

Basics of Coaching

A brief review of recent literature

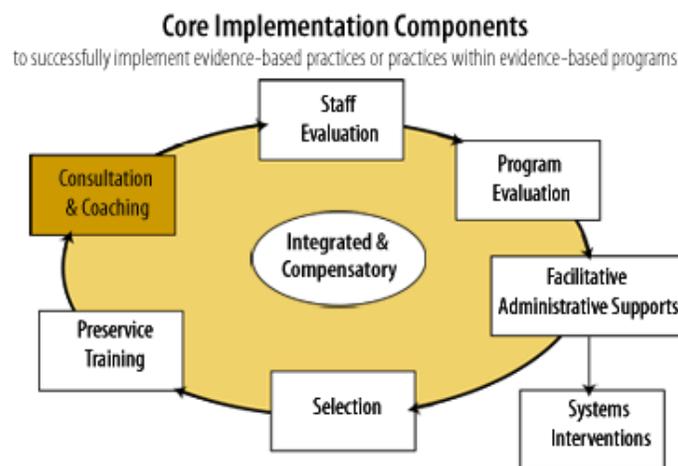
What is coaching?

Coaching is a professional development tool frequently suggested as effective but not always clearly defined. Coaching is described by one source as “the practice of providing deliberative support to another individual to help him/her to clarify and/or to achieve goals” (Bloom et al, 2005, p. 5; Silver et al, 2009).

Another defines it as “enabling personal and professional growth leading to service improvement” (Driscoll & Cooper, 2005, p. 19; Brittain & Potter, 2009). Contrasting coaching with mentoring, Brittain & Potter (2009) describe coaching as “typically more task oriented and focused on work situations” than mentoring, which can be a more personal relationship involving social support and general career development (p. 285). These definitions point to coaching being a useful tool to address a well-defined work performance issue or goal.

“Coaching is highly focused on individuals designing their future – and that of their organization – and achieving excellence through setting personally and professionally challenging goals and committing to taking the actions necessary to achieve them”. (Byrne, 2007, p. 1987)

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) includes coaching as one of its core implementation components (NIRN, 2008), as seen in Figure 1 below.



The NIRN research highlights several reasons coaching may be necessary for effective implementation:

- “Newly-learned behavior is crude compared to performance by a master practitioner
- Newly-learned behavior is fragile and needs to be supported in the face of reactions from consumers and others in the service setting
- Newly-learned behavior is incomplete and will need to be shaped to be most functional in a service setting” (NIRN, 2008).

(For more information on the National Implementation Research Network, please see their website at <http://www.fpq.unc.edu/~nirn/>).

What are the benefits of coaching?

Byrne (2007) describes the type of learning commonly achieved through effective coaching programs:

- Enhancing specific skills
- Resourcefulness
- Confidence
- Openness
- Commitment to change
- Clarity of thinking
- Commitment to action
- Enhanced communication skills
- Empowering organizational culture
- More constructive relationships

When would coaching be an effective tool?

Brittain & Potter (2009) clearly describe the three primary types of work situations that may benefit from coaching:

“Skills coaching is focused on specific skills and abilities leading to specified outcomes. The supervisor is likely to use this approach most often in the beginning stage with new workers, though it may be very appropriate with more senior staff members as they take on specific new responsibilities. Skills coaching is targeted to specific gaps in skills-coaching approach to meeting needs in an ITNA [Individual Training Needs Assessment].

Performance coaching is focused more widely on enhancing role performance and is useful in helping good workers become great workers and intervening when workers are struggling (Driscoll & Cooper, 2005). This type of coaching is most appropriate at the middle level of caseworker development, the “make it or break it” stage.

Development coaching is less directive than the other types and is aimed at challenging and stimulating growth and areas of excellence. The supervisor may challenge the worker to develop deeper levels of critical thinking to assimilate theory, research, and practice (Clare, 2007). It may be most appropriate with very seasoned workers in the end stage of their development who are looking for ways to expand their expertise and opportunities to contribute (Driscoll & Cooper, 2005).”

There are a variety of models or coaching programs described in the literature – the following addresses who serves as coach, whether coaching is provided to an individual or group and highlights a few common coaching approaches.

Supervisor as Coach

Brittain & Potter (2009) describe a model where the supervisors or outside professionals are coaching employees. They describe “the interaction between supervisor and worker is one of the most powerful settings for developing worker competence..... mentoring and coaching are important opportunities for workers and supervisors” (p.280). In this model, coaches assess the workers through observation to understand how they work and how that fits with the desired goals of the job. An agreed-upon structure of the coaching process is important and the coach should ask for permission to coach the employee. The coach and employee identify natural “coachable moments” that occur in their job, where the employee can step outside the situation and “examine the event with the goal of integrating knowledge or enhancing a skill” (p. 260).

Peer Coaching

Huston & Weaver (2008) examine peer coaching as a professional development opportunity in an educational setting. Peer coaching is defined as a reciprocal or one-way collegial process whereby two colleagues work together to improve or expand their approaches to their work. The authors describe six recommendations for creating a peer coaching program:

1. Goal setting – most important that the goals of the coaching relationship are set by the colleague rather than the coach
2. Voluntary participation – for both the colleague and the coach
3. Confidentiality – the colleague must know that the coach will not share the content of the coaching relationship (questions, suggestions, receptiveness) with anyone who may affect their promotion possibilities
4. Assessment – Maintain confidentiality in assessment process, also be sure to assess coaches’ experience on an ongoing basis
5. Formative evaluation – Should be used for formative and developmental purposes rather than for summative – “the sole function of the coaches should be to help colleagues improve...; the coaches should not be commandeered to participate in top-down, administration-driven evaluations” (p.16).
6. Institutional Support – funding, publicizing and marketing, nominating potential coaches, sponsoring events to honor the coaches.

Individual and Group Coaching Combination

Both the supervisor and peer coaching models above assume a one-on-one approach consisting of direct interactions between coach and coachee. Poglinco & Bach (2004) examined an educational coaching program made up of not only one-on-one coaching support in individual classrooms but also group-focused activities such as staff meetings and study groups of several coachees where curricular materials were introduced and reviewed. They found that the group activities were not as effective. “Although the coaching model relies on a combination of individual support and group activities, we

found that the connection between group focused professional development activities and changes in classroom instruction is less than robust or, at the very least, underspecified” (p. 399). They went on to say that, “Of all of the techniques coaches employ, modeling instruction in individual classrooms is most likely to result in modifications in instructional practices” (p. 399). This is in contrast to group activities, where “many struggle to understand how to use the new materials to change their instructional practices in the classroom” (p.399).

Cohort-based Coaching

Silver et al (2009) describes the use of a cohort-based model as a “particularly valuable aspect of the program” (p. 226). Interestingly, the cohorts in this case include the coaches themselves as opposed to the coachees. The program, an extension of a university-based preparation program for school administrators, provides three years of coaching support to new principals. In this program, coaches provide 3-6 hours of individual coaching monthly to coachees at their respective schools and are available by phone or email to answer questions. Coaches are from outside the school or system with expertise in school leadership. While not explicitly described, it appears that the cohorts are made up of coaches grouped geographically. The ability to discuss their coaching skills and receive feedback from peers was reported as especially valuable. The administrators, or coachees, reported that a cohort for them would be a valuable addition to the program, especially for those in rural areas to increase opportunities for peer mentoring – they reported often feeling alone and isolated.

Coaching Approaches

There are a variety of coaching “approaches” described in the literature, a few of the most common include (Denton & Hasbrouk, 2009):

- **Technical Coaching** – coach is “expert” who supports coachee’s implementation of a specific new practice or approach; often used in support of previously received training
- **Problem-solving Coaching** – coach acts as facilitator, collaborative problem-solver, and teacher/learner in order to identify and address issues by working them through together and learning from each other
- **Reflective practice coaching** – coach is mediator helping coachee to reflect on their practice and become aware of the thinking that guides their behavior

What is the role of the coach and how is it structured?

The role of the coach will naturally vary depending on the model and coaching approach used. The following descriptions may be helpful when considering a coaching program. While Denton & Hasbrouk (2009) focus on instructional coaching in an educational setting, their general description of coaching activities can easily be adapted to the child welfare setting:

- Observing the caseworker and providing feedback
- Modeling effective techniques and strategies
- Advising and supporting
- Working with caseworkers to effectively use data

- Engaging in problem-solving discussions
- Conducting workshops to introduce new strategies
- Developing and monitoring improvement plans and goals (p.155)

Denton & Hasbrouck (2009) also specifically describe the role of a coach using the technical coaching approach. It consists of a three-step process including:

- *Planning* – setting goals and objectives on which coaching will focus or identifying a problem to address
- *Executing* – providing demonstration, observation, facilitating group meetings, providing training, studying assessment data
- *Reflecting and Debriefing* – feedback on observations, post-demonstration debriefing and recommendations on which aspects to focus, leading back to step 1.

It is recommended that coaching relationships start during training if possible so the development of the coaching relationship can be facilitated by the practicing of new skills and feedback process (NIRN, 2008; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Smart et al., 1979). From an organizational standpoint, it is important to include potential coaches in the planning stages of the program to help ensure success (NIRN, 2008).

The time devoted to coaching can vary widely, from two hours of coaching a week to two hours per month. NIRN (2008) cites examples of a program where weekly consultation is supplemented with direct observation, post-observation feedback, and skill development. It has been noted that coaching may suffer from a lack of time, inadequate staff resources, and a focus on paperwork as opposed to outcomes (NIRN, 2008). NIRN (2008) provides a link to an “Example of a Consultation and Coaching Outline” that may be a helpful guide when designing a coaching program http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/implementation/07/07a3_consandcoac/CoachingOutline.pdf. The document includes examples of clearly developed “Purpose” and “Policy” sections that clarify the role of the coach.

What are the characteristics and qualifications of effective coaches?

Since programs vary and the outcomes will determine the type of skills a coach will need, there is no consensus on the background or specific skills a coach must possess. However, several authors outlined some key characteristics that may help a coach to be effective. Byrne (2007) indicates that coaches must have “well-honed communication and interpersonal skills essential to motivating and inspiring others” (p. 1987). Several authors indicate that coaches not only need to be highly experienced in their subject matter but also adept at a variety of coaching skills. Poglinco & Bach (2004) specified that coaches must be able to:

- Observe and understand worker strengths
- Identify strategies for engaging the worker
- Offer effective criticism
- Provide useful feedback

“Ineffective coaches were more likely to interfere in day-to-day work and provide solutions rather than develop problem-solving skills” (Wageman, 1997; Brittain & Potter, 2009).

- Effectively provide a variety of technical assistance/coaching techniques including modeling, joint lesson planning, co-teaching, formal observation, informal conversations, etc (Poglinco & Bach, 2004)

Brittain & Potter (2009) describe a study at Xerox which identified positive coaching behaviors resulting in highly functional teams; those most effective were able to:

- Give clear, engaging direction
- Design rewards for excellence
- Ensure basic resources for the team
- Give team members authority to manage their own work
- Set clear goals
- Create work norms that promote strategic thinking

Finally, the NIRN (2008) research cites several qualities of effective coaches as those who tend to be:

- Diplomatic
- Patient
- Willing to share information, credit and recognition
- Encouraging
- Supportive
- Committed
- Sensitive
- Flexible
- Respectful
- Enthusiastic

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