Powerful Questions for Coaching Turnaround Leaders

**Introduction**

Leaders who choose to take on the challenging work of dramatically increasing student achievement in schools that have experienced chronic and persistent failure require professional development. This professional development needs to focus on the unique requirements of the job. Leadership coaching, a proven approach for increasing leader performance, is well suited to provide personalized support for turnaround leaders, including principals, assistant principals, deans, and teacher-leaders.

This *Powerful Questions for Coaching Turnaround Leaders* tool provides information for coaches on critical turnaround leader actions and competencies, and offers coaches guidance on crafting powerful questions to support the turnaround leaders’ ongoing development.

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**Turnaround Definition**

A school turnaround is a swift, dramatic, lasting change in the culture and student achievement of a chronically low-performing school.¹

**Turnaround Leader Actions**

Strong leaders are essential to turnaround success. Cross-sector research indicates a set of high-leverage leader actions that contribute to turnaround success.² Turnaround leader actions must be quick, bold, and sustained to be successful.³ The most important of these actions happen in a fast cycle—identifying a few high-priority early wins, deploying new tactics, measuring results, and changing tactics based on data. This cycle occurs continuously throughout the turnaround process.⁴ Leadership coaching for turnaround leaders focuses on supporting leaders in taking the actions necessary to dramatically improve school performance.

**Turnaround Leader Competencies**

The underlying competencies, or habits of behavior, of turnaround leaders affect the actions they take. Across sectors, effective turnaround leaders exhibit similar patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking that enable them to implement the leadership actions necessary to drive dramatic organizational improvement.⁵ Fortunately, competencies are not innate, fixed traits, but develop and can change with experience. Therefore, focused professional development and coaching can help turnaround leaders build and strengthen necessary competencies.⁶

**Leadership Coaching**

Coaches work with individuals in a thought-provoking process that inspires them to maximize their potential.⁷ Unlike other professional learning, coaching develops a leader’s internal
capacity to make decisions and take actions consistent with their values and beliefs. Coaching turnaround leaders differs from coaching leaders in a typical school due to the urgency for dramatic, transformative changes. Research shows that leadership coaching can make a difference in the performance of leaders across sectors. In turnaround leader coaching, the participants focus on achieving their goals by taking strategic actions, changing leadership behaviors, and bringing the leader’s vision to life—all with a sense of urgency. A successful turnaround relies on strong leadership—and strong leadership often relies on skilled coaching.

**Powerful Questions**

To help leaders develop competencies and take high-leverage actions, coaches use powerful questions to focus, expand, or shift thinking. Ambiguous, personal, and anxiety-provoking, powerful questions require leaders to look inside themselves, envision the future, and determine necessary actions. Answers to powerful questions require complex thought and deep analysis, which bring clarity and insight to the situation and support effective decision making.

**Turnaround Coaching Questions Tool**

Succeeding only about a third of the time, turnarounds place intense pressure on their leaders—resulting in a high leadership turnover rate. Effective leadership coaching can reinforce effective turnaround leader competencies and actions and retain highly effective leaders.

This tool matches powerful questions to four competency clusters that support key turnaround leader actions: 1) driving for results; 2) influencing for results; 3) data analysis and problem solving; and 4) showing confidence to lead. Each section includes a brief description of the cluster, associated turnaround leader actions and competencies, and a set of coaching questions. The conclusion describes common coaching challenges and helpful hints to support a turnaround leadership coach.

By nature, coaching questions are not crafted outside of a coaching conversation. Still, master coaches continually search for questions that will move their clients’ thinking to deeper levels and drive their clients to take actions that will result in increased performance and satisfaction. The following questions are intended as a resource for coaches of turnaround leaders. Some are basic, selected and adapted from a variety of coaching tools listed in the resources list. Some aim to move to a deeper level. Coaches are encouraged to read through, try out, and add more to these questions.

**Driving for Results**

The **Driving for Results** competency cluster concerns a turnaround leader’s strong drive to achieve outstanding results, and relentless focus on the actions required for success. A leader needs the competencies and actions included in driving for results to make bold changes in practices, overcome obstacles, and achieve dramatic increases in student achievement.

**Leader Actions** related to driving for results:

1. **Focus on achieving a few tangible early wins in year one**: Choose a few high-priority goals that will produce early, visible successes, motivate staff, and quiet naysayers.
2. **Implement strategies that deviate from organizational norms**: Deviate from existing strategies to achieve early wins.
3. **Require all staff to change**: Mandate change with no exceptions.
4. **Make necessary staff replacements**: Replace ineffective or stagnant leaders with those who will drive change.
5. **Focus time and money on successful tactics; halt others**: Stop ineffective
practices and replace with new strategies.

6. Relentlessly pursue end goals—progress alone is not enough: Report progress, but focus on end goals.

**Competencies** necessary to support turnaround leader actions:

**Achievement (ACH):** Setting high performance goals for the school, prioritizing the highest leverage activities, and directing people, time, and financial resources to these actions.

**Initiative and Persistence (I&P):** Taking personal responsibility and putting in the extra effort necessary effort to reach challenging goals, including enlisting others and navigating obstacles.

**Monitoring and Directiveness (M&D):** Setting clear expectations, monitoring performance, and holding everyone accountable.

**Planning Ahead (PLA):** Proactively planning actions and preparing for potential challenges to avoid problems.

**Coaching Questions for Driving for Results**

**Achievement**

- What one or two early outcomes do you want?
- What goals have you set? How do you know they are rigorous and achievable?
- How will you know you have reached your goals?
- What outcomes will you achieve first? When?
- What action could you take that would move you furthest toward your goals?
- What actions would you take if there were no limitations?

- How could you allocate resources to align to these actions/outcomes?

**Initiative and Persistence**

- What more could you do to reach your goals?
- What is stopping you?
- What changes will it require?
- What obstacles do you anticipate?
- What risk are you willing to take to achieve your goals?
- What would happen if you did? What would happen if you didn’t?

**Monitoring and Directiveness**

- How do you communicate your expectations?
- How do you hold yourself and others accountable?
- How do you monitor performance against expectations?
- How do you address performance problems?

**Planning Ahead**

- How have you planned for taking actions?
- How will you monitor and adjust your plans?
- What if it doesn’t work out the way you planned?
- What are some potential problems that you are prepared to address?
- What are you not prepared to address?

**Influencing for Results**

**Influencing for Results** focuses on motivating and influencing the thinking and behavior of others to achieve results. Turnaround leaders cannot create effective change on their own; they must induce behaviors from others that are significantly different from those previously exhibited.
Leader Actions related to influencing for results:

1. **Communicate a positive vision**: Share a picture of success and its benefits.
2. **Help staff personally feel problems**: Help staff feel problems caused by the status quo and motivate them to change.
3. **Gain support of influencers**: Earn support of influential staff and community members. Use influencers to gain the support of others.
4. **Silence critics with speedy success**: Use early wins to quiet naysayers. Reduce time spent on influence, and increase time spent on results.

Competencies necessary to support turnaround leader actions:

- **Impact and Influence (I&I)**: Acting with the purpose of affecting the perceptions, thinking, and actions of others.
- **Team Leadership (TL)**: Assuming authoritative leadership of a group: keeping the team informed, promoting performance, obtaining resources, monitoring productivity, and motivating the team with a compelling vision and enthusiasm.
- **Developing Others (DO)**: Increasing the short- and long-term effectiveness of others by expressing positive expectations, providing training to build capacity, and delegating authority to broaden experience.

**Coaching Questions for Influencing for Results**

**Impact and Influence**
- What do you want others to know?
- How could you communicate it to others?
- How do you think your message will be received?
- Who are the key influencers?
- Who else might help you reach your goals?
- How have you been successful in the past?

**Team Leadership**
- What is your vision for the future?
- What excites you about this?
- What are some ways you could communicate your vision?
- How do others feel about your vision?
- How well do your actions align with your vision and goals?
- How do you keep the focus on the vision and goals?
- What obstacles are getting in the way?

**Developing Others**
- What are the most important skills your staff needs to reach your goals?
- How could you develop competencies and skills in staff?
- What resources could you use to build capacity?
- How do you provide leadership and growth opportunities for staff?
- How do you acknowledge and encourage staff to stretch?

**Data Analysis and Problem Solving**

Data Analysis and Problem Solving focuses on how a turnaround leader applies his or her thinking to school goals and challenges. Turnaround leaders use data analysis and problem solving to set a course of action that others can follow, understand when tactics are working, consider alternative approaches, and clarify action steps to connect school learning goals to classroom activity.
Leader Actions related to data analysis and problem solving:

1. **Collect and personally analyze data on school performance:** Analyze data about school performance to identify high-priority problems that can be fixed quickly.

2. **Develop an action plan based on data:** Create an action plan with annual goals and major steps. Provide enough detail that all members of the school community know what they need to do.

3. **Measure and report progress frequently:** Set up systems to measure and report interim results often. Adjust plans as needed, discontinuing failed tactics and increasing the use of successful tactics.

4. **Require all decision makers to share data:** Report results visibly and often. Require all key staff to share results openly. Make results central to problem-solving conversations.

Competencies necessary to support turnaround leader actions:

- **Analytical Thinking (AT):** Breaking a problem down into smaller parts in a logical way by sequence, relationship, or importance.

- **Conceptual Thinking (CT):** Understanding how parts fit together and are related in the big picture.

Coaching Questions for **Data Analysis and Problem Solving**

**Analytical Thinking**

- What might be the reason for the results you see?
- What have you tried so far?
- What additional data do you need?
- What steps do you think you need to take?
- What do you want to do first?

**Conceptual Thinking**

- What trends do you notice?
- What evidence do you have?
- How does that change your thinking?
- What do you think that means?
- Which is most important to address?
- What else might you do?
- If you did know what to do, what would you decide?

**Showing Confidence to Lead**

**Showing Confidence to Lead** concerns staying visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite the personal and professional criticisms common during turnaround efforts. The turnaround leader’s ability to remain self-confident contributes to actions in all of the other competency clusters.

Leader Actions related to showing the confidence to lead:

All 14 turnaround leader actions require self-confidence. Making dramatic gains in student achievement requires bold, often unpopular, actions on the part of the leader. Turnaround leaders need to present themselves with confidence, put themselves into challenging situations, take personal responsibility for mistakes, and follow up with analysis and corrective actions. Coaches may find that this competency is the one for which turnaround leaders need the most support.

Competencies necessary to support turnaround leader actions:

- **Self-Confidence (SCF):** Believing in one’s ability to accomplish tasks and the actions that reflect that belief.
### Coaching Questions for Showing Confidence to Lead

**Self-Confidence**
- What would you say to a colleague in the same situation as you face?
- How have you contributed to this success?
- How will you decide what to do?
- What is the worst-case scenario?
- What would you do if you weren’t afraid?
- How do you want to show up in this situation?
- What contributions are you making?
- What is the story you are telling yourself?
- What doubts or reservations do you have?
- How confident are you in your decision?
- What would you need to be more confident?
- What price are you willing to pay?
- How will others respond?
- What excites you most about this opportunity?
- What question am I not asking you that I should?
- What is the risk if you do/don’t?
- What do you need to let go of?
- What would it take to move you forward?
- What would you do if you were 10 times bolder?

### Coaching Turnaround Leaders

Turnaround school leaders are engaged in urgent and important work that requires them to act quickly and decisively to make changes that will dramatically improve student outcomes.

Coaches of turnaround leaders may find themselves facing challenges that they do not frequently experience when coaching other leaders.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Challenge</th>
<th>Helpful Hint</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maintaining a regular time for coaching</td>
<td>Consider meeting off-site or outside of school hours for coaching</td>
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<td>Staying present with the leader while remaining focused on highest priority goals</td>
<td>Ask the leader how her concerns affect reaching stated leadership goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focusing on end-of-year goals, not setting and monitoring short-term goals</td>
<td>Ask the leader how he will know he is on track for reaching end-of-year goals</td>
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<td>Understanding the leader’s underlying concerns</td>
<td>Listen for and call out repeated words, emotion words, and analogies</td>
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<td>Helping the leader to get “un-stuck”</td>
<td>Ask the leader to respond from another perspective or invite them to brainstorm</td>
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<td>Pushing the leader outside of her comfort zone</td>
<td>Use questions that require leader to think differently than her usual style</td>
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<td>Prioritizing the most important actions</td>
<td>Ask the leader to rank on a scale which action will have the greatest impact</td>
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<td>Holding the leader accountable for taking actions</td>
<td>Ask the leader to schedule actions and/or send an email to the coach with actions they will take</td>
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Conclusion

Turning around achievement in persistently low-performing schools requires committed and resilient leaders who are willing to take bold actions and relentlessly drive for results in the face of negativity and disbelief. Leadership coaching helps keep turnaround leaders focused on the top actions for success and builds leadership competencies necessary to take those actions. In addition, leadership coaching helps attract and retain strong turnaround leaders in challenging settings. For turnaround leaders, on the front lines of education, coaching provides a critical support that may make the difference between success and failure—a difference with significant consequences for students.

Helpful Resources

Turnarounds Competencies and Actions


Powerful Questions


Leadership Coaching


International Coaching Federation http://www.coachfederation.org/


