Think about your last professional review conversation. Did you feel heard, empowered and valued? Unfortunately, many physicians have walked away from their annual reviews feeling less confident and unsupported, hindering well-being.

While physicians hope to leave their annual review feeling heard, valued and supported, “we don’t necessarily find that in these conversations and yet there’s growing body of evidence that talks about the qualities that our physician supervisors bring in—their leadership skills directly impact the well-being and the fulfillment and satisfaction of their reports,” Andrea Sikon, MD, said during a session at the International Conference on Physician Health, a collaborative meeting of the AMA, Canadian Medical Association and British Medical Association.

That is why in 2016, “our organization rededicated itself to revising an enhanced annual professional review experience,” said Dr. Sikon, director of the Center for Excellence in Coaching and Mentoring at the Cleveland Clinic. After conducting a needs assessment of the department chairs and directors who conduct the reviews, “we found that most of them had been conducting [reviews] for years,” but “very few had received formal training, and most were interested in participating in some sort of training.”

But the Center for Excellence in Coaching and Mentoring aimed to change that. Between 2017 and 2021, the center offered 12 coaching trainings for leaders—10 one-day in-person sessions and two that were two concomitant half-day virtual trainings. Through the program, 119 health care leaders received training on the center’s coaching framework and skills modules. These trainings switched to full virtual in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of those who participated, 28% noted that they had never delivered an annual review. However, one-third stated that they had been delivering annual reviews for at least three years yet volunteered to participate in coach training. Evaluations of the coach training revealed that nearly 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the course was a valuable use of their time and was
relevant to their professional practice.

The coach training impacted leaders’ confidence in three areas.

Impact of coaching fundamentals

Each leader was asked to rate their confidence on the impact of the coaching fundamentals covered at the beginning and end of their training.

“We found that, overall, there were significant increases in most of these areas such as ability to apply coaching skills in their daily interactions with colleagues, with patients and in personal life,” said Elaine Schulte, MD, co-founder of the Center for Excellence in Coaching and Mentoring.

There were also increases in “their ability to use asset-based thinking, their opportunities to expand relationships with their colleagues across the enterprise, their ability to find meaning at work,” Dr. Schulte added.

Read about how Cleveland Clinic’s doctor peer coaches build physician resiliency.

Establish relationships with reports

The health care leaders involved in coach training were also asked “to report on their confidence in establishing a relationship with their report,” explained Dr. Schulte, noting that “the increases in their confidence were statistically significant,” including learning “how to ask powerful questions to reframe and elicit new awareness.”

Additionally, “they learned how to link a report’s goals to their values” and “assisted the report to help identify strengths, motivations and values,” she said. Leaders also “engaged in active listening” while also feeling “more confident about remaining curious, developing rapport and demonstrating empathy.”

Create accountability

“We asked them to report out on their confidence around creating accountability with their report,” said Dr. Schulte. “Again, all of these areas demonstrated significant improvements with the skills
training.”

This meant the leaders “felt confident to guide the coachee to narrow and prioritize actions, have the report to summarize new awareness, getting the report to create a timeline for achieving goals and helping create and maintain accountability,” she explained. “Our net promoter score revealed that 100% of our participants would recommend this course to a colleague or a peer.

“We showed significant increases in the ability to apply coaching skills in daily interactions, which was an exciting discovery,” Dr. Sikon added. Leaders “were using these skills with their colleagues, with their patients and in their personal life.”