

Empowering school leaders to transform education – our theory of change

Shifting culture to support system transformation

Many can bear personal witness to the massive impact that school leaders have on the quality of education. Though it is sometimes difficult to quantify, the importance of the quality of leadership is borne out in the research evidence too.^{1 2}

School systems may strive to transform how they deliver education in order to continually improve the learning and wellbeing of the children in their schools. Indeed, they are increasingly open to going beyond narrow measures of literacy and numeracy attainment to consider their role in preparing children for fulfilling lives, spurred on by initiatives such as [OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030](#) and Education for Human Flourishing. Yet there are numerous examples of attempted ‘system transformations’, restructures and new policy initiatives that have failed to deliver improvements in the quality of education across schools. ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’, as the idiom goes. In our experience, education systems cannot unlock the full potential of their schools until they invest seriously in changing culture at all levels – empowering district leaders, principals, middle leaders and teachers to make decisions locally in order to meet the individual and group needs of students in their local context.

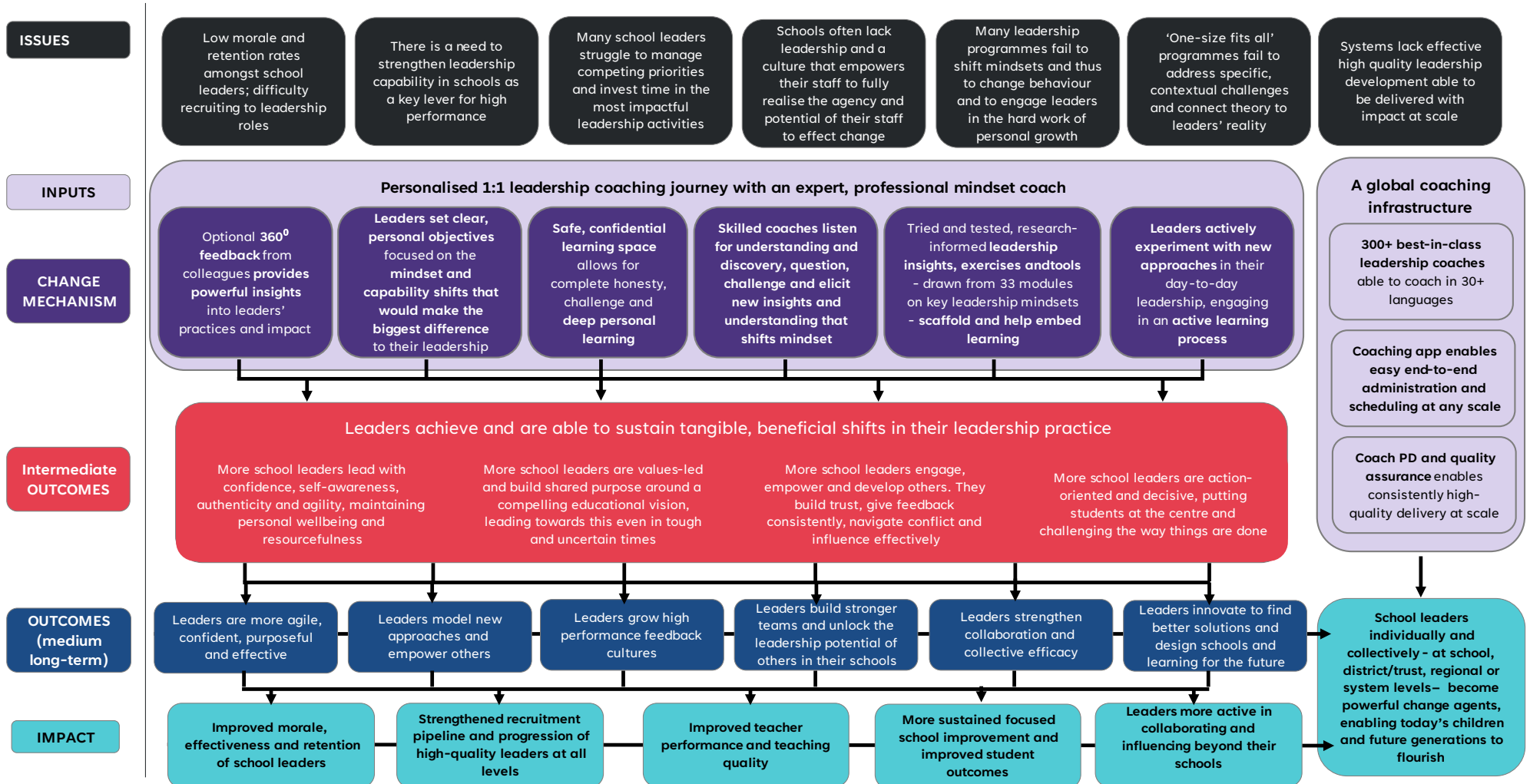
Achieving culture change doesn’t just happen. Under constant public scrutiny and wary of political interference, school systems have traditionally been run as bureaucracies, where highly committed education executives have found themselves feeling that they have little or no choice but to reinforce ‘command and control’ cultures. Years of ‘unlearning’ is required which goes way beyond changing processes, roles and language (rhetoric). **Culture** can only shift in a sustained way if school systems can learn how to shift **mindsets** – the ingrained attitudes, beliefs and values that cause us to behave in a certain way.

Shifting mindsets in order to shift leadership practice is specialist work and draws on expertise from professional leadership coaching. BTS Spark has developed a Theory of Change model that clearly identifies how school system transformation can be supported by a strategic coaching intervention. This is outlined in the figure below and further explained in the rest of this paper.

¹ Grissom J.A. et al (2021) How Principals Affect Students and Schools: Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research, The Wallace Foundation

² Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris & David Hopkins (2020) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited, School Leadership & Management, 40:1, 5-22, DOI:10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077

BTS Spark 1:1 Leadership Coaching Theory of Change



What do we know about school leader mindsets?

Mindsets matter³ as, together, they create your culture. Many forward-looking school systems have started to name 'dispositions' or 'mindsets' that they would like their leaders to espouse, often a curated group of 3-6 'school leader mindsets'. But they tend to have scant or no actual data on the mindsets currently held by their district and school leaders, and how these may be supporting or hindering their system transformation efforts.

Our recent book, [Embracing MESSY Leadership](#), has shed a light on this by sharing the insights that BTS Spark coaches have gained from coaching over 20,000 school leaders globally. Through analysing thousands of coaching objectives and coaching conversations notes, we uncovered the top leadership mindset shifts that school leaders themselves are prioritising and seeking professional coaching support with ...

1. Giving feedback – *'It's something we both want'*
2. Stretching others – *'I develop and enable others'*
3. Confidence – *'I act even when I'm afraid'*
4. Engaging others – *'I can step into others' shoes'*
5. Coaching – *'I guide from the side'*
6. Personal resilience and wellbeing – *'I can choose my response'*
7. Leaning into conflict – *'Difficult conversations lead to trust'*
8. Action-orientation – *'I focus on what's important to deliver results'*

This data can justifiably give many school systems pause for thought. How can they improve the quality of teaching in every classroom when so many school leaders haven't yet gained a level of comfort with giving feedback? How can they improve student wellbeing if school leaders (and teachers) can't role model this as they are burnt out and struggle with personal wellbeing themselves? How can they expect district and school leaders to be empowered to act with personal agency when so many struggle with deep-seated confidence issues? And how can they rely on leaders in turn to empower their teams if they haven't received the professional support they need to give them both the skillsets and the mindsets to coach and stretch others?

In his preface to BTS Spark's **Embracing MESSY Leadership** book, Pasi Sahlberg explains how school leaders can benefit from MESSY Leadership approaches ...

*"Leading schools and diverse groups of people in them is sometimes difficult, often imperfect, and always messy ... MESSY Leadership is a guide to proactive, collaborative and inclusive education in a world that continues to be characterised by uncertainty, growing inequalities, and disruption."*⁴

Pasi Sahlberg, Professor of Educational Leadership

³ [Connor R. & Gallagher A. \(2022\) Mindsets Matter: Effective School Leadership Post-Covid-19, in 'Education Reimagined: Leadership for a New Era', WISE/ Centre for Strategic Education](#)

⁴ Gallagher A. & Connor R. (2024) *Embracing MESSY Leadership: How the Experience of 20,000 School Leaders can Transform You and Your School*, ASCD

The book goes on to espouse a new MESSY way of leading schools which is more collaborative, emotionally intelligent, authentic and adaptive, characterised by five MESSY behaviours:



Why current leadership development programs don't shift mindsets

As education systems look to the future there have been a growing number of calls for a more focused approach to leadership development. These apply both to higher performing jurisdictions that are identifying a need for more expansive models of leadership⁵, and to countries where the imperative for transformation is driven by major inequalities and a lack of universal access to even basic learning.⁶

There remains a lack of clarity around the leadership development processes that are most impactful. Prevalent training models and competency frameworks for school leaders also may not be sufficient to equip them with the capabilities now called for, let alone the mindsets.⁷ And poor learning design of programs can lead to outcomes falling short of the desired impact⁸. Typical factors behind failure may include:

- **A one-size fits all approach**, which doesn't recognise that leadership is always contextual. Rather than focusing on the few key shifts in leadership practice to make the biggest difference for each individual leader within their own unique context, programmes can cover a whole set of expectations and capabilities – with the risk that leaders have insufficient opportunity to engage deeply with any of them.
- **A failure to connect the theory to the reality of people's leadership experience**, so applying the learning does not feel relevant to the real challenges and tasks that leaders must prioritise in their day-to-day leadership.

⁵ See for example the OECD's 2023 "High Performing Systems for Tomorrow 2023 Conceptual Framework" and Hallgarten J. and Robinson L. (2023) "What else? What next? What if? A Report by Big Education and CfEY into the future of leadership development in England." London: Big Education

⁶ See for example the World Bank's 2023 report on "Realizing the Future of Learning – From learning poverty to learning for everyone, everywhere" Washington DC: World Bank Group and Alfadala A. and Cosner C. (2023) "Post-pandemic National Educational Investments: School Leadership Development through Innovative Learning Designs." WISE / Qatar Foundation.

⁷ See for example, in the UK context, Hallgarten J. and Robinson L. (2023) "What else? What next? What if? A Report by Big Education and CfEY into the future of leadership development in England." London: Big Education and Cruddas L. (2023) "The New Domains of Educational Leadership." Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts.

⁸ Gurdjian P., Halbeisen T. and Lane K. (2014) "Why leadership-development programs fail" McKinsey Quarterly Jan 2014 edition

- **Too much time delivering content knowledge, without engaging leaders in the hard work of personal growth and development.** Often a significant knowing-doing gap remains. Leaders know what's needed in theory but may still struggle to break out of long-established ways of operating and shift their behaviours to achieve the greater impact they're seeking.
- **Not recognising the need (or knowing how) to shift mindsets to enable sustained shifts in behaviour.** All of us hold certain unhelpful beliefs, often about ourselves and/or others. Unless we let go of these, they can continue to hold us back in our leadership. This is particularly likely when we need to become more agile and collaborative to lead in more complex and uncertain environments.

How professional leadership coaching can shift mindsets

In recent years, leadership coaching has emerged as a promising tool to support the development of school leaders, and importantly, by its very nature, it overcomes all four pitfalls of more traditional leadership development listed above.

While coaching has become more commonplace to support school leaders – for example in the UK's government-funded Early Headship Coaching Offer – it is not always well-defined or quality controlled. Mentoring by retired school principals is often conflated with professional leadership coaching by accredited coaches. Coaching is a versatile process that can help school leaders in a myriad of ways.

For one school principal, 1:1 coaching offers *'a safe space to offload, clarify my thought processes and become reacquainted with my love of education'*. For another, her coach, *'empowered me to go ahead and make some tough decisions and arrange meetings to hold those tricky conversations I was avoiding'*. A third describes how *'The depth of reflection, enabled by my coach, was immense. She opened up some deep-rooted areas of my leadership journey that to date I had not fully explored – it's been powerful.'*

There are a number of key characteristics of coaching which engender a powerful learning experience, but also make it an especially valuable professional development process for school leaders:

1. **1:1 leadership coaching is personalised**, with every coaching conversation focused on the individual leader, the development needs they have identified, or the challenges the leader needs to tackle. The leader's specific leadership context will be kept expressly in mind, thus ensuring the learning process feels meaningful and relevant.

A coaching programme may include a 360° review inviting others to share their assessments of an individual's leadership attributes or behaviours. With the support of a coach to help interpret and contextualise the feedback results, this can provide invaluable insights into how others perceive an individual's leadership.

2. The **confidential nature of coaching** is hugely valuable for school leaders, providing what they perceive as the only truly 'safe space' to acknowledge the full reality of leadership – the pressures, the uncertainties

and doubts all leaders feel at times – and to benefit from non-judgemental, expert support to identify and implement strategies for managing and overcoming these. Similarly, a coaching relationship can become a **forward-thinking space for more strategic or innovative thinking**, with leaders supported to explore creative solutions and new possibilities for the future of their schools.

- 3. Leadership coaching is highly purposeful.** It's not a 'soft' option, it's a process designed to facilitate the hard work of personal and professional growth. In a coaching relationship, there are no spectators! A skilled coach will facilitate a process of change which gets to the heart of the matter – the mindsets and beliefs that underpin patterns of behaviour – and elicits a shift in these to sustain new approaches.

Experienced professional coaches are trained in 'transformational coaching processes' and are able to open up new levels of personal growth and learning for leaders, empowering 'vertical development' in contrast to more typical 'horizontal development'.⁹ (To use a technology metaphor: horizontal development equates to adding more apps to our phone; vertical development is about upgrading the operating system to support more complex tasks.) It enables leaders to view from a different perspective, find new and creative solutions, act with greater wisdom and capacity, and have transformative impact, both within and beyond their own school or district.

- 4. Coaching is a highly practical professional development option** for busy, time-poor school leaders with tight professional development budgets. Leaders may be reluctant to take time away from school to attend scheduled training events or enrol in a program that isn't entirely relevant to their current challenges and priorities. Conversely, coaching offers a '*just for me, just enough, just in time*' solution that maximises the value of every minute. With most coaching delivered remotely nowadays, sessions can be scheduled flexibly when a school leader needs them ... and a coaching conversation only takes an hour. Leaders discuss issues with their coach as they arise and agree a new way forward. Leaders can then immediately apply these new strategies, reviewing progress and refining plans almost in real time with their coach.

These critical elements of professional leadership coaching set it apart from other leadership development options and distinguish it from mentoring or professional companionship offered by retired principals. Furthermore, there are now sophisticated ways to measure both mindset and behavioural change as a result of a coaching intervention.

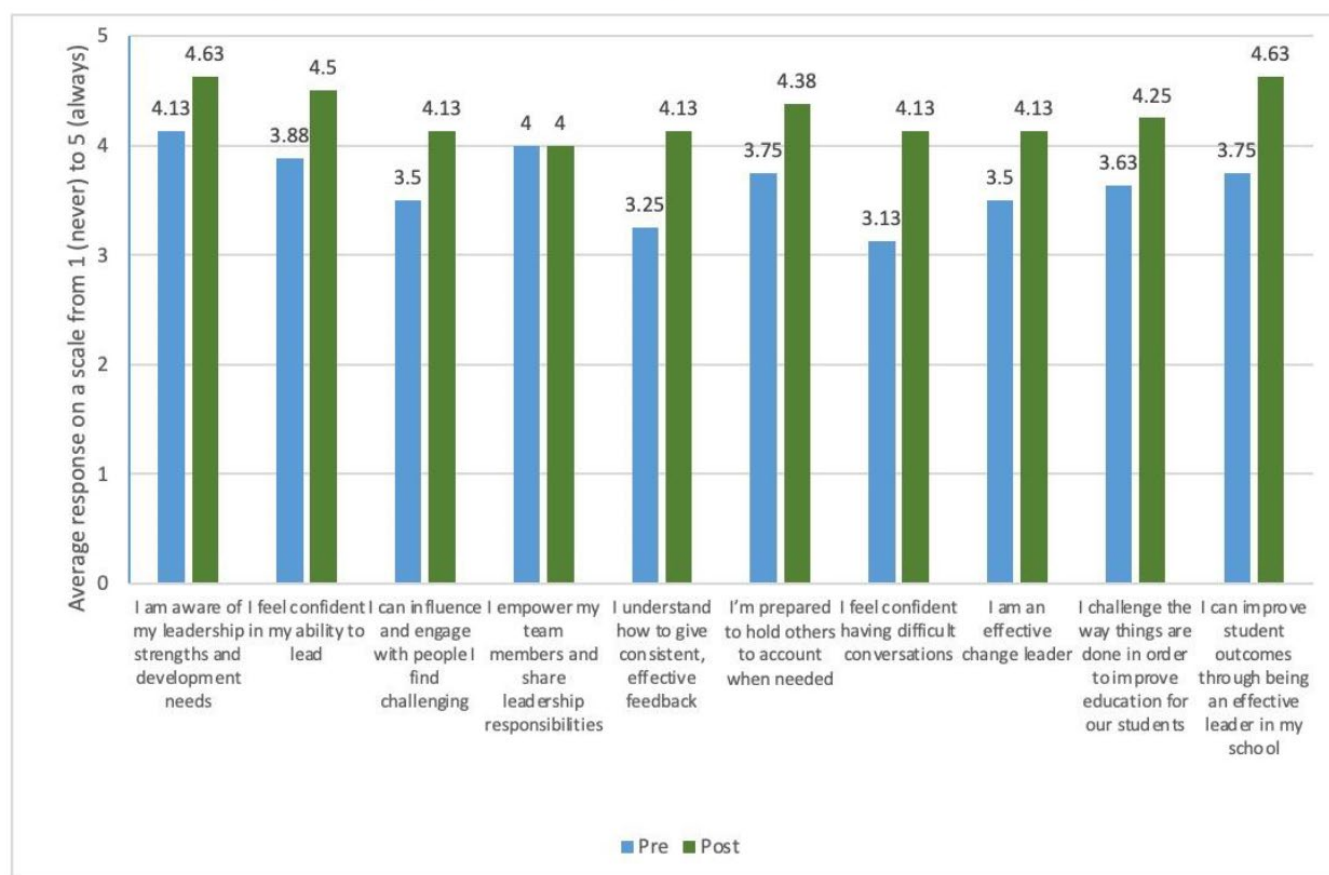
Creating empowerment cultures through coaching key leaders

There is a strong connection between the quality of school leadership and school culture, teacher engagement, collective efficacy and student attainment in schools. School leaders also role model personal wellbeing and play an important part in creating a culture of school-wide wellbeing that encompasses both staff and students.

⁹ [Hirani K. \(2018\), Theoretical Underpinnings of our Approach, BTS Coach](#)

We recently appointed an external evaluator, WestEd, to measure the impact of our leadership coaching on both principals and superintendents. Their interviews dug deep into how coaching changed leadership practice and their collation of before and after data reported consistent improvements across a range of measures (Figure 1¹⁰). This cohort of education leaders were in a better position to drive school improvement and lead change after engaging in several coaching sessions. (WestEd are now gathering longitudinal impact data from a wider sample set.)

Figure 1. Pre- vs post-survey data for the 7 respondents who took both surveys



It's no coincidence that many chief executives and top leaders across a wide range of professions have coaching. There is simply no more personalised way of accessing professional support and development as a leader. Yet when we surveyed senior education leaders – Directors and superintendents – more than two thirds had never benefited from personal coaching support.

If a school system is genuinely committed to transformational system change, then it needs to carefully consider how it will strive to change its culture – the collective mindsets that its leaders manifest. This doesn't 'just happen' through repeated messages from chief executives. But it can be achieved through careful and considered

¹⁰ Marcias M. & Tyler B. (2024), BTS Spark Leadership Coaching Evaluation, WestEd



planning and investing in supporting key leaders to get the professional support they need to embrace new mindsets and ways of working.

Empowerment cultures free up leaders and teachers to harness all their professional wisdom and expertise in order to meet the varying and changing needs of the students in their care. For this to genuinely happen, people – and especially leaders in key roles – need to reconnect with their purpose, take control of how they spend their time, gain the confidence to try new approaches and collaborate effectively with others. Professional leadership coaching is not a panacea, but it does offer a major and largely untapped ‘secret weapon’ to add to a school system’s arsenal of change levers.

Rosie Connor & Denise Barrows, BTS Spark

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BTS Spark is the not-for-profit education practice of BTS, a global multi-award-winning leadership development consultancy. We provide school leaders around the globe with access to world-class coaching and leadership development to help them feel confident, resourceful and fully capable.

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