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A Principal Leadership Framework for Enhancing Teacher Practice Through Coaching With Emotional Intelligence

Nate R. Templeton
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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the 2016-2017 school year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has mandated school principals begin appraising teachers the new Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). Central to this new instrument is the necessity for principals and other appraisers to improve professional practice through the reciprocal interaction, open dialogue, and continuous learning inherent to coaching. While the T-TESS rubric provides a structured process for the TEA’s vision of what coaching should look like, that vision lacks the inclusion of the soft skills we know are needed for effective success coaching and healthy school environments. In this article, we fill the gap by introducing a research-derived coaching framework that combines situational leadership with emotional intelligence for person-centered coaching and learning. Research directions are suggested based on this more robust model for principal coaching. Students, teachers, schools, and communities benefit when education policy is balanced with social-emotional learning.

INTRODUCTION

Bayer (2016) suggested that principal leadership ability has strong implications for student-learning outcomes. Playing a key role in change and student achievement, school principals must exercise confidence and competence as instructional leaders. Moreover, principals must refocus school reform initiatives by centering on improving teacher capacity (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). Central to impacting teacher capacity is the ability to move beyond traditional walkthroughs, instructional rounds, and observations. Effective principals will move beyond student scores on standardized instruments to measure the effectiveness of individual teachers; and will instead provide high-quality support through mentoring or coaching.

The principal’s ability to develop capacity in teachers through coaching is essential for improving the quality of instruction. Davis (2008) proposed that targeted mentoring is imperative for improving professional capacity. Davis further expounded by suggesting that the principal serve as the lead mentor, having a significant role in teacher capacity building through the design of induction systems and professional development activities. Likewise, principals must be supportive of the work of teachers by shifting the focus from teaching to learning (Lunenburg, 2010; Holland, 2009). As teachers embrace the role of learner, the principal ascends to the role of instructional leader.

Beyond formal education and credentialing, how do principals learn to be effective leaders? Lunenburg (2010) asserted that principals learn how to be leaders through collaborative relationships with teachers and other leaders, and through effective coaching experiences. Lunenburg emphasized five observable behaviors needed for principal and school effectiveness. These observable behaviors included (a) focus on learning, (b) be encouraging and collaborative, (c) use data to improve learning, (d) provide support, and (e) align curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To this list we would add the skilled behaviors of emotional intelligence (EI, Nelson and Low, 2011), and leader imagineering (Hoyle, 1995). It is most apparent and obvious when EI skills are not practiced, and we will talk more
about EI skills and EI-centric coaching later in this article. As the chief executive officer of the campus, the principal must also develop and implement a shared aspiration; a vision and conduit through which desired, observable behaviors are coached, modeled, and internalized. The campus vision does not have to be complicated nor long (e.g., to be a safe campus known for the value it places on learning). In fact short, meaningful vision statements are probably more effective. An important aspect of leader imagineering is to live and emphasize the vision at every opportunity using skilled behaviors.

To be an effective instructional leader requires the principal to be actively engaged with teachers, providing necessary support, guidance and instruction. Schools are increasingly in need of principals with demonstrated abilities to serve as effective instructional leaders with the capacity to affect change by serving as teacher-leaders. Moreover, leader behavior must be adaptable, depending on situational factors. However, as Smith and Engelsen (2013) and Renihan and Noonan (2012) discussed, becoming a teacher-leader is an intentional process. Principals must learn to lead through deliberate self-development (Nelson, Low, Nelson, & Hammett, 2015).

From research and practice, there is an emerging and natural connection of teaching, learning, coaching, and leadership excellence in education that holds promise for enhancing teacher capacity and teacher-leader performance. From a student perspective, research data support the intricate link of learning transformative emotional intelligence (EI) skills to student achievement and program completion (Nelson & Low, 2011). In similar ways, research connections and professional practice are connecting EI skills for teaching and learning excellence (Nelson, Low, Nelson, & Hammett, 2015). Additionally, research-based, person-centered, relationship focused, and skills-based coaching provides a learning and positive change model for principals as teacher-leaders (Nelson, Low, Hammett, and Sen, 2013). The purpose of this article is to introduce a research-derived coaching approach with the foundation of specific skills for modeling emotional intelligence in developing principals and teachers in positive ways. A summary of related research needs and implications are included for improving teacher capacity through coaching.

CONNECTING THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Our approach to school leadership is grounded in situational leadership theory and operationalized through EI-centric coaching. Educational leaders have long postulated how leadership style affects not only organizational productivity but employee satisfaction, as well. Perhaps the most prevalent leadership theory is transformational leadership, developed in response to characteristics exhibited by leaders who successfully transformed organizations (Burns, 1978). Burns characterized transformational leadership as that which “occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 20). Krishman (2002, 2005) further discussed transformational leadership as the congruence of values that emerged from leader and follower elevating each other to higher levels of cognization.

By contrast, contingency theory posits there is no one best way to lead an organization (Fiedler, 1994; Schein 2004). The general premise is that external factors demand different approaches and what works best in one situation may not work in another. Likewise, situational theory assumes varying levels of leadership are necessary based on the priority of the task and the ability and readiness of followers. The four types of situational theory are: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). Essentially, situational leadership theory postulates that leader behavior must be adaptable, depending on situational factors. While similarities exist between contingency theory and situational theory, the former is characterized by focus on the task (structure and production), while the latter focuses on fostering productive interpersonal relationships. The emphasis on skills that foster strong interpersonal relationships, self-management, personal leadership, and intrapersonal knowledge is also a strength and focus of transformative emotional intelligence and
El-centric coaching (Nelson, Low, Hammett, & Sen, 2013).

The situational leadership framework is particularly instructive for principals because it asks leaders to fashion their leadership strategy or approach based on a subordinate’s combination of ability (aptitude) and willingness to perform a job or task. Combining willingness and ability an on x-y axis reveals the popular quadrant model of situational leadership prevalent today in the popular media. When ability and willingness are low, then directing the teacher to is the appropriate leadership behavior for the principal. On the other extreme, when a teacher demonstrates high ability matched with high willingness to perform, then the best leadership strategy is delegation. When willingness is low and ability is high, then the suggested leadership strategy is supporting with the purpose of increasing willingness. An El-centric approach to coaching is recommended in all situations, but it may prove most effective in the final situational leadership quadrant. When willingness is high and ability is low, then coaching is most impactful for raising teacher effectiveness. For more information on situational leadership as it relates to principal leadership, we invite readers to review the Texas Education Association’s Trainer of Trainers materials (TEA, 2015b).

Coaching as a Leadership Approach

Instructional coaching has emerged as an approach that can greatly impact teaching and learning. Research from The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2007) supported a push for principals to invest more time improving classroom instruction. Notably, the report recommended that in order to be effective school leaders, principals must become instructional coaches. While instructional coaching may be somewhat situational in nature; that is, varying based on the needs of a particular teacher or campus, the principal must be the chief coach who oversees and determines all aspects of the program and strategy being implemented (Steiner & Cowal, 2007).

In similar research, Borman and Ferger (2006) presented a need for more descriptive research related to instructional coaching. Concluding that the area of research is relatively young, the authors called for more studies exploring the impact of instructional coaching programs. From our own experience we know that effective school leaders take advantage of opportunities to implement person- and group-centered coaching through a variety of different activities. The items presented in Table 1 are offered as candidate principal coaching activities, multiple levels of an independent variable related to coaching intervention if you will, for future research into principal coaching for increasing school effectiveness.

Coaching and Teacher Capacity

Individualized support must begin with an understanding that changes in behavior are in response to an individual’s response to events (Wong, 2006). In a related study, Cooper, Heron, and Heward (2007) discussed building behavior by shaping. Shaping refers to reinforcing small steps in the direction of the ultimately desired behavior. In most teaching situations, shaping is combined with modeling and coaching to produce collaborative inquiry (Cooper et al., 2007). Therefore, principals must support teacher learning by inspiring and sustaining a school culture that functions as a reflective learning system. Learning systems are not independent communal organizations. By contrast, they are systems of interconnected components with entrenched structures involved in common problem solving to achieve joint objectives (Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, & Hammond, 2010). One example of nurturing a culture of reflective learning would be to create opportunities for teacher professional development that links resources, individual teacher needs, and external evidence of opportunities for improvement (DeWitt & Hammett, 2014). See Table 1, Item GCA2.
In a similar study, Fullan (2014) argued that collaborative inquiry tasks the campus principal to become a systems leader who fosters leadership in others as a means of sustaining organizational change. With intentionality, principals should define the teachers’ role as one of learner and teacher, while redefining their own role as the architect of learner centered capacity building. Cooperatively, teachers and principals share what they know, identify challenges in need of further investigation, and connect newly acquired concepts and strategies to allow for significant growth and development. Fullan (2014) suggested four qualities that leaders must possess:

• The strong intellect of moral drive with consideration of the underlying forces of change
• Sensitive intelligence as they build connections
• Commitment to increasing and sharing fresh knowledge
• Ability for coherence building

Earlier Fullan (2007) noted that the combination of soft skills, combined with relationships between teachers and students were important for positively impacting student development. A related connection is that soft skills (EI skills) can be learned, developed, and modeled to enhance teacher capacity (Nelson & Low, 2011; Nelson, Low, Hammett, & Sen, 2013; Nelson, Low, Nelson, & Hammett, 2015). We would add that EI skills are also important to more fully develop school principal leadership for facilitating positive change, making important connections, fostering commitment to collaboration, and building coherence and teamwork. The following section connects EI theory and skills to encourage effective leader-teacher coaching in schools based on our understanding of the importance of transformative EI in school, life, and work.

TRANSFORMATIVE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FOR SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

The authors believe, from their research and practice, that leadership development in general (Hammett, Hollon, & Maggard, 2012; Rude; 2014, Sen & Joshi, 2015; Tang, Yin, & Nelson, 2010), and principal leadership development in particular, is enhanced through the integrated practice of situational leadership and the learned ability of transformative EI. We emphasize our hope and understanding that EI is a learned and developed ability facilitated through the systematic practice of specific skills.

Research is clear that EI skills, behaviors, and strategies are essential for developing and maintaining healthy relationships, well being, and personal excellence; characteristics essential to healthy learning and being (Nelson and Low, 1977-present). In a practical sense, it is always more apparent when EI is not present and characterized by a toxic culture where people do not want to be. As illustrated in Figure 1, learning and performance environments are healthiest and most productive when EI is present, and toxic when it is not. One of the best ways to teach EI
and build healthy environments that attract talent is to model EI through our behavior and relationships with others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOXIC</th>
<th>POOR</th>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
<th>EXCELLENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destructive/Damaging</td>
<td>Narcissistic</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>Demonstrates genuine concern and caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal technique that damages the learning environment</td>
<td>Self-centered</td>
<td>Credible</td>
<td>Models openness; respectful and clear communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers perceive principal as motivate by self-interest</td>
<td>Unethical</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Teachers perceive support and concern for their well being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malevolent narcissism is the personality dynamic</td>
<td>Not credible</td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>Personality dynamic is balanced: Mutual respect for self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generates maximum anxiety over minimum significance</td>
<td>Dishonest with self and others</td>
<td>Relationship focussed</td>
<td>Actively builds healthy and productive learning relationships that engender trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrogant, self-serving, inflexible and petty</td>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>Collaborative: Problem solving focus and empowers others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximizes interpersonal damage at the highest level</td>
<td>Incongruent</td>
<td>Congruent</td>
<td>Self-confident, acceptant, and tolerant of deficiencies in others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely unethical; amoral</td>
<td>Intolerant</td>
<td>Acceptant</td>
<td>Models integrity through highly ethical behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very politically astute</td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>Emotionally Intelligent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. A Continuum of Leadership Excellence. Adapted from Teaching and Learning Excellence (Nelson, Low, Nelson, & Hammett, 2015). Reprinted with permission of the authors.*

Our rationale for a skills-based approach for practicing EI is further demonstrated by connecting specific EI skills that facilitate excellence in school, work, and life. The rightmost column in Figure 1, above, lists many positive indicators that result in the of modeling EI. Table 2, below, extends this idea by attaching specific, discernible characteristics and behaviors that foster the desirable indicators. According to Nelson, Low, Nelson, Nelson, and Hammett (2015),

*The integration, interaction, and confluence of EI competencies and skills are what are truly important in our person-centered model of teaching and learning excellence. The modeling of EI skills, behaviors, and attitudes enables the development of healthy learning environments that fosters challenge and excellence in learners.*

(p. 36)

Educators in particular know the advantages of good learning models to organize lessons and teaching strategies to facilitate learning. The emotional learning system (ELS, Nelson & Low, 2004, 2011) is a good model to help define and achieve goals and learning outcomes through coaching. The ELS is a five step, person-centered, systematic process that engages the experiential system for meaningful learning and development (Nelson, Low, Hammett, & Sen, 2013). The ELS’s five steps include (a) person-centered exploration, (b) identifying strengths and areas to improve, (c) understanding how practice would improve or
change with the application and development of specific skills, (d) learning those skills, and (e) applying the skills through practice. The ELS is grounded in cognitive neuroscience, and it connects with and transcends Kolb’s learning cycle and Bloom’s taxonomy of learning (Hammett, 2007; Nelson, Low, Nelson, & Hammett, 2014). Since Bloom and Kolb are already familiar models in education and often applied by teachers in their classrooms, the ELS fits particularly well with our principal coaching framework for improving teacher and school effectiveness. For additional information about the ELS, see DeWitt and Hammett (2015) in this volume.

Having presented the tenants of transformative EI with a person-centered learning model and rationale for using a situational approach for grounding leadership, the only piece remaining to complete our coaching framework for enhancing teacher practice is the specific emotional intelligence skills that should be developed, strengthened, and enhanced to improve teacher and school performance. The Emotional Skills Assessment Process (ESAP) provides the EI skills and dimensions, and together with the ELS, provides the toolset to operationalize the EI-centric coaching framework. The skills of the ESAP model have been identified through concurrent research to be significantly related to constructive thinking (Cox & Nelson, 2008), mental health (Nelson, Jin, & Wang, 2002; Nelson, Low, & Ellis, 2007), positive campus culture (Hills, Cano, & Illich, 2013), learning (Nelson, Low, & Vela, 2003), and leadership quality (Labby, Lunenburg, & Slate, 2013; Love, 2014; Hammett, Holon, & Maggard, 2012; Rude, 2013; Tang, Yin, & Nelson, 2010). Which of these important qualities would you not want to develop and maintain as the principal of your school?

The ESAP model is a positive self-assessment instrument consisting of 13 scales aligned among the four dimensions of (a) Interpersonal Communication (b), Self-Control, (c) Personal Leadership, and (d) Intrapersonal Knowledge. The composite scales and skill scales are provided as follows:

I. Interpersonal Communication
1. Assertion
2. Aggression (assessed as anger control and management)
3. Deference (assessed as anxiety control and management)

II. Self Control
4. Drive Strength
5. Time Management
6. Commitment Ethic
7. Positive Change (assessed as Change Orientation or one’s dissatisfaction with ESAP skills)

III. Personal Leadership
8. Comfort (social awareness)
9. Empathy
10. Decision Making
11. Positive Influence (leadership)

IV. Intrapersonal Knowledge
12. Self-Esteem
13. Stress Management

There are several versions of the ESAP that measure the same four dimensions and 13 skills. Where they vary is by length. The education version has been most heavily researched using concurrent validation studies. It presents 213 items and is available either online or by paper-pencil by contacting the assessment’s publishers, Emotional Intelligence Learning Systems. The education version has demonstrated evidence of adequate internal consistency (whole test reliability, \( \alpha = .91 \)) (Nelson, Low, & Vela), as well as concurrent validity with many positive constructs including constructive thinking, mental health, positive campus culture, learning, and leadership quality (see citations in previous paragraph). All versions of the ESAP have similar reading skill levels. With their Kincaid Grade Reading Levels of 5-7, the ESAP items are designed to engage at a basic level of feeling more than thinking. The ESAP instructions and introductions to each section have a Kincaid Grade Reading Level of 7.6 and 11-12, respectively. All the ESAP versions except the latest one, the ESAP International (ESAP-I, 2015), use a 3-point Likert scale. The ESAP-I uses a 5-point Likert scale with only 87 items and is being pilot tested in India and elsewhere at the time of this writing.

CONNECTING SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND EI FOR PRINCIPAL COACHING

We encourage principals to use the situational leadership model to guide an integrated and tailored approach for coaching teachers toward better teacher practices, learning outcomes, and more positive school climates. An integrated model for combining situational leadership, coaching, and EI skills is provided in Table 3. The ELS is embedded throughout the process for personally meaningful engagement and learning, and the ESAP skills can be assessed, taught, and modeled to build upon existing positive, effective practices (DeWitt & Hammett, 2015). As teachers see their principals model EI through their school leadership, teachers learn and will be more willing to model EI through their classroom leadership. Positive social change is facilitated when students, families, and communities benefit from increasingly more positive and effective schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Candidate Skills</th>
<th>Learning Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1/Directing</td>
<td>Assertion, Comfort, Empathy, DM, DS, SM SE</td>
<td>The Emotional Learning System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2/Coaching</td>
<td>All EI skills</td>
<td>The Emotional Learning System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3/Supporting</td>
<td>Assertion, Comfort, Empathy, SE, DM, CE</td>
<td>The Emotional Learning System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4/Delegating</td>
<td>All EI skills</td>
<td>The Emotional Learning System</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There are 13 EI skills assessed by ESAP.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRINCIPAL PRACTICE

Historically, teacher effectiveness has been determined by the educator’s ability to impact gains in student achievement scores. While student achievement remains at the forefront of the national discourse on school accountability, improving student learning as evidenced by gains on standardized tests is but one measure of teacher effectiveness (Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008). The author’s further postulated how crafting a well-designed teacher evaluation system must collectively engage the synergy of administrators and teachers in order to create a system that not only evaluates, but also enhances professional practice through individualized support.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), in conjunction with steering committee assistance began the development of the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) in 2013. The steering committee, comprised of teachers, principals, and representatives from higher education and educator organizations, sought to create an evaluation system that assisted educators in achieving professional growth and development.
This new evaluation system is currently being piloted in 60 districts across Texas. Full implementation is scheduled for the 2016-2017 school year.

There are 3 identified components of T-TESS to measure teacher effectiveness: Observation, Goal Setting/Professional Development, and Student Growth. Thus, the evaluation process involves increased dialogue and interaction as the teacher and supervisor work together to determine goals and needs for professional development. As this process becomes the norm in Texas public schools, it is of merit to suggest that alignment of the tenets of Emotional Intelligence with T-TESS could prove beneficial for enhancing teacher practice through the evaluation process.

Effective principals must plan to exhibit more competence leading the instructional community. Implemented with fidelity, T-TESS places the onus of supporting teacher growth firmly on the campus principal. Using guiding questions suggested by TEA (2015a), principals begin the process of coaching for improved practice. A sustaining dialogue for coaching with vision may be engaged by revisiting the following guiding questions.

- How do you decide on the ways in which you will connect the content being taught to more powerful ideas?
- Why is it important to provide opportunities for students to highlight key concepts and connect to other powerful ideas?
- How do you decide on the types and frequency of questions you ask during a lesson?
- How do you identify the learning styles of your students and incorporate these into your lessons?
- How do you engage students in providing quality feedback to one another? (TEA, 2015b, n.p.)

Principals must become adept at coaching pedagogy to practice by sharing experiences, values, and attitudes. Reforming schools will not happen by legislation or pontification. Reformation must occur at the grass-roots level where teachers of teachers are involved in the daily grind of building competence through the articulation of a we can framework of coaching with emotional intelligence.

Principals will begin collecting data through their coaching efforts as they implement the coaching program outlined by the T-TESS. We encourage them to add an EI-centric approach and to take advantage of this opportunity to set up ethical research designs to help clarify what works best. Quantitative designs might include correlation and regression studies to evaluate relationships and associations between coaching practices and teacher evaluation results based on T-TESS. Causal-comparative studies could evaluate the impact of EI-centric coaching versus coaching without any EI focus. Finally, qualitative studies will explore teacher and principal experiences to determine the perceived value of embedding EI in principal coaching versus principal coaching without EI.

The new T-TESS model presents a rich, new opportunity to improve schools throughout Texas. It is our hope that this article will encourage school leaders to leverage the principles of appreciative inquiry through an EI-centric approach to get the absolute most out of their coaching efforts.

**Author Note:**

Nathan R. Templeton, Ed.D., Assistant Professor and Director of the Meadows Principal Improvement Program, Texas A&M University-Commerce.


Gary R. Low, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

Melissa A. Arrambide, Ed.D., Assistant Professor, Texas A&M University-Commerce.

Kent Willis

Correspondence concerning this article should be forwarded to nate.templeton@tamuc.edu.
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