

## Positive Education Professional Coaching for Community Influencers

[In Hone, Lucy. In press. To be published 2020. *The Educators' Guide To Whole-School Wellbeing: A Practical Guide To Getting Started, Best-Practice Process And Effective Implementation*. UK: Routledge.]

### Case Study 15.1: Personal Reflection: Sherri Fisher and Edwina Ricci

[Sherri Fisher](#) (MAPP, MEd.) and Edwina Ricci (Project Manager, [Maroondah Positive Education Network](#)) discuss how their coaching relationship has supported Edwina through five years of professional growth. See [video resource here](#). (Note: Plus-10 Schools is now Maroondah Positive Education Network.)

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In the kitchen of her rustic house at the top of a hill, Edwina Ricci chops loudly into the assortment of veggies on a cutting board. Her phone on speaker, Edwina is preparing a late dinner while meeting with her coach, Sherri Fisher, on Skype. Thirty hours travel time and 17,000 km away, the invention of video chat has made an unusual and influential coaching relationship possible. While both have made the 30-hour journeys to work alongside each other in person, they believe the coaching relationship forged on Skype has brought them closer in ways that airplanes cannot. Here, they reflect on the evolution, purpose and benefits of a professional coaching relationship that has spanned five years and half the globe.

**Edwina:** Before I had a coach, I attended lectures by luminaries; read research papers and books about Positive Psychology; and talked to everyone I could who seemed to be doing work in the Positive Education space. There were master's degrees and certificate programs that could teach me even more about applying the research. Instead, as a teacher and community connector I wanted practical skills that could transform my entire city. It was important to me that my coach not have a stake in any particular outcome or be trying to sell me a solution. I wanted someone who would uncover new directions. I wanted someone who cooks every day with confidence; knew how to deviate from the cookbook; would help improve the recipe; and adapt the recipe to individual circumstances and ingredients.

I had seen Sherri interviewed on video. I already had my question list ready. The questions tumbled out of me. I asked her, 'How has this field changed your life? The lives of clients and students? Do you go beyond the tools? How and when do you know how to apply research to get your outcomes? What are the ingredients of community wellbeing? She understood the

education context, the roles of different people in a school setting, and the potential challenges in implementing community-wide change. She offered me the opportunity to learn my way around the Positive Education kitchen, and to taste and see what was good for myself.

**Sherri: How did it feel to be coached?**

**Edwina:** Part of being coached is learning the skills of resilience and reframing. In my case the city-wide vision (for Maroondah) was developing while I was, too. After a typical 90-minute coaching session, I often felt committed to specific action. Sometimes I had absolutely no confidence I would be able to put that important puzzle piece in place. Sherri was my champion and accountability partner when things went well. She kept me on the ground when the runway was foggy and my destination was unknown. When I was headed somewhere the research did not support, or made conclusions based on very little evidence, she reset my direction by asking seemingly simple questions. What *can* you do? What else? What is enough for now?

I eagerly anticipated our meetings and felt a sort of relentless enthusiasm for applying what I was learning. The pace of change in institutions, though, is frustratingly slow, and given we usually met at 9 or 10 pm my time, I was often physically as well as emotionally exhausted from my day. Underneath my zest I was sometimes quite discouraged. Fortunately, the coaching relationship felt honest. It was supportive and generative, productive and reflective. She'd say things like: 'that sounds brave. I'm sorry it hasn't worked yet. Sounds like a win! Tell me more; What haven't you tried yet; What resources would help?'

She sent me articles and recommended reading, provided resources that were hard to argue with (even for me!), but informed my steps ahead. She even sat in on video calls I had with potential project partners. We had impromptu meetings and dialogued on Skype messaging, and chatted as if we were having a coffee. When we were working together, I felt deeply respected for my life's purpose.

**Sherri: How did positive psychology coaching change you and the way you work?**

**Edwina:** Coaching and positive psychology were multiplying factors in my life and work. Instead of trying to fix what was wrong – even though there were plenty of statistics that portrayed my community in crisis – my own coaching focused on what was going well and how I could choose, measure and share ingredients to get more of that.

In retrospect, I did not begin by trying to change the way I worked. Like most teachers, I wanted to apply research for the benefit of students. I also wanted to learn Positive Psychology principles and apply them with wider impact. By speaking weekly with you, a true pioneer expert in the field, I developed my language around wellbeing literacy. Every day, at school and in the community, I shared what I was learning. As my confidence and enthusiasm grew, so did my skill at communicating to my network. I was transforming my own way of cooking in the Positive Education kitchen.

**Sherri: What did you gain from coaching?**

**Edwina:** In my coaching, I took a personal learning journey. Though principals and networks are quick to want what research outcomes seem to promise, I believe the personal practice of positive psychology – actually applying wellbeing principles to our own lives - is the most important part of any implementation strategy. Because coaching is not didactic, but nimble and open minded, it lets me fly the plane as I build it, reappraising new runways as the project

and opportunities are revealed. As a result, it feels productive on different fronts, making room for fast prototyping while treating iterations of the 'recipe' as part of the work. As the Maroondah Project has expanded, I've become convinced coaching is a mechanism for designing our greater implementation scheme. It builds a human foundation for positive change. We can bring curriculum to classrooms, but it is much richer and more impactful when we deliver it with ourselves.

I now have my dream job: I support the change process for other influencers of young people - teachers, students, building leaders, parents and community youth workers. I let them try things out and offer myself as a co-creator in community thriving. With the evidence from the research base, Sherri empowered me to try things out responsibly and reflect on that experience. My work now directly impacts over 100,000 people. Today when I am faced with a seemingly impossible challenge, I can compassionately ask myself questions she taught me: What *can* you do? Who can help? What is something you have not done yet?

**Sherri: What obstacles did you face, and how did you overcome them?**

**Edwina:** Even though it may look as if it happens in an instant, cooking up community-wide change can take a long time! People who see what is now the Maroondah Project don't generally know that over five years of coaching supported it. The work is hard, especially in schools. People and their contexts have their own ways to do things, and there is also the national curriculum to consider. Any change needs to prove beneficial for students and doable for educators, and it can't ignore the reality of community problems like depression, anxiety and suicide. There is no such thing as a community-wide project without politics. Together Sherri and I have worked through times of significant political change as well as partnering realignment.

The field of Positive Education has also grown exponentially in places all over the world during this time. We have both needed to keep up through continuing education and international conference attendance. Other community models and solutions have been developing simultaneously.

**Sherri:** Because of shifting times over the seasons, we have met in the wee hours of the morning and in late night darkness. Because of this relationship, I can now automatically think in Australia's East Coast time, I have hugged a baby wombat and fed kangaroos, we know where the cell phone dead zones are while the other person is driving to and from work. Edwina has connected me with the network she have spun. And together we've cooked up whole new wellbeing recipes for each other over time which has been incredibly rewarding.

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For more information about coaching for Positive Education, [contact Sherri Fisher](#).