



Can educational coaching make you a more effective school leader?

A case study into the impact of educational coaching through the assessment and development of mental toughness.



BACKGROUND

This case study evidences the impact of educational coaching on the mental toughness of a Deputy Head Teacher from a British school in Abu Dhabi, referred to as the client. The coaching was delivered by a Positive Psychology Consultant and former Head Teacher, referred to as the coach.

Educational coaching is focused on the improvement of learning and development outcomes by increasing individual effectiveness through the enhancement of self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility. It involves 'a one-to-one conversation between the coach and the client, in which the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the client through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate' (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, chp. 1)

The UK National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education, 2005), proposes that high-quality coaching in schools supports professional development, leadership sustainability and school improvement. **The UK National College for School Leadership (Creasy & Paterson, 2005)** supports the use of coaching in schools and incorporates training on coaching in three of their professional leadership development programmes: Leading from the Middle, Leadership Pathways and National Professional Qualification for Headship.

The benefits of educational coaching for school leaders include:

- Helping to transfer theoretical learning to workplace practice;
- Continuing to perform effectively and with commitment;
- Enhancing skills and developing new habits;
- Developing greater self-awareness;
- Enhancing motivation;

- Strengthening personal confidence and self-regard;
- Building resilience and supporting well-being;
- Bringing out the best in educational staff and students;
- Leveraging organisational change within schools and systemic change across the wider educational arena. (van Nieuwerburgh, 2005, chp.2)

One of the core purposes of coaching is to enhance an individual's ability to cope effectively with challenge.

Mental toughness is defined as 'a personality trait which determines, in large part, how people respond to challenge, stress and pressure, irrespective of their circumstances' (Strycharcyk & Clough, 2015, p.1). Mental toughness can be developed in individuals through coaching and, as a result, help them to perform better, enjoy greater wellbeing and realise their potential.

The impact of coaching on mental toughness can be measured using MQT PLUS psychometric, which is an online questionnaire that can be completed in about 20 minutes.

MQT PLUS assesses overall mental toughness through 4 capacities, comprising 8 factors, as shown in the table below. These capacities are scored on a normally distributed scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest level of toughness.

Mental Toughness Scale	What this means...What Does MQT PLUS Assess...The 8 Factors
CONTROL	Life Control - I really believe I can do it
	Emotional Control - I can manage my emotions and the emotions of others
COMITTMENT	Goal Orientation - I set goals- I like the idea of working with goals
	Achievement Orientation - I'll do what it takes to keep my promises and achieve my goals
CHALLENGE	Risk Orientation - I welcome new and different experiences- I stretch myself
	Learning Orientation - I learn from what happens- including setbacks.
CONFIDENCE	In Abilities - I believe I have the ability to do it- or can acquire the ability
	Interpersonal Confidence - I can influence others- I am happy to ask the "stupid" question

(Graham, 2018)

MQT PLUS provides a recognised framework to assess and measure mental toughness, and support coaches in selecting and applying interventions to assist their client.

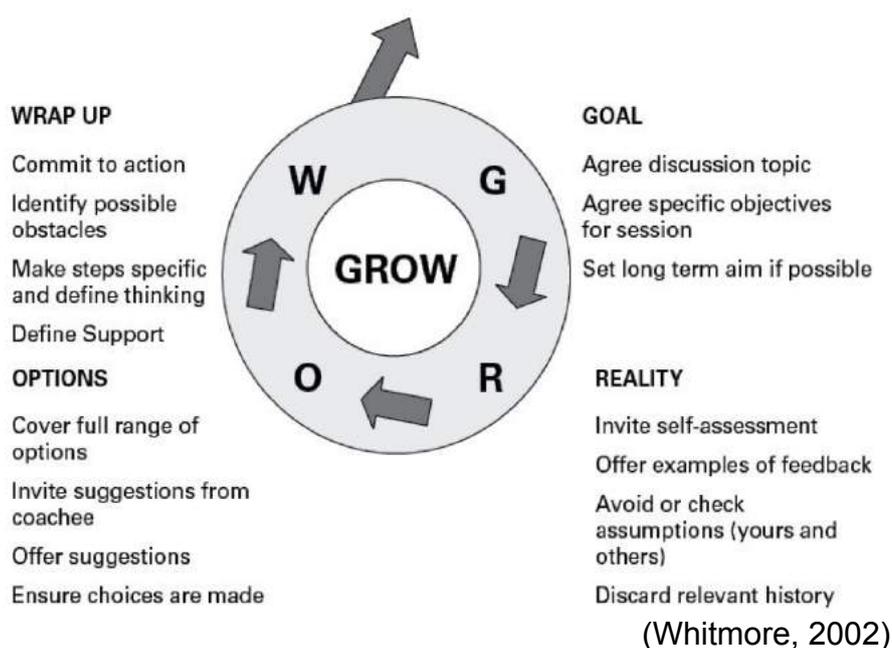
CONTEXT

The educational coaching involved five 2-hour sessions, using the following key coaching skills:

- Listening to encourage thinking;
- Asking powerful questions;
- Summarising;
- Paraphrasing; and
- Giving/receiving feedback.

(van Nieuwerburgh, 2014)

In each session, the coach employed the GROW process to enable the client to select a **goal** and reflect on the **reality** of the current position in relation to his goal. The coach then supported the client in brainstorming **options** of how he might achieve his goal and assisted him in evaluating which would be the best one for him. Each session concluded with the **wrap up**, where the client developed a clear action plan towards achieving his goal.



The first session commenced with contracting to align and manage the expectations of both the coach and client. The coach then focussed on enabling the client to identify and prioritise the **goals** he wanted to achieve from the coaching. This involved the coach facilitating discussions about the client's work, e.g. his job description, school improvement plan responsibilities and professional development targets. Following the first session, the client completed the online MQT PLUS psychometric to assess his mental toughness.

The second coaching session focussed on the client reflecting on the MQT PLUS results. The coach and the client examined each of the 4C's in turn and analysed the implications of the scores across and within each of the 8 factors. Based on this reflection, the client identified two factors of mental toughness he wanted improve on – **goals**; reflected on experiences that involved these factors – **reality**; explored possible ways to improve these factors – **options**; and chose the best options to develop his action plan - **wrap up**. The coach supported the client by suggesting positive psychology interventions he could employ to achieve his goals, including 'Three Good Things', 'Character Strengths Investigation' and 'Best Possible Self.' The third and fourth sessions focussed on the achievement of the client's goals, using the GROW model and positive psychology interventions to increase mental toughness.

The client repeated the MQT PLUS psychometric eight weeks after the fourth session, to provide a comparison of mental toughness scores before and after coaching. The delay in repeating the psychometric was designed to show that the improvements achieved were enduring. The output, known as a 'distance-travelled report', is shown in the results section.

The final session focussed on the client and the coach conducting a critical reflection of the results of his 'distance-travelled' report. However, people can learn

and develop for many reasons; therefore, it is critical to identify whether any influences and factors, unrelated to the educational coaching, may have impacted on the final mental toughness scores.

Limitations to the case study were the small sample size and lack of a control group for comparison purposes.

RESULTS

Distance-Travelled Report



Fig. 1 – Client results

This report shows the impact of the leadership coaching on the client's scores for overall mental toughness and for each of the 4C's and eight factors. This was created from the data gathered from the client's MQT PLUS responses after session 1 and 8 weeks after session 4. Session 1 data is on the left in grey. Session 4 data is shown on the right in dark green. The increase in scores is displayed in the middle in light green.

The report shows there has been a significant increase in the client's overall level of mental toughness, in all 4C's and in 6 out of 8 factors.

DISCUSSION

An evaluation of the distance-travelled report confirmed that the positive changes in the mental toughness scores were a direct result of the educational coaching. No external influences or factors were present.

The client identified the improvements in each of the 4C's and 8 factors of mental toughness as follows:

Confidence:

Confidence in abilities – The client feels more confident in himself and about his role. He now feels more productive, more visionary and stronger in longer-term planning.

Control:

Emotional control – The client now feels more in control and recognises this as a strength.

Life control – The client is now more proactive in setting goals.

Commitment:

Goal orientation – Coaching has helped the client find better ways to move forward. Being more visionary, he has been able to set time aside to put more plans in motion. In particular, it has enabled him to create an action plan for his school's digital strategy; understanding exactly what he wants to achieve and developing a clear pathway to do so.

Achievement orientation – The client is achieving more now that he is more goal orientated.

Challenge:

Risk orientation – The client's increased confidence and self-worth, means he no longer feels the need to be as risk adverse. This is improving the client's decision making, by enabling him to consider all

opportunities open to him.

Learning orientation – Being more confident and aware of his worth within his role has helped the client to see the learning opportunities when things go wrong.

CONCLUSION

This case study has clearly:

- Demonstrated the benefits of educational coaching for school leaders.
- Confirmed the positive correlation between effective leadership and high levels mental toughness.
- Established the value of MQT PLUS in measuring and assessing mental toughness.

TESTIMONY

FROM THE CLIENT

What difference do you think the MQT PLUS assessments and coaching made? The assessments were a good starting point for raising my awareness and helping me to understand myself better. The coaching allowed me to pause and spend time exploring different pathways that have allowed me to become more effective in what I do.

How has that difference translated into your life and work? Through blocking off protected time, I am more effective and more confident that what I am producing is of real worth. Coaching has raised my awareness of my strengths. I feel more confident in my position at school and my sense of belonging and purpose with the Senior Leadership Team has increased.

How useful have you found the insight provided by MQT PLUS assessment? The results have been a good starting point for reflection and understanding

myself more.

What impact could coaching have on head teachers? Coaching could impact not just on head teachers but everyone in a senior role within schools. Coaching allows ring fenced time to reflect. It is tailored towards your individual leadership style and personality. I would recommend it without a doubt.

What was your most significant learning experience during the coaching process? A self-realisation that I was running to stand still and that was getting me frustrated. Coaching helped me to develop a toolkit to become more effective at longer term planning.

How do you think schools could benefit from coaching? If 10 hours of coaching makes you more effective, it has to be worth it. Having time to be reflective has got to be advantageous to your role and your school. It also has a positive knock-on effect on the staff, students and the school community.

How would you describe your coach? The coach is warm and has great wisdom, built on her experiences as a Head Teacher. This means she is very empathetic to the teaching role, which is in itself very comforting. The coach can listen really well and also ask questions that dig beneath the surface, not scratch it, and this help her client to become more self-reflective. I have thoroughly enjoyed my coaching sessions (even though I didn't think I would!) and truly believe I have become more effective in my role, more visionary as opposed to operational.

This case study was carried out by **Matrix Consulting** Learn more about educational coaching for school leaders:

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