In 2007, when Russom Mesfun became principal of Montera Middle School in Oakland, California, he discovered a troubling achievement gap between white and black students. He suspected that a number of practices contributed to this gap—uneven teacher collaboration, inconsistent assessment practices, and a lack of shared leadership—and he resolved to lead his school toward ensuring an equitable education for all students. Aware that this new challenge required an expanded set of leadership skills, Mesfun engaged the support of a transformational leadership coach.

In spring 2011, Montera Middle School received the prestigious California Distinguished School award, bestowed on schools that meet extensive criteria, including the implementation of successful practices to close the achievement gap. Montera’s Academic Performance Index—the state’s primary metric for evaluating student achievement—had increased by 94 points in the previous three years, with the largest gain coming from black students. Although the journey was at times arduous, the school is now a different place than it was four years ago.

Mesfun attributes this transformation in large part to the leadership coaching he received. “For as long as I am a principal, I will always have a coach,” he declares. He sees coaching as a way to continue improving his practice—a necessity given the demands of his job. He also recognizes that in working with a coach, he is modeling the ongoing learning he expects from his teachers.

In Oakland Unified School District, Russom Mesfun is not alone in his appreciation of leadership coaching. Since its inception six years ago, our team of transformational leadership coaches has supported more than 100 principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, site-based coaches, and central office administrators. Although some of our clients are encouraged by their supervisors to engage our services, all leaders take up the coaching voluntarily. The evidence of Oakland’s progress in raising student achievement has convinced us that transformational leadership coaching is a high-leverage and effective way to improve schools.

We grew to a team of seven, all former teachers with experience in coaching or administration. Unlike most large urban districts, who partner with external organizations to provide coaching to their leaders, our district chose to meet this need by creating an internal service provider. As coaches who operate within the district, we can build an extensive network of trusting relationships, navigate the political climate, access information, and align our work with the district’s goals.

Our team provides sustained, job-embedded, differentiated support to school leaders. Our goal is not to merely produce structural change in the leaders’
work, but rather to transform the culture of the entire organization to eliminate inequities within the education system and to get the best results for all students.

How We Work: An Example
Our work is a partnership, grounded in data and research and contingent on deep trust. In our initial meetings with clients, we inquire about their vision for their school and talk about what brings them to the work; we get a sense of where they’re coming from and where they want to go. We promise confidentiality, and we meticulously honor this promise. We play no role in a leader’s official evaluation.

As we build trust, we co-construct a work plan that focuses on one or more of the following areas: instructional leadership, professional learning communities and shared leadership, quality teaching and learning, and community and family engagement. Our team has developed tools to guide us in compiling a picture of a school in these areas. We also analyze the site’s data, engage in conversations with all stakeholders, and observe as much as possible—classrooms, meetings, lunchrooms, hallways, and so on. When we have a complete enough picture of the school, we settle on a few goals.

One of our clients, Victoria Garcia (a pseudonym), a second-year principal of a large, low-performing elementary school, wanted to focus on developing her instructional leadership skills. Together with her coach, she constructed this goal:

By June 2011, the principal will develop her capacity to give teachers feedback on their instruction. The principal will also develop her capacity to gather data on the current reality of instruction at her school and to use this data to differentiate professional development for teachers.

To measure progress on this goal, the coach and Ms. Garcia used a developmental leadership rubric that our team created. After self-assessing on the rubric, Ms. Garcia decided that she
wanted to focus on three elements: high expectations and equity for all; hard conversations; and expectation and agreement. (See the rubric online at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_201110_aguilar_rubric.pdf.) She set goals for each element—under hard conversations, for example, she aimed to move from the pre-initiation stage to the developing stage.

Next, the coach and principal developed a work plan that included a theory of action, prioritized high-leverage strategic activities, and spelled out the evidence and data they would gather along the way to show progress. The following are some of the strategic activities that Ms. Garcia and her coach determined would help her reach her goal:

- The coach will support the principal to set up structures so that regular teacher observations can occur, observations are focused and strategic, and a structure exists for debriefing observations. (Structures to support observations include scheduling, ironing out logistics, and determining conversation protocols for debriefing.)
- The coach and principal will reflect on the effect of the principal’s feedback to teachers and will track the feedback that results in a change of teacher practice.
- The coach will support the principal in identifying, articulating, and communicating her instructional expectations to teachers.

Initially, Ms. Garcia’s coach supported her in scheduling observations of all her teachers for the following two months and thinking through the necessary logistics. Then they analyzed various forms of data—such as language assessment results from the beginning of the year, attendance reports, and teacher self-evaluations—and determined a focus for the observations.

For example, in a 3rd grade class full of English language learners, Ms. Garcia wanted to observe how much time the teacher gave students to speak, both formally and informally. The coach accompanied Ms. Garcia on a number of visits to this classroom, where they observed that the teacher spoke most of the time and accepted the single-word responses that students gave to her questions.

The coach then conferred with the principal, offering different ways that she could address the issue with the teacher in a follow-up meeting. The coach suggested asking the teacher how she envisioned supporting her students’ oral language development as a way to open the conversation. The coach also helped Ms. Garcia articulate the outcomes she wanted from the meeting and identify the strategies she would ask the teacher to try. The principal was adamant about wanting the teacher to reduce her talk-time and increase students’ structured talk-time.

At their next meeting, Ms. Garcia and her coach discussed how the follow-up meeting with the teacher had gone. Ms. Garcia reported that she had not become adversarial, as she sometimes did with teachers, and therefore felt the meeting was successful. The coach noted this as a change in leadership practice but also pushed Ms. Garcia to reflect on whether the conversation had produced positive change. Because Ms. Garcia was not sure, they returned to the 3rd grade classroom to observe. This time they saw the teacher using a cooperative learning structure that allowed for a great deal of student talk.

Ms. Garcia was thrilled: The change in her leadership practice had resulted in a change in teacher practice. This leader was on her way to meeting her yearlong goal.

After several months of observations, the coach helped Ms. Garcia summarize the data she had gathered and identify some instructional expectations. As a result, Ms. Garcia determined that she wanted teachers to provide their English language learners with sentence frames. She had months of data to support her argument that students needed these structures. Her coach then worked with her to develop a plan for how to share the data, communicate her expectation to teachers, and get their buy-in. Again, the coach supported Ms. Garcia in stating her expectations in a non-confrontational way that would invite participation. The coach and principal role-played hypothetical conversations in which teachers resisted these changes until Ms. Garcia felt confident in her ability to respond effectively.

The following week, Ms. Garcia spoke to her staff about her expectation regarding sentence frames and increasing the amount of time that students speak in class. The coach took notes on the principal’s presentation, also noting the comments and body language of the teaching staff. Later, the coach supported Ms. Garcia in reflecting on the meeting, which had gone smoothly. The work then became about monitoring the changes in teacher practice and identifying individual teachers’ professional development needs. The coach

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continuously connected each step of the work back to the plan, citing changes and guiding the principal toward meeting her goals.

This snapshot of the work with Ms. Garcia is typical of the way transformational leadership coaches engage with school leaders. In general, we spend a great deal of time in conversation with our clients. We listen without judgment, gently and steadily using questioning strategies to help leaders explore their underlying beliefs and attitudes, to uncover root causes of an issue, and to figure out what changes are possible at the school and how to make those possibilities a reality. We provide principals with current research, readings, data analysis tools, and protocols; we connect them with colleagues, experts, and resources.

**Our Own Professional Learning Community**

Our team of coaches meets for about three hours each week to delve into the latest research on school leadership, effective teaching strategies, the change process, and the craft of coaching. We also support one another on dealing with our clients’ immediate issues. Principal Garcia’s coach struggled initially with how to help her client effectively talk with teachers about their weaknesses. The coach recognized that Ms. Garcia needed to speak with her teachers differently but wasn’t sure how to coach her toward making this change.

Together, our team reflected on the emotional intelligence skills necessary for hard conversations and on the non-confrontational language that principals can use to communicate expectations. We supported our colleague, engaging her in role-plays and conversation until she felt prepared to return to Ms. Garcia’s school and effectively coach the principal toward a different practice. Our professional learning community is where we come week after week for learning, support, and inspiration; we recognize it as the key to our team’s success.

**Why Prioritize Leadership Coaching?**

Given that the quality of school leadership is the second most important factor in student achievement (after the quality of teachers), school districts must create the conditions to systematically support, develop, and retain highly effective leaders. Transformational leadership coaching, as a model for professional development and school improvement, is an effective way to accomplish this objective. At the schools we have supported for two years or more, the Academic Performance Index score has risen by an average of 74 points per year. (Average growth in Oakland in 2009–10 was 26 points.) Schools that have worked with leadership coaches have seen a significant reduction in turnover of effective teachers, a major challenge in Oakland’s schools. We have also documented a reduction in principal turnover, particularly among principals who have received coaching in emotional resilience.

Our team always wrestles with the question, Would transformations like that at Montera Middle School have happened anyway, without transformational leadership coaching? It’s impossible to know for sure, but data from the surveys and interviews that we regularly gather indicate that our work has significantly promoted school improvement. Principals often remark, “Your support was the only reason I didn’t quit midyear,” or “You’re the only one who listened to me and believed in me.” We receive these comments with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction: We wish that a robust system for support and encouragement existed for all principals, but until it does, we are grateful to play such an important role in school transformation.

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**EL Online**

Read about another team of coaches who work with both school leaders and teachers to improve instruction in the online-only article “The Professor as Coach” at www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct11/vol69/num02/The-Professor-as-Coach.aspx.

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