

The WOCEC Executive Coaching Effect:

Amplifying Leadership Capacities of Women of Color District Leaders

The Women of Color Education Collaborative (WOCEC) is a career development and professional support network for women of color superintendents and senior district leaders. Our mission is to promote the professional growth, advancement, and well-being of women of color leaders, with the goal of increasing the number of women of color who positively progress and thrive in K-12 system leadership roles. (For additional details see the [WOCEC website](#).)

WOCEC Executive Coaching

A core WOCEC program component is the provision of executive coaching from women of color former superintendents tailored to the specific needs of WOCEC members. Each WOCEC member has access to up to eight hours of executive coaching per month. The impact of having executive coaches who understand firsthand the unique challenges faced by women of color in leadership positions cannot be overstated. This direct experience allows WOCEC executive coaches to provide practical advice, emotional support, and effective strategies for navigating challenges and facilitating members' personal and professional growth. WOCEC executive coaching distinguishes itself by:

- *Leveraging shared experiences:* WOCEC coaches have walked in the shoes of women of color education leaders. With firsthand experience in similar roles, they possess a unique perspective that enables them to effectively guide and mentor our members.
- *Inspiring through role models:* WOCEC coaches serve as tangible examples of success. Their achievements as women of color education leaders empower our members to envision and actualize their own leadership potential.

The Study

This report presents early findings from a study that investigates the impact of the WOCEC executive coaching on members' leadership practices and outcomes. Participants in this study are five WOCEC executive coaches (referred to as Coach A, Coach B, Coach C, Coach D and Coach E), and their WOCEC mentees (referred to as Mentee A, Mentee B, Mentee C, Mentee D and Mentee E), whose identities are anonymized for the purposes of this study.

Data were collected through open-ended survey questions that sought to capture detailed insights on the amount of coaching provided, the duration over which coaching was provided, the leadership challenges that were the focus of the coaching, and the improvements or changes in leadership observed as a result of the coaching. Coaches were asked to select one WOCEC mentees and respond to questions about their experiences with that mentee.

Findings

Drawing on the survey responses from the five WOCEC executive coaches, this section describes three critical aspects of the coaching engagement. It details a distinct leadership challenges or problems of practice faced by each mentee, outlines the tailored coaching strategies employed to address these issues, and concludes with the transformative outcomes experienced by the mentees.

Navigating Political Dynamics and Fostering a Culture of Accountability

Over the span of 6 months, Coach A devoted 30 hours of executive coaching to Mentee A, a Deputy Chief of Student Supports within a state-controlled school district. This particular district is notorious for its dysfunction, characterized by widespread nepotism, a lack of accountability, and overall ineffectiveness. Mentee A, being new to a central office position, found navigating the politics of this environment particularly challenging. Coach A encapsulated the struggle saying, "The focus of our coaching sessions was helping her to navigate her first central [office] position and managing the politics in that environment. So many times, she wanted to quit, but we worked to navigate the politics and get the job down."

Despite the initial obstacles, Mentee A proved to be resilient. Through WOCEC's executive coaching, she developed an enhanced capacity to manage her workload effectively and hold staff accountable. She showed marked improvements in her leadership ability and began to effectively navigate the district's politics to produce successful outcomes. In the process, Mentee A also learned invaluable lessons about perseverance and the practical aspects of leadership within a complex environment.

The culmination of these improvements was Mentee A's promotion to deputy assistant superintendent of student supports. This was a direct testament to her effective leadership and her ability to adapt to and navigate through challenging circumstances. Coach A underscored this achievement stating, "The superintendent promoted [Mentee A] as the superintendent saw how effective she was and wanted her in a higher level role."

Developing Systemic Initiatives and Personal Self-Belief

Over a period of 5 months, Coach B devoted 25 hours of coaching to Mentee B, an assistant superintendent, grappling with the extensive student learning gaps exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Together, they crafted a systemic literacy framework to counteract these educational losses, encompassing comprehensive data analysis, resource selection, professional development planning, community engagement, and board presentations. Coach B reflected on this undertaking, stating, "Our work helped to focus [Mentee B] on establishing a literacy framework initiative that responded to the losses encountered during this bleak historic period."

A notable outcome of this coaching journey was a marked enhancement in Mentee B's self-confidence and belief in her leadership potential. The transformative power of the coaching experience inspired her to revisit her education goals and to pursue a doctorate with renewed determination. Coach B expressed his strong belief in Mentee B's potential, stating, "I have no doubt that we will be celebrating with Doctor [Mentee B] in the near future."

Managing Conflict and Promoting a Positive Workplace Environment and Culture

Over a period of 4 months, Coach C dedicated 40 hours to coaching Mentee C, a member of the executive leadership team of a very large school system. Confronting persistent conflicts with male peers and grappling with the limited involvement from the head of the school system, Mentee C found herself in a challenging work environment. Coach C encapsulated her struggle, noting, "This specific situation involved navigating an issue with male colleagues who have considerable influence with [the head of the school system] and engaged often in disrespectful, threatening, and chauvinistic exchanges that made her feel undermined, disempowered, and broken."

WOCEC executive coaching enabled Mentee C to carve out effective strategies to handle conflict, assert her authority, and promote a respectful work environment. Under Coach C's guidance, Mentee C fortified her self-confidence, honed her communication skills, and learned conflict resolution strategies. Coach C detailed the impact, stating, "[Mentee C] gained valuable insights and strategies to address the conflict effectively, promoting a healthy and respectful work environment." Moreover, Mentee C, with Coach C's assistance, established a more inclusive and communicative team culture and found better equilibrium between her work and home life.

Mentee C emerged as a stronger leader, managing conflicts efficiently, navigating complex leadership dynamics, and fostering a harmonious work environment. Coach C noted, "She

successfully managed the conflict with the male team members and the challenging dynamics of navigating politics within the top leadership team, including her boss. She also secured standing meetings with the head of school system and garnered his support."

Effective Decision-Making and Communication in Times of Difficult Transitions

Over a period of 6 months, Coach D offered 20 hours of coaching to Mentee D, former superintendent and current an executive director of an education nonprofit organization. Faced with the formidable task of reorganizing her team in the wake of administrative cutbacks, Mentee D was thrust into a process characterized by Coach D as one filled with "ambiguity and often shifting information from central administration."

To navigate this complex challenge, Coach D and Mentee D collaboratively developed a multifaceted approach. This strategy prioritized the acquisition of critical data for robust decision-making, even in situations where team consultations were unattainable. They also homed in on enhancing clarity and transparency in Mentee D's interactions with her supervisors and board. Additionally, an important aspect of their work involved building resilience and emotional self-care, particularly when discussing layoffs with esteemed team members with whom Mentee D shared a personal rapport.

As a result of WOCEC's coaching, Mentee D successfully steered her team through the transition. This led to a more tightly knit and efficient team. Mentee D acquired key skills in effective communication, managing uncertainties, and addressing the emotional fallout of layoffs. Coach D observed that "helping her communicate both up the chain of command and to the members of her team and understanding the differences between those types of communication was key to her successfully managing a difficult transition."

Establishing Authority and Maximizing Efficiency

Coach E provided a total of 38 hours of coaching over 5 months to Mentee E, a director of school leadership in a large school district. Mentee E found herself grappling with resistance in her role as a nonsupervisory principal coach, making it challenging to establish her authority and foster acceptance among the principals she was assigned to guide. As Coach E reflected, "Mentoring in a nonsupervisory role presents its own unique challenges, especially when met with resistance."

To address these issues, Coach E and Mentee E worked together to devise a strategic approach. This strategy involved creating a structured agenda for each site visit, reducing the frequency of visits, and adequately preparing the principals ahead of time. They also focused

on developing questioning strategies and reflective practices to aid the principals in improving their own practices. Establishing Mentee E's authority and fostering a willingness among principals to accept her guidance was a pivotal aspect of their collaborative work.

The impact of the coaching was evident in Mentee E's transformation. She became more organized in her approach, which led to increased success and productivity. With the aid of coaching, Mentee E developed a timeline for the implementation of best practices and found useful resources to share with her principals. She also effectively reorganized her site visit schedule based on the locations and specific needs of the schools, thereby streamlining her work. Reflecting on their journey, Coach E said, "The shared experiences and reflective practices serve to benefit both the mentor and mentee, moving forward in the work we do on behalf of the children we serve."

Conclusion

The transformative influence of WOCEC executive coaching emerges prominently through these early findings, serving as a potent catalyst for leadership growth. The WOCEC coaching engagements, which were between 20 to 40 hours over 4 to 6 months, resulted in significant enhancements in the leadership practices of the five WOCEC mentees.

Mentee A successfully navigated the complex politics of her school district, earning a well-deserved promotion. Mentee B, amidst pandemic-induced student learning gaps, was able to develop a comprehensive literacy framework, also rekindling her ambition to pursue doctoral studies. In the same vein, Mentee C managed challenging workplace conflicts, fostering a respectful work environment and asserting her authority effectively. Mentee D faced the daunting task of team restructuring amidst administrative cutbacks, learning to communicate effectively with her supervisors and the board, and making sound independent decisions. Meanwhile, Mentee E, a nonsupervisory principal coach, enhanced her authority and honed a structured approach to her responsibilities, which resulted in increased success and productivity.

Each WOCEC mentee's story underscores the transformative influence of WOCEC executive coaching, equipping these leaders with the necessary skills and strategies to navigate their unique challenges and facilitating their personal and professional growth. These early findings highlight the immense potential of WOCEC executive coaching as a pivotal resource for leadership development, particularly for women of color in education leadership, as it promotes a comprehensive evolution in leadership practices.