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FROM PRESCRIPTIVE TARGETS TO COACHING, A CASE STUDY ON THE SHIFT IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

Performance management in schools has long been a topic of both strategic significance and practical tension. Initially designed to ensure accountability and continuous improvement, traditional models of performance management in education have frequently relied on quantitative metrics, such as student attainment data and fixed objectives (Department for Education, 2012). These systems, rooted in New Public Management ideology, have often emphasised compliance, standardisation, and outcomes over professional growth (Ball, 2003). While such approaches aimed to improve standards, they have also been criticised for fostering a culture of fear, reducing teacher autonomy, and undermining intrinsic motivation (Torrance, 2017).

More recently, literature has highlighted the limitations of target driven models. Research has shown that rigid goal setting can result in performativity, where teachers focus on "doing well" according to inspection frameworks, rather than developing as professionals (Ball, 2003). This performativity can contribute to teacher stress, lower job satisfaction, and attrition (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Furthermore, evaluation systems that overly depend on student outcomes may fail to capture the full spectrum of a teacher's contribution, particularly in holistic and inclusive school contexts.

In response to these limitations, there has been growing advocacy for more formative, developmental approaches to staff development. Most notably, coaching. Coaching in education refers to a confidential, non-judgemental professional dialogue that empowers staff to set goals, reflect on practice, and take ownership of their development (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Research by Lofthouse and Hall (2014) argues that coaching provides a powerful alternative to traditional models by encouraging self-efficacy and collaborative reflection. International evidence supports this shift. Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of teacher coaching programmes in the US and found consistent positive effects on instructional practice and student achievement. In the UK, case studies of coaching based performance development, such as those conducted by the Teacher Development Trust (2021), have reported increases in staff wellbeing, professional agency, and retention.

In the Middle Eastern context, however, research remains limited. While there is growing interest in coaching within international schools, particularly those following the British curriculum, few empirical studies explore how these models are adapted culturally or operationally within the UAE. Given the region's diverse educational landscape often characterised by high staff turnover, accountability pressures, and multicultural leadership, the implementation of coaching as a performance model requires contextual understanding.

This study aims to address that gap by investigating how the shift from prescriptive, target driven performance management to a coaching based approach has impacted staff development, confidence, wellbeing and productivity within a UAE international school setting. By focusing on a case study of three departments, the research seeks to explore the lived experiences of staff and provide insights that can inform broader leadership practices across similar educational contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This research employed a mixed methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the impact of a significant shift in performance management at a UK international secondary school. During the 2024–2025 academic year, the school transitioned from a data driven, target focused model of performance management to a coaching based approach. This new model empowered staff to identify and direct their own areas of professional development, promoting autonomy, agency, and reflective practice.

The research was structured as a case study focusing on the early implementation of this model, with particular attention paid to staff experience, professional dialogue, wellbeing, and departmental performance.

Implementation of the Coaching Model

As part of the new model's rollout, I conducted weekly coaching meetings with two departmental heads across the academic year. These sessions were grounded in non-directive coaching principles and focused on collaborative goal setting, reflective dialogue, and solution-oriented discussions. Wellbeing check-ins were also embedded as a regular component of these meetings to monitor the holistic impact of the change on staff morale and stress levels.

Midway through Term 3, I expanded the inquiry by inviting three academic departments to participate in a broader evaluation of the coaching-based performance management model.

Data Collection

Data was gathered via an online questionnaire, developed specifically for this research. The instrument included:

1. Closed Likert-style questions to measure perceptions of professional growth, teacher autonomy, and wellbeing.
2. Open-ended questions to elicit rich, narrative responses regarding staff experiences, perceived impact, and suggestions for improvement.

This dual format design enabled the triangulation of data to ensure validity and a deeper understanding of the coaching model's effects.

Data Analysis

The closed-question responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency (mean and mode) to identify overall trends. These findings were visually represented through bar charts to illustrate perceptions around professional growth and autonomy under the new coaching model.

Open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis using a best fit framework approach. Initially, inductive coding was applied to identify emergent themes. These were then aligned to key research focuses: professional dialogue, staff confidence, wellbeing, productivity, classroom practice, and implementation challenges. Illustrative quotes were extracted to provide authentic staff voice and to deepen the interpretation of quantitative findings.

The integration of both data sets allowed for complementary insights; for instance, high ratings of agency and wellbeing were further substantiated by qualitative statements highlighting increased trust, empowerment, and reduced performance anxiety.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Data collected from departmental heads across a UK international secondary school reveals a predominantly positive reception to the shift from a prescriptive, target driven performance management approach to a coaching based model.

As seen in **Figure 1**, respondents largely rated the new coaching model as highly supportive of professional growth, with the majority assigning it a score of 4 out of 5. A similar trend is observed in **Figure 2**, where most respondents also rated agency and autonomy as a 4 or 5, indicating strong perceptions of increased professional independence. These ratings suggest that, in terms of perceived impact, the coaching model is successfully fostering greater trust, ownership, and developmental opportunities among staff.

Figure 1
Support for Professional Growth Under Coaching Mode

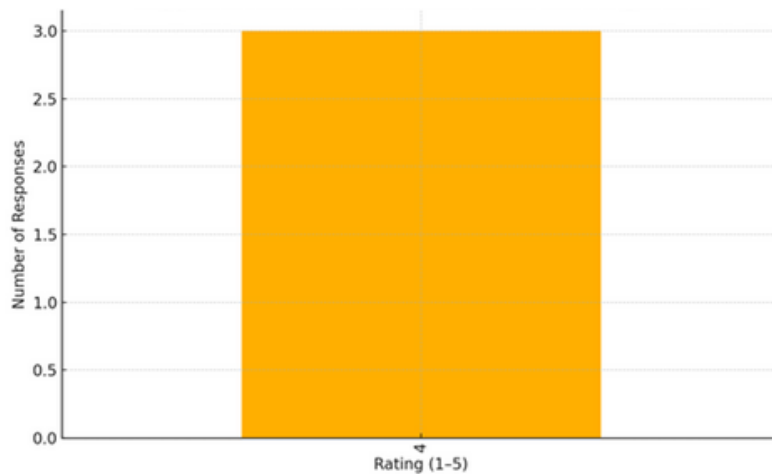
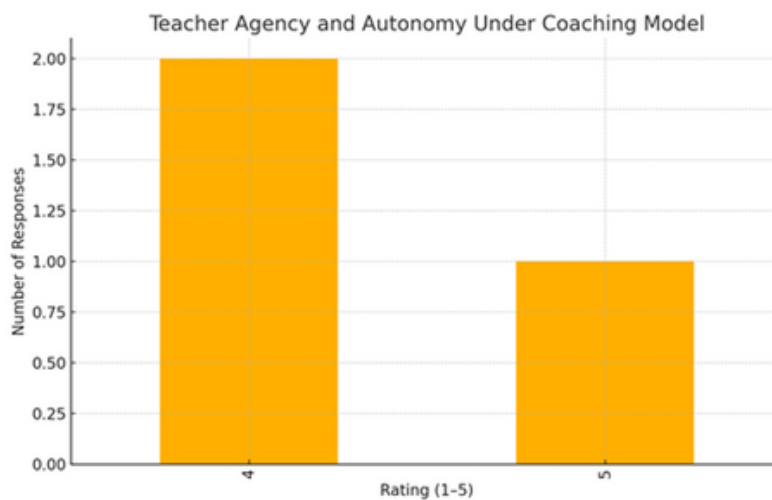


Figure 2
Teacher Agency and Autonomy Under Coaching Model



Qualitative Analysis

1. Professional Dialogue

Respondents noted a marked improvement in the quality and frequency of reflective conversations. One commented:

"There is more space for dialogue than in the previous model... though the depth and impact of those conversations can be limited when they aren't focused on coaching through specific challenges."

This suggests that while structural space for dialogue has improved, the depth and coaching expertise still require development.

2. Staff Confidence

There was a mixed perception of staff confidence:

"Yes, increased ownership of professional development and a sense of empowerment."

"I haven't noticed a change... any increases in confidence seem to stem more from collaboration or individual efforts than the coaching model itself."

This highlights that while confidence may be increasing, it is not always directly attributed to the coaching model, indicating a gap between intention and execution.

3. Wellbeing and Performance

A recurring theme was that removing numerical targets has positively impacted staff morale:

"Not having academic targets which they must meet, but having time to coach and discuss weekly performance, has helped wellbeing."

Yet, performance impact varied:

"Enhanced autonomy and problem solving, taking initiative."

"The coaching does not currently feel like a driving force for change or improvement."

This indicates that implementation fidelity and leadership engagement may vary across departments, affecting consistency of outcomes.

4. Challenges and Recommendations

A key theme emerging from the data was the identification of persistent barriers to the effective implementation of a coaching model in performance management. The three most common obstacles were time constraints, a lack of formal coaching training, and the risk of coaching becoming a procedural, box-ticking exercise. As one respondent highlighted, *"Without proper coaching skills and a shift in focus, these conversations risk becoming just another accountability task."* This concern underscores the need to protect the integrity of coaching by ensuring it remains developmental rather than performative.

To maximise the impact of coaching in schools, staff made several informed recommendations. These included the allocation of dedicated coaching time within the timetable, investment in the development of coaching competencies, and the provision of greater autonomy for staff in setting personalised goals. One particularly compelling suggestion was the use of reflective resources to enhance coaching practice.

As one participant remarked, “A book like *The Magic Happens in the Silence* is an excellent starting point to explore listening and questioning in coaching.” This indicates a clear appetite for deeper engagement with the core principles of effective coaching.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the shift from a target driven to a coaching based performance management model has positively influenced staff development, wellbeing, and autonomy across the school. Quantitative data indicate strong support for the model, while qualitative responses emphasise increased professional dialogue, ownership, and morale. However, the findings also highlight key challenges, including the need for dedicated time and more in-depth coaching training to ensure conversations are consistently developmental rather than procedural. Overall, the study supports the value of coaching as a more empowering and human centred approach to performance management, provided it is implemented with clarity, consistency, and a genuine commitment to staff growth.

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