



BOLD LEADERS

Learning Coaches

An Option for Re-Imagined Learning

School districts across the country and around the world are working on ways to reimagine schooling during a pandemic. The solutions they come up with will involve shortened in-school time, mask wearing during class, no recess, zoom sessions and more. Families will need to think about childcare for younger students on weird schedules of “2 days this week, 3 days next week” rotations.

While the situation will be in flux and change by the moment (we will all get tired of “Phase 1” and “Phase 2” talk), one thing is likely: students will be doing much of their schooling away from the physical presence of a teacher. **Because of this, we will need teachers, mentors and community members to be trained as *Learning Coaches*.**

A Learning Coach is someone who sees and says things to help a student win at his or her learning. The context is radically and fundamentally different from a teacher, however. Instead of content instruction, the focus is on relationship-centric practices that foster agency growth and learning habits. To do this well, we propose the Learning Coach works within a rich contextual orientation and three operational spheres...



Contextual Orientation:

Causing Best Self

Operational Spheres:

- *Help Establish the Playing Field*
- *Support Gaps/Creative Resourcing*
- *Reach and Reciprocity*

Causing Best Self

(Note: The idea of Best Self is a significant aspect of our Framework for Availability that we train educators, managers and facilitators in through [our online course](#). The basic idea is below.)

Beyond a vague notion of pop psychology, the context of Best Self can help re-ignite the self-directed learning that **must** be a critical component of education in the COVID era. Having the teacher/coach understand and use it as a frame of reference shapes a needed foundation for the changing educational environment.

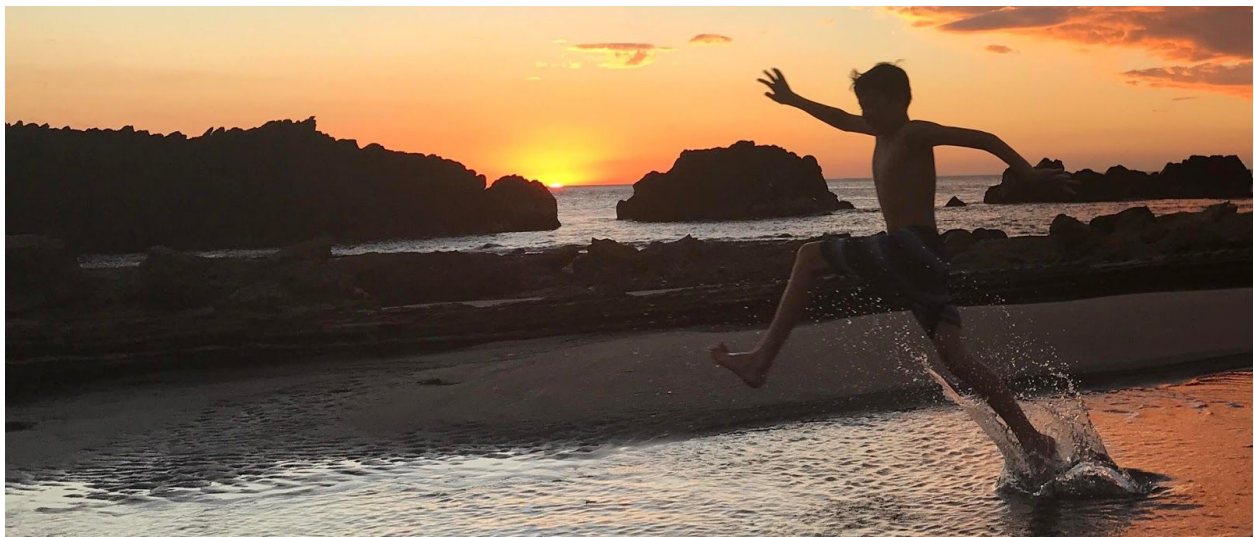
The idea of Causing Best Self is a solid, simple and elegant orientation that cuts through much of the barriers we often experience in communication and building relational spaces - even virtually. It creates a path of *doing 'with'* versus *doing 'to'* and produces faster activation of participation, learning, and collaboration.

In our work with groups, we created a definition of *Best Self*, and we find it to be well supported in research. We have seen it in action in hundreds of diverse settings. We say Best Self is an *experience of, and/or an aspiration towards:*

- Self-agency
- Being valued
- Belonging
- Connection

When people **experience** one or more of these, they have a sense of being their Best Self. Think about it for yourself: when you had an experience of any one of the four listed above, how did it feel to you? Are you proud of yourself, content or inspired? Were you interested in repeating whatever you did that caused that sense of Best Self? You felt this way because you experienced your 'self' meeting one of those basic needs.

Human beings also **aspire toward** these aspects. Students (and teachers, parents, etc.) desire experiences where they are autonomous, important, have a sense of being part of something and are in real relationship to others. This results in a powerful motivating force, any one of which can be used to help propel movement in the disaffected learner.



Because they are such vital aspirations and sought-after experiences, you can use these components of Best Self as a context or ethos to coach through. When coaches do this, they look for ways to give their 'player' an experience of self-agency, being valued, being connected and having a sense of belonging. This is a relationship-centric practice that can easily create a coach's *modus operandi*. Using the lens of Best Self puts an expansive view of relationships at the forefront of the coach, and - as any great coach will tell you - paying attention to relationships significantly impacts success and human performance.

Finally, the key difference with this umbrella context is not what it *is*, **but what it *is not***. It is not a drive for standards mastery, or testing improvement. It is not focusing on mandated achievement tracking or teacher evaluations. Those frameworks will not work well in the distance learning environment of a pandemic. What will work is relationship-based practices that put the learner at the center of their learning. This will take time to build momentum and see results, but we have a real opportunity in this moment to reinvigorate a passion for learning that we all know often sees a steep decline from 4th to 9th grade. A Learning Coach who creates opportunities for students to have experiences of their Best Self while learning will find a ready and *interested* partner who will then be more willing to include some measure of needed competency and standards mastery. The added benefit for schools will be the parallel **Social and Emotional Learning** Outcomes that will be achieved as students/coaches work concurrently on self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making and more.

Three Spheres of Work

The Learning Coach operates in three intertwining spheres as a basic framework with the learner. While any number of scenarios can work, we have found that one teacher needs 30 minutes a week/student to build a regular habit. This could mean 7-10 hours/week for a teacher with 15-20 students. This is a perfect role for mentors and community members to be trained in as well, which could free up time for the teacher to focus on higher-need learners.

Help Establish the Playing Field

This will be the biggest challenge for many teachers-as-coaches, as it upends a very traditional and mythical paradigm. Rather than the teacher outlining the scope and scale of the learning, a Learning Coach gives the pilot seat to the student. Why? Because students in the pandemic era will be the real-agents of their learning for a good portion of their 'school' time. They can build a self-directed learner muscle more easily if they are pursuing learning of their own choice and motivation, rather than something mandated or forced.

Within this sphere, the coach's role is to help the learner define the playing field. The teacher will resist the temptation to define the playing field, but rather help the student think through:

- What do you want to learn about or work on?
- What will the learning look like?
- What are the boundaries of study?
- What might a final product look like?

Once a student has experienced some habit of self-agency and connection with the coach (key Best Self components), their disposition towards learning and their coach will shift and become more available - giving Coaches the chance to broaden the 'playing field' with learning that may not be student-choice.

Support Gaps/Creative Resourcing

The student-player is in the process of *becoming* just like all students - meaning he is not there yet. Hence the coach's role to identify any areas that need extra attention and awareness. We find that the best method is to follow three steps: 1) Jointly align on what the gap is and get permission to coach; 2) Objectify the gap and coach from there using creative resourcing, and; 3) Combine when it's time.



1. **Jointly align/permission** - Have a conversation to **align on what gaps** are present. Asking "What do you feel are things you might need to work on to have success with your project?" gives the student a chance to be the pilot. If you have perspectives to share about gaps you notice (and you have permission) share them. Prioritize which ones need attention first. We have found that every student from 4th grade on up (often earlier as well) has this ability to name their gaps. It is particularly important to note that they also almost universally appreciate the opportunity to go to work on them.

Permission is bedrock to coaching. We do not proceed until we have permission from the player to be their coach. This is a profound act and one that shifts the "doing to" mindset for both the coach and the student. It creates a spirit of mutuality and shared-responsibility. [Read more about our take on Permission.](#)

2. **Objectify gaps** - Rather than make the gaps a personality flaw or labeled as something 'wrong', turn them into **objects** and coach for success. If you have both identified that "procrastination" is going to get in the way and needs to be improved, put on your creative coaching hat and send in a 'play' to practice that object (*objectifying the gap separates it from the content and makes it easier to work with*). In this way, learning coaches do not need to be content experts, they need to be **creative resource** experts. A good sports coach does not look at a player who needs to run faster and says "run faster", she devises strategies and games and drills that build speed. The Learning Coach must be fantastic at piecing together an array of resources that meet the needs of the student-player. Coaching creatively takes thoughtfulness. Our experience with coaches and mentors is that they stop way too early when looking for a creative solution.

Let your imagination run and you will find that the more creative the play, the more success it will bring.

3. **Combine when it's time** - Great coaches will break new learning into specific tasks only in the beginning. Once there is basic familiarity, **combine** gap responses (i.e. a recent teen I worked with was keeping his eye on procrastination and communication: I combined his gap practice after a while to share out loud with a family member when he was starting his learning, what he planned to accomplish and when he anticipated finishing. We tracked this 'practice' each day and talked about it's impact, and a real shift came about in both areas, They).

Supporting gaps could look wildly different for different learners. Some may identify encouragement, or help finding information, or specific competencies like writing or solving for 'x'. Your role is not to 'run', your role is to recognize that the student cannot see themselves when they are 'running'. Coach towards the gaps you see, starting with the ones you both can align on.

Reach and Reciprocity

This is the serve and return methodology of early childhood educators and the heartbeat of an experiential pedagogy. The first three steps have been detailed above.

1. Identify the gaps or the learning the student is interested in
2. Creatively resource the gap
3. Have the student run the play
4. Promote dialogue on performance and effort.
 - a. How did that go?
 - b. What worked? What did not work?
 - c. What was the value of that for you?
 - d. What would you do differently in the future?
5. Repeat as needed, adjust or move on. Develop the routine so that you both get used to the learner 'running a play' and then returning to talk about it.

Teachers-As-Learning-Coaches may not seem like a significant shift, but the change in dynamic needs thoughtful preparation and training, and could well be the springboard we need to support learning as a lifestyle, rather than the coercive act it often is. There is a real opportunity here to help students *and* teachers move their mindset about learning towards a "doing with" rather than a "done to" paradigm.

BoldLeaders has been working with mentors, teachers and coaches for 20 years to find the best ways to build relational environments that support self-agency in young people. If you are interested in more information or would like to chat about what you have read, [schedule a call](#) on our calendar or take a look at our online [Mind the Gap Master Class](#).