



COACHING FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH:

A Personal Strategy for Leadership Development

Building a caring, safe, compassionate learning environment for children takes considerable time, much patience, ongoing work, a great deal of support, and hinges on the success of the people leading the effort.



Operation Respect provides a range of professional development services to schools, districts, and individuals. They include customized, relationship-based professional coaching for leaders in critical areas including social-emotional learning, working effectively in cross-cultural situations, and creating positive changes in the learning environment.

Mark Weiss, Education Director for Operation Respect since 2002, oversees the organization's coaching services, work he started doing when he was a well-respected New York City high school principal. He is a master trainer and oversees a team of professionals who lead Operation Respect's



training across U.S.-based school systems as well as in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Ukraine, Japan, and Hong Kong. He has been a professional leadership coach for more than 10 years.

“Just as we say that children and youth need a range of skills, self-awareness, and social awareness to become successful, productive, and humane adults, so too do the educators who lead their schools,” he says.

“Coaching requires school leaders to take a deeper look at who they are (their values, for example), and where they want to be as a leader, educator, and person. I ask school leaders with whom I work to identify what they've accomplished to date and to identify goals of where they want to be three years from now.”

Operation Respect's approach to coaching focuses on the school leader as a person, rather than a role, stresses Molly McCloskey, the organization's President and CEO. Many professional development opportunities for principals and superintendents emphasize tasks and strategies as if the person implementing them is irrelevant, but research shows that emotional intelligence within the school leader

VOYAGES PREPARATORY HIGH SCHOOL

Principal Nicholas Merchant-Bleiberg

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www.voyagesprep.org

Nicholas Merchant-Bleiberg first worked with Weiss and Operation Respect when he was an assistant principal at Lyons Community School in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. Weiss served as a mentor to Merchant-Bleiberg and helped the school adopt a restorative justice disciplinary policy. “Mark helped us effect change—and he helped me in particular as my outside school partner,” he said.

Merchant-Bleiberg served as assistant principal at Lyons for six years before accepting his current

position as principal of Voyages Preparatory High School, which serves students ages 16-21, in the Elmhurst neighborhood of Queens.

“As assistant principal, I got to be the ‘good cop,’ and I was able to operate without the pressure of full accountability.” The role of principal is very different.

He also moved to a school where he didn't know any of the staff, and he was taking over for the school's founding—and very well-liked—principal. “I needed a coaching professional development framework that would adjust to my new job

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and my new school,” he said. “At Lyons, I had the opportunity to help grow the kind of positive school culture and climate I was seeking. At Voyages, the norms are different. We have older students with historically low school attendance. Some are young parents, some work full-time. Mark had personal experience serving as a principal in an alternative school setting.”

has important implications for school culture and improvement, she adds. “Successful coaching is all about creating alignment between who school leaders are as leaders and what they *do* as leaders to reach their goals for the school.”

As the primary coach for Operation Respect, Weiss credits Janet Patti, for helping him to develop an emotional intelligence framework for coaching that’s closely aligned with his experiences as a principal and with Don’t Laugh at Me, Operation Respect’s K-12 social and emotional learning curriculum. Don’t Laugh at Me’s cornerstone themes for children and youth—expressing feelings, building community, resolving conflict, and celebrating diversity—mirror the coaching process for adults.

Patti, a professor at Hunter College, is also the co-partner with Robin Stern of Star Factor Coaching, which trains professionals to offer emotional intelligence-based coaching to individuals so that they can “reflect on their own strengths, challenges, and experiences to develop insights and experiment with new ideas and behaviors,” according to the organization’s website.

HOW WE ARE DIFFERENT

Customized relationship-based professional coaching
+
focus on the school leader as a person
+
integrated social and emotional learning for adults and students
+
cross-cultural competence
=
Positive Changes in the Learning Environment

Trust between the trainer and the school leader is essential if the coaching relationship is to be successful, Patti explained. “Every day in the job of a school leader, there are countless decisions to be made and emotions to be experienced,” Patti says. “Principals and superintendents have no one to talk to, to trust. Coaching gives them a chance to truly reflect with a peer. No one is judging them, so it allows them to open up more. As leaders work with their own emotions, they become more self-aware, choose more appropriate behaviors and make better decisions.”

donnaelder.wiki.westga.edu/file/view/Emotional+intelligence+for+school+administrators+a+priority+for+school.pdf

In his early days at Voyages, Merchant-Bleiberg described feeling as though “it was me against the world. That’s not where you want to be. Mark is really good at understanding the adults inside a school setting—how they relate to each other, how they relate to me, how they relate to the kids. I needed that perspective.”

Coaching helped Merchant-Bleiberg to identify what he was doing well and what he wasn’t; then it helped him course correct. “Coaching helped me understand how and why I needed to listen to people, why it’s important for everyone to have a stake in what’s happening. Mark also helped me process the flack I got. I had

a flawless reputation at my old school. Here? I came in as the guy who replaced everyone’s beloved principal.”

Merchant-Bleiberg also credited Weiss with helping him to think more like his teachers, to place himself in their role, and to successfully pair teachers with counselors to move the advisory process forward.

“School leaders have enough demands on our time and enough compliance-based requirements,” Merchant-Bleiberg said. “We need someone who respects and personally understands how we do our job. Mark made it clear he would be what I and the school

needed him to be,” he said. “We co-planned. Sometimes he’d lead. Sometimes he’d co-lead. Sometimes he’d be the fly on the wall.”

Over his four years of leading Voyages, teacher and staff leadership has significantly increased, Merchant-Bleiberg said. “We now have numerous structures and systems that are staff-led, consensus-based and collaborative in design. I wouldn’t have been able to draw up these structures by myself. I would have never told you, four years ago, that would be my school model, but the coaching process helped me develop the personal understanding to build it and it’s working.”

NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Fred Walsh
District Superintendent

Emotional intelligence is the exact coaching framework that Fred Walsh said he needed to do the job of supervising principals.

Walsh is superintendent of nearly 50 schools across four boroughs for the NYC Department of Education. He knows that Operation Respect's coaching helped him learn to more effectively process negative emotions he might be harboring, after a bad start to his day, before he walks through the front door of a principal's building for a planned visit or meeting.

"That principal who's looking forward to meeting with you so that she can tell you all about the positive work that's been happening inside her school?" Walsh said. "She doesn't know that you spilled hot coffee on your lap while you were stuck in the worst traffic jam, and that you're still mad, as you pull into her school's parking lot."

"So if you don't check yourself before getting out of your car and before you walk into that building, you are ruining the day of the person with whom you are meeting. Because now it's all about you when it should have been all about them and their good work. Emotional intelligence (EI) gives you the tools you need to be a more effective leader."

When reflecting on the positive effects of coaching, Walsh linked success to not only the EI framework but to Weiss's approach. "Mark is authentic. He lives and breathes this work. He knows it because he lived it first as a principal. He understands this work."

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

A COACHING FRAMEWORK TO AID IN SUPERVISING OTHERS



P.S. 315 LAB SCHOOL

Gaby Flores, Principal
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schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/10/X315/default.htm

When Gaby Flores became principal of P.S. 315 Lab School in the Bronx, NYC, she took advantage of Weiss' coaching services, which she described as a "wonderful opportunity. I needed as much support as I could have." Six years later she's still benefitting from Weiss' coaching which she attributes to helping her grow into the school leader she is today.

Flores has spent the last 20 years of her professional life at P.S. 315, working in a variety of roles, first as an ESL teacher, then transitioning to classroom teacher, to literacy coach, to assistant principal, and now principal. She described the process of going from being a fellow teacher to becoming her fellow teachers' leader as not an easy one, and she expressed deep appreciation for how Weiss' coaching helped her along that path.

"Before working with Mark, I didn't see myself as leader," Flores said. "In the past I would be overly cautious in asking something of a teacher. It was hard for me to delegate; I'd end up doing everything myself."

School leadership requires that the individual tasked with the job establish trust with the staff and students, create and maintain a supportive environment, and foster strong family-community ties.

"Now I can say with confidence, 'I'm a principal.' I think what made it difficult for me to believe that I was the leader and to feel comfortable in calling myself 'principal' was the fact that I don't have an authoritative style," Flores added. "Mark was so helpful to me as I looked at different aspects of leadership and he helped me mold my pathway toward it. He was able to help me analyze situations, help me with different strategies, and take positive steps."

"Challenges occur in every moment, and school leaders need to know how to balance all of that. That's why I needed someone like Mark. He is very positive and so helpful. If I feel that I failed, Mark helps me get back up again."

Contact Mark Weiss at mweiss@operationrespect.org to learn more about Operation Respect's coaching services.
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