
Chapter 2: Building a coaching relationship with learners

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Take home points

1. The coach-learner relationship should be based on rapport and trust, and this rapport and trust should be continuously enhanced.
2. Expectations should be clearly defined for both participants, with the learner setting the agenda and the goals and the coach focusing on maximizing strengths that are identified by the learner to help achieve goals.
3. The coaching relationship requires unique communication skills on the part of the coach and attention to privacy and confidentiality.

This chapter will describe elements of a coaching program that engage the learner and build the coaching relationship. For coaching programs to achieve the goals of learner self-actualization and reflection discussed in Chapter 1, there needs to be intentional preparation of the coach and the learner, with clear expectations for the role of each participant.

Preparing the coach

As discussed in Chapter 1, the nature of coaching is distinctively different from the advising or mentoring relationships familiar to most faculty who volunteer as coaches. Coach training usually takes the form of faculty development workshops, which should be planned for and begun prior to the launch of the program. These faculty development programs typically contain common themes, discussions that highlight the distinctiveness of the coaching relationship, exercises in active listening, positive psychology and understanding one's own biases, and practice with the tools and communication skills that facilitate the coaching process. Successful programs

Vignette

Sarah is a newly matriculated medical student. First in her family to pursue a medical career, she feels very self-directed, since she had to explore on her own “what it takes to get into medical school.” Sarah earned her B.Sc. degree in a large university following a pre-med curriculum, in which the predominant pedagogy was lecture and single-best-answer assessment. During her senior year she completed a project with a small group, but didn't like the experience, since work was not equally shared. Sarah volunteered at a local hospital as receptionist in the ICU family waiting area and, working with her pre-professional program, she shadowed a surgeon. At orientation week in medical school, Sarah sees that the first two days are spent in activities with four other students and a faculty coach, who will be coaching her through four years of curriculum. She wonders whether this is a good use of her time and what she will get out of this.

Thought questions:

1. What preparation is needed for this student to optimally engage in the coaching relationship?
2. What are appropriate program activities to engage this learner in the coaching process?

often continue these programs longitudinally and develop a learning community of coaches who support each other in the work of coaching as long as they are involved in the program.

Engagement of the learner

For the learner, orientation to the coaching process is a critical first step. The coaching program may be introduced in an informational session that highlights the goal of the coaching program, and how this may both resemble and differ from learners' earlier experiences with coaching (as in athletics), advising (as in undergraduate academics) or mentoring.

Ideally there is also a written agreement that serves as the foundational framework for the coaching relationship that is available to all participants, learners, and coaches. This written agreement is sometimes called a "Coaching Contract," although this can be

controversial since a contractual relationship may be incongruous with the student-centeredness of the coaching relationship and may actually disincentivize the learner's participation. If the coaching program is the structure of an educational program's advising system, for instance, and is mandatory for student participation, then requiring a contract signature may be perceived as disingenuous. On the other hand, the coaching program will only work if there are explicit shared expectations of engagement by both the learner and the coach. A contract may be most appropriate for an optional program, since these programs often require additional time from the learner. An example of the agreement used for a portfolio coaching program is presented in Appendix 1.



The coaching agreement begins with principles of coaching and then defines and codifies mutual responsibilities, expectations and boundaries. It is critical for the coach and learner from the first session onward to commit to these key principles to guide the relationship. Examples of these principles are presented below.

Principles of the coaching relationship (adapted from Moore et al. *Coaching Psychology Manual*, Chapter 9, 2016)¹

Coach
<p>I will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask provocative questions and encourage my learner to arrive at his/her own answers whenever possible. • Encourage realistic expectations and goals. • Assist my learner to identify and fully engage in his/her strengths. • Acknowledge when an issue is outside my skill set and recommend other resources.
Learner
<p>I am ready to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take responsibility to make and sustain changes. • Become more self-aware. • Listen to suggestions and try new and different approaches. • Share personal information that is relevant to my performance.
Shared goals for the coach and learner
<p>I will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be punctual. • Maintain confidentiality. • Be open and honest. • Be responsive to phone and electronic communication within an agreed upon timeframe. • Be aware that setbacks are normal on the path to change and necessary in order to establish new mindsets and behaviors. • Commit to upholding the terms of this agreement.

Learners especially will appreciate specifics regarding the logistics of the program, which can also be detailed in the agreement, as noted below.

Structure of a coaching agreement

- Statement of goals of the coaching program
- Time requirements for participating, e.g. length and frequency of meetings
- Duration of the program
- Expectations for setting the agenda for the meetings and work/assignments in between meetings
- Confidentiality of information and types of information to which coaches will have access (In some academic programs, weekly reports on student progress are forwarded; this would be unusual in professional coaching programs.)
- Communication procedures in between meetings, e.g., maximum time to respond to phone messages or e-mails; whether personal cell phone usage/texting is appropriate

Learner reflection

A second step in the engagement of the learner is a reflection exercise, which helps the learner to identify his/her strengths. Often a tool is used in this reflection that can be modified depending on the goal of the coaching program. For instance, a leadership development program might use a tool that specifically asks one to assess particular leadership behaviors and skills, whereas a coaching program intended to enhance professional development and wellness might use an instrument that queries broader goals and values of the individual. The results of this reflection can then be used to establish rapport with the coach and in setting strength-based action plans for future goal setting by the learner. An example of one instrument, the “Values in Action Inventory of Strengths,” can be accessed at

<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>.

A modification of this instrument is used by the Massachusetts General Hospital Internal Medicine Professional Development Coaching Program.² The process of moving from identifying one’s strengths to setting an

action plan is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Outlining expectations, responsibilities and boundaries

For the coach

As noted in Chapter 1, the coach’s role is distinct from that of a mentor or career adviser where the faculty member typically serves as an expert who advises the learner on their strengths and potential deficits. In the coaching relationship, the learner is the expert on his/her own values, strengths, motivators and challenges; hence the learner sets the agenda and drives the goal-setting process based on intrinsic motivators. The coach is most effective by serving as a vehicle to guide the learner to set and achieve goals through affirmations, questions that evoke self-discovery and reflection, and application of positive psychology tools. The expectation from the coach is to remain an approachable, active listener with a mindful presence. The coach establishes a safe space for the learner to reflect, so it is paramount that the coach is

not serving simultaneously in a position of evaluating the learner. The coach should attempt to meet the learner at his/her stage of readiness and refrain from judgment or evaluation. Allowing the learner to lead the agenda empowers them to become experts in problem-solving and strategic planning, eventually building self-efficacy, a sense of mastery, and an internal locus of control. Establishing and building upon trust and rapport with the learner will allow a safe space for the learner to reflect and communicate openly about his/her motivators and goals. This relationship is grounded in confidentiality which would only be disrupted if the learner is felt to be at risk of harming self or others. It is essential that the coach refer the learner for professional assistance or specialist expertise when a health concern is identified.

For the learner

The learner's understanding of his/her role is paramount to the success of a coaching program. The learner must have a clear understanding that s/he is expected to drive the agenda of the coaching sessions. The coaching relationship allows the learner to take on a proactive role by driving the goal-setting process, rather than a passive or reactive role. For this relationship to thrive, the learner is encouraged to remain open to self-discovery, reflection, and the possibilities of change and growth during and between coaching sessions. Honest communication with the coach about the learner's strengths, successes, areas of struggle, stressors, and motivators will facilitate the growth process. Another expectation of the learner is to remain organized and accountable for tracking the progress and work that is being done towards the goals.

Communication

Effective communication is essential to creating and sustaining an effective coaching relationship. The scope of

effective communication includes how, what, when and where to communicate in order to facilitate the self-actualization of the learner.

How: It is necessary for the coach to guide the communication with the learner in a respectful and non-threatening manner in order to identify learner strengths and align those with opportunities for learner success.

What: The goal of the coaching encounter is for coaches to facilitate learners to generate their own solutions through supportive, discovery-based approaches. The primary responsibilities of the coach are to ask appropriate questions of the learner in order to help the learner create a plan for success.

When: The frequency of coaching sessions can be co-determined by the coach and learner or by the program, but these coaching sessions need to be scheduled at consistent intervals across the coaching timeframe. Co-creating processes and rationale for scheduling extra coaching sessions and/or rescheduling missed coaching sessions is recommended. Response times to phone, electronic or other methods of communication should be agreed upon at the beginning of the relationship and written into the coaching agreement.

Where: Coaching sessions should take place in a relaxed, comfortable, and confidential environment devoid of extraneous distractions.

Privacy/information sharing/avoiding conflicts of interest

In order to mitigate the risks of conflicts of interest developing, it can be an advantage to create a purposeful mismatch between the faculty member's expertise with the learner's intended career focus.

Mismatching the faculty member with learners outside their professional field of interest lessens the risk of the faculty

member reverting into an adviser or mentor role. Furthermore, learners need a safe space to reflect and communicate freely about insecurities, vulnerabilities, challenges, or struggles, without fear of retribution or a negative impact on their future career. However, a career alignment of learner and coach could increase perceived legitimacy of the coach in students' eyes. Coaches are not expected to be advocates or evaluators of the learner since this may hinder the learner's self-actualization and self-efficacy. This may lead to procedures precluding the coach from writing a letter of recommendation, for example. Care must be taken to meet Liaison Committee on Medical Education standards for separation of advising and evaluation. When possible, the learner and

coach should avoid working together in a clinical or other course where assessment occurs. If it is unavoidable, the school should address this potential conflict at the start of the rotation by explicitly outlining the procedure for ensuring a coach does not directly assess the student or contribute to the student's grade, such as by manipulating site placement or using coach assessment data as formative only. The goal of coaching is to guide learners to develop and grow an internal locus of control and mastery of new skillsets which include conflict resolution. If the coach is expected to advocate for the learner, this could not only create a conflict of interest but also has the potential to stifle the learner's growth process and self-efficacy.

In review

In the case of Sarah, our learner in the vignette, we can see that her program could do several things to optimize student buy-in at the outset: provide faculty development (orient coaches to the coaching process, pertinent communication skills practice, and discussion of approaches with different learners) and student development, such as an orientation outlining the details, process and expectations for the coaching. Initial activities could include meeting with her coach in a small group discussion, participating in self-assessment exercises with the four other students in her coach's learning group, and writing a personal learning plan for her first month of medical school.

Conclusion

The essential elements for the launch of a coaching program include preparation of the coach for the unique role of the coach, engagement of the learner in the coaching process, setting clear expectations for both participants, and the adroit use of communication skills to build the coaching relationship and advance the achievement of the learner's strength-based goals. Since trust is critical to the coaching relationship, privacy, confidentiality, and potential conflicts of interest must be continually assessed.

References

1. Moore M, Jackson E, Tschannen-Moran B. Design Thinking. In Moore M, Jackson E, Tschannen-Moran B, eds. *Coaching Psychology Manual*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Wolters Kluwer; 2016: 125-140.
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