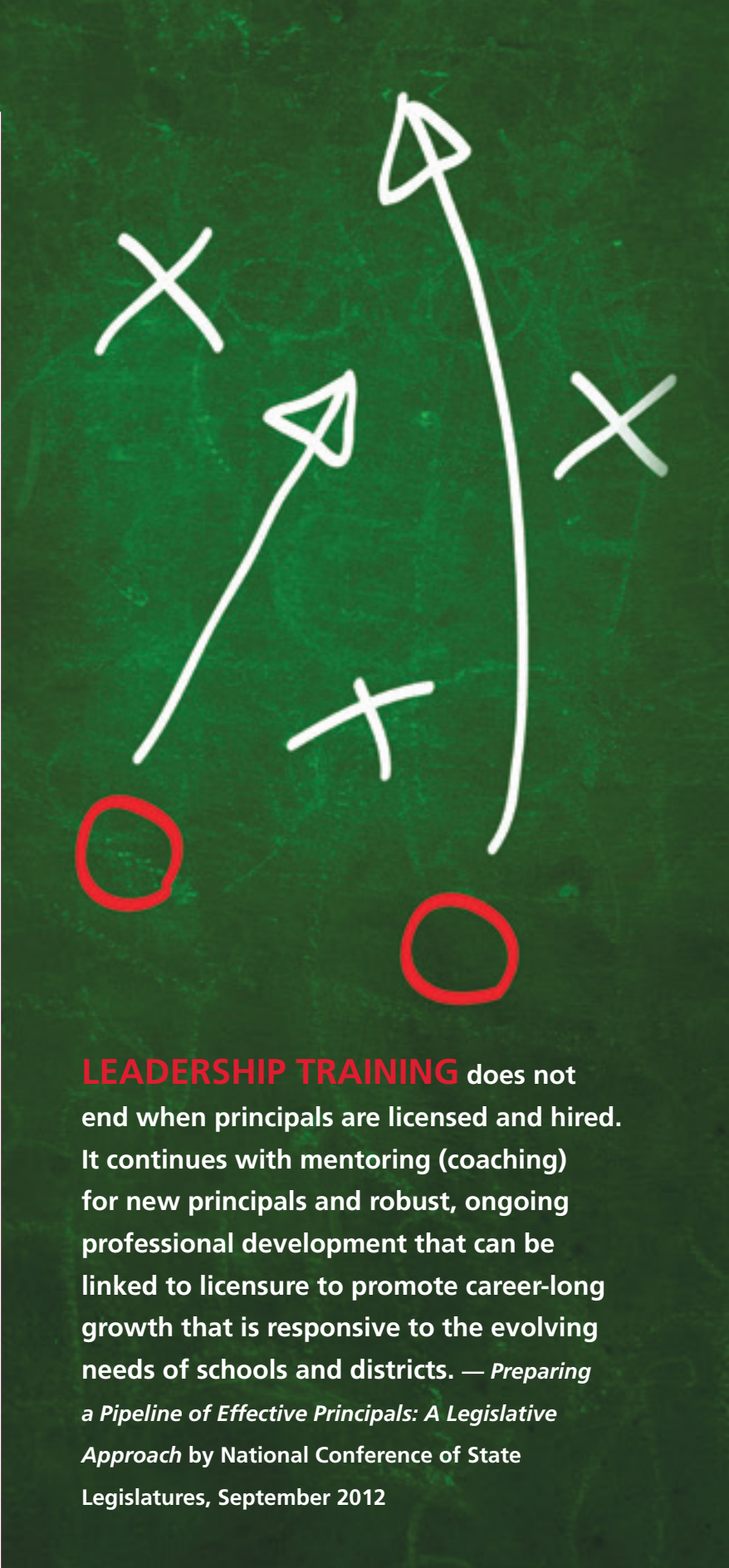
But there is still so much to learn. It is imperative that you check your ego at the door. Who wants to work with a know-it-all? Humble yourself, and present yourself as a willing learner.

Play #2: Don't Suffer in Silence. It's OK to not know everything; in fact, it is expected. Be willing to reach out to your coach for guidance and assistance. You can tap into his or her expertise and ultimately decide to either accept the suggestions or go another way.

Play #3: Know Thyself. Be comfortable with your strengths and areas of needed growth and development. Don't try to hide from your coach or supervisor. You were created with specific talents and strengths. They are transferable. Once you have a firm understanding of yourself, it becomes easier to share with others the areas in which you excel and those areas that you could use support around.

Remember that in any relationship, communication goes both ways. Don't get caught up in who is contacting whom. If you are in need, reach out to your coach or supervisor, even if they haven't reached out to you in a while. With the right support, you will win. **P**

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LEADERSHIP TRAINING does not end when principals are licensed and hired. It continues with mentoring (coaching) for new principals and robust, ongoing professional development that can be linked to licensure to promote career-long growth that is responsive to the evolving needs of schools and districts. — *Preparing a Pipeline of Effective Principals: A Legislative Approach* by National Conference of State Legislatures, September 2012