The Power of Cohort Coaching

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Overview

The use of peer-to-peer coaching as an alternative to executive coaching or traditional leadership development programs has become increasingly popular during these lean economic times. Organizations that have been forced to trim their training and coaching budgets have tried to find more cost effective, yet still impactful alternatives for addressing their critical development needs. In addition, when precious resources are expended for training, organizations are turning to peer coaching as a vehicle to assist with that often elusive transfer of skills back to the job. Recognizing these needs, my colleagues and I formed a niche coaching business focusing exclusively on the application of "cohort coaching" — our model of peer coaching.

Although it is still a relatively new concept in the corporate arena, structured peer-to-peer coaching has actually been around for quite some time and first appeared in the 80s as a critical tool for primary and secondary teacher education.

Its inception was engendered by the fact that teachers were rather isolated and more or less left on their own to work through difficult issues and improve their skills. Peer coaching began as a methodology for 2-3 teachers to share insights and offer each other feedback based on observations of one another in the classroom. They also used the approach to assist in the transfer of learning from external training programs as well as to transfer new learning methodologies and technology. Teachers lauded the effectiveness of the concept because in their peer coaching groups there seemed to be an absence of power distance in the relationships, less evaluation pressure and they felt they could be more open with one another.

The concept quickly caught on in the Arts sector for museum directors, and now has spread to the religious sector for pastors and bishops. Although the numerous settings and applications can be formal or informal, these peer coaching approaches all have a clearly articulated structure and a methodology that differentiates them from mentoring. Mentoring is defined as imparting advice or knowledge whereas peer coaching is defined as growth centered, relying on the peer coach's use of questions, active listening and observations leading to self discovery.

Overview of Cohort Coaching Approach

In our discussions with potential clients and other colleagues alike, we have been very deliberate in the positioning and definition of cohort coaching to ensure its differentiation from mentoring and/or other forms of advice giving. We define our approach as follows:

- A structured, focused, goal oriented way

of leveraging relationships among peers—combined with the development of coaching skills—to accelerate leadership development while honing the ability to drive business results.

- Based on data; builds on strengths; and focused toward achieving clear goals.
- Overseen by an external coach, who provides structure and helps participants develop coaching skills and insights.
- A relationship among peers, which builds on strengths, insights, and awareness of organizational issues—not advice.
- Involves active listening, developing focused questions, and confronting contradictions and challenges.
- Facilitates active learning from peers; application of learnings to complex issues; and concrete measurement on business results.

Admittedly, cohort coaching has many applications. Thus far, we have offered it to companies as a tool for:

- high potentials preparing for new leadership roles;
- leaders wishing to apply their learning following a leadership training program;
- leaders transitioning to new roles;
- high potential women or other minority groups;
- individuals leading globally diverse and virtual teams.

Clients have been quite receptive to the approach and every time we talk with a new client, we end up brainstorming and shaping additional applications. For example, a global audit firm with limited funds gravitated to this approach to onboard their new Partners (instead of a 3 day training program). In addition, a large healthcare company opted for this approach as a vehicle to transfer and sustain the learning generated during a four-day, high impact leadership development effort.

In our model, we have found that dividing the group into trios is optimal. This size allows the peers to build trust more rapidly and work through issues and plans in more depth. We kick-off the process by introducing some of the basics of cohort coaching skills such as listening, questioning and probing, feedback skills, supportive challenging and rapport building to get the trios up and running. We also introduce the participants to a series of stand alone tools that can be used as a reference throughout their journey. These tools include tips for change in some of the most common leadership areas, as well as approaches for moving from advocacy to inquiry, managing paradoxes, and developing connectedness skills, just to name a few.

The trios meet face to face, or virtually, at least twice a month for up to six months. Our external coaching role in the process is multifaceted. The first and most critical role is to teach and model skills that facilitate the development of an optimal learning environment. Our experience has been that the external coach will be more active in the early stages of the process by offering feedback, ensuring questioning and reflection, versus advice giving. In addition, we work with the trios throughout the process to structure the agenda and goals for their sessions. For example, in a post leadership development application, a cohort coaching agenda will typically focus on:

- Reviewing progress of leadership development plans
- Coaching each other through challenges and setbacks
- Practicing or "rehearsing" new skills
- Reflecting on homework
- Assigning new homework and/or developing new execution plans

For the global audit firm's new Partner effort, we identified the typical challenges that new Partners face and structured agendas around each topic area. An example of an agenda for a session focusing on delegation was:

- Identify current delegation challenges
- Explore reasons (including individual ones) for not delegating/ not letting go
- Explore framework for delegating
- Work through real situations to increase delegation
- Identify any additional resources needed, etc.

The ultimate goal of the external coach, however, is to transfer skills and ownership for the process to the trios. To that end, although we have a basic framework and structure, the approach can be customized to fit the specific needs and budget of the organization. In fact, we offer what we call a "low to high " level of coach involvement in the process dependent upon need and – of course – the budget!

Some Lessons Learned

Based on our experiences thus far we have developed a list of do's and don'ts when implementing cohort coaching.

The Do's

- Provide a clear overview of the program (including expectations, structure, measurement, etc); expected time frame; external coach's role; and basic training in coaching skills.
- Select participants who are self-directed learners and motivated to change.
- Clearly define the process, goals, and expected outcomes of the program.
- Provide knowledgeable and credible internal Human Resource support for the process
- Develop clear criteria for selection of coaching triads and peer coaching pairs.
- Involve the external coach in all aspects of the program.
- While being flexible in case of emergencies, convey the importance of sticking to the coaching schedule—including the time needed to devote to preparing for and conducting each session.

We also captured some lessons on what not to do.

Don't:

- Introduce a program without the proper preparation. The participants need to be skilled up in the cohort coaching techniques and enough structure needs to be given to ensure success.

- Allow peer coaches to self-select coaching partners (partners need to balance each other's strengths, confront and challenge). The foundation of these relationships is trust and openness.

- Allow focus to be on the past and merely understanding—rather than toward future actions.

- Encourage 'gripe sessions'; 'poor me'; or 'bad-mouthing' to take the place of coaching toward achieving business results.

- Expect progress without regular coaching sessions, support of external coach, and holding participants responsible for outcomes.

Conclusion

Even with the impending economic recovery, cohort coaching continues to gain momentum as a powerful yet cost effective tool to enhance leadership contribution and impact, demonstrate measurable impact on business results and hone coaching skills. In observing these peer interactions, it becomes evident that there is something quite unique that occurs between peers that does not occur with a boss or even a subject matter expert.

When a trusted peer suggests an alternative approach or challenges an existing assumption, individuals appear to be more apt to take notice and change their point of view. It may be difficult to pinpoint exactly what occurs but in the words of Carl Jung: "***The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two choice substances: if there is a reaction, both are transformed***."