*Since 2012, SAANYS has offered a 10-month long MentorCoach program for new and experienced administrators. Feedback from mentees has been positive; with many asking if there is a year two or three follow up service. Through the support of a LIFTny SED grant, SAANYS piloted a Group MentorCoach service with the idea of testing out different professional development modes to determine which might help fill the request from the field. In groups of three to six administrators, mentorcoaching was provided in face-to-face, on-line virtual conferencing, and phone modalities, with the hope over that time these groups would coalesce around the modality that worked best for them as they grew in to a self-sustaining mentorcoach group.*

Group Mentor Coaching: “You Are Not In It Alone”

Anyone who has been involved with a powerful mentoring program would most likely agree that there is a feeling of empowering support, which evaporates after the yearlong process. At GASD, we were fortunate with a Human Resource Director, who not only requested mentoring for the new administrative team members, but also agreed to assist in a “next step” model of mentoring. With the assistance from our SAANYS Mentor, Dr. Bonnie Tryon, we were able to establish not only a process to continue the mentor paradigm, but experiment with different modes of communication with the hopes of determining what may work best for others. This is our story:

Key Components

To begin the process, we established basic ground rules. First, we needed to trust each other when unwrapping our concerns. This may appear easy. However, the three of us came with three different “titles”. One person was a member of a building level team. The second person was in charge of District level K-12 Program. The third person was viewed as a “Downtown” administrator. Each title came with a different circle of influences that challenged us to work through our culture, while using three different sets of lens. Another variable we needed to consider was the tenure status of our triad. Two were non-tenured with early in administrative career experience and one was heading toward the end of her career. These potential barriers were managed with the assistance of our mentor leading us through guiding questions at our first session. Through open honest discussion of all of our concerns, we establish three basic ground rules: 1. Trust and confidentiality were a must. 2. We would wait ten minutes to start. 3. Our focus for the hour session was on each other. Once these were established, we agreed upon two topics that significant concerns in each of our roles: safety and communication. After two sessions we were ready to experiment.

Steps in our Experiment:

Our process started with learning how to ask each other guiding questions to better define our concerns. We bounced ideas off each other, heard each other out, and discussed next steps. This was a time consuming process as we each had different needs with regards to the topics and were use to our own one to one time with the mentor. We agreed to break the topics into three categories for future sessions: define the problem, discuss past District practices, and create an Action plan. A time- keeper was assigned to keep us focus on the task at hand. After trying out our plan and negotiating next steps, we were then asked to attempt the same technique using Online Conferencing and Telephone Conferencing. Online Conferencing was used to give us up-to-date research on leadership practices to guide the hour session. For this session, Dr. Tryon presented research through Power Point. We reviewed the information and discussed it over our individual office phones. The benefit was being in our offices. Our struggles with this technique consisted of managing the conversation process. We caught ourselves interrupting each other, referring to our old agendas and not easily keeping the over arching action plan in mind. The information provided gave us excellent background knowledge, but our conversation took longer and was laborious at times. Telephone Conferencing was a tool used to test out if it was possible to replicate the face-to-face network we had established. Since this is typically how we communicate with each other, we anticipated this would be second nature. However, we discovered that we still needed the non-verbal cues to pull the conversation forward. We discussed this being a second possibility, but not as effective as face-to-face discussion. We agreed that the one on one hour long sessions was the most powerful for us as individuals, but the group mentor was a strong contender for a year two mentor process.

Conclusions

When we started phase two of our mentor journey, we knew very little about each other’s roles in the District. We assumed that we were alone in our journey in learning how manage various aspects of our new roles. We quickly learned that we shared many of the same consternations. We were able to help other break down our perceived barriers, navigate the District processes and procedures to answer systematic questions, breakdown the task using our individual strengths and creatively use our three different perspectives to develop a plan.

The most powerful tool to move us forward was the Mentor Coach Conversation Path. We practiced using the six steps as dyads working out colleagues through the six steps. The third person was used to evaluate how we worked through and among the six phrases that include: Agenda/Awareness (red zone), Choice/Commitment (yellow zone), Action/Accountability (green zone). Using a frustration topic, we practiced using mentoring guide questions with a partner. The evaluator recorded how we maneuvered through the different zones. It was noted that we fluently went in and out of each zone as the “mentor” helped us drill down to the specifics of the problem and decide on an action that would best suit the situation.

Finally, we all agreed that we would attempt to maintain our mentoring relationship without our mentor, Dr. Tryon. Through a quick Friday text, we check in to see if a quick meeting needs to take place to assist one of us in developing a plan to work through roadblock, a difficult confrontation or develop a compliance plan. The process has helped each of us realize that the stresses can be managed when learning a new position and our expectations can be managed through different lens. Our goal remains the same-to become the best for the students we serve by remaining true to our standards and learning how to manage our personal values within our District culture. We know realize that we aren’t in it alone. A trusting colleague is not only a text away, but also willing to meet to help us work through whatever new struggles arise.