

Chapter 7: Creating, supporting and sustaining a coaching program

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Take home points

1. A needs-based rationale for initiating a coaching program should be well articulated.
2. Stakeholder support should be assured and expected outcomes clarified.
3. A unique job description to recruit optimal faculty for the coaching program is needed along with effective faculty development.
4. Coaching program success should be celebrated and community-of-practice support nurtured.

Building a coaching program

Before initiating a new program, the rationale for the program and the stakeholders that stand to gain from the program need to be identified. There are several useful frameworks for program development; educators may be most familiar with the Kern model for curriculum development, which can be applied to the development of a coaching program.¹ The first two steps in Kern's model are problem identification and needs assessment. Problem identification outlines the exact gap or challenge that a coaching program is attempting to address. Although a consensus definition of academic coaching exists, each institution has unique areas that a coaching program might impact, leading to variations in the scope of the coaching job. What is the gap or challenge that the institution hopes to address with coaches? Who are the stakeholders? Does it seem feasible, based on the definition and scope of practice of coaches as outlined in prior chapters, that a coaching program will successfully address this issue? What types of outcome measures will the stakeholders request, and what changes do they expect as a result of the coaching program? The details of

Vignette

The Northeast Valley Medical School has recently obtained funding to begin its much-anticipated coaching program. A general call for applications to become a coach went out to the small, yet enthusiastic faculty. Dr. Patel, a microbiologist, promptly submitted his application. He has no formal coaching training, but has been teaching microbiology to medical students for 15 years. Within his teaching duties at the school, Dr. Patel is a small groups facilitator for the school's problem-based learning curriculum and has been a faculty academic advisor to five first-year medical students each academic year for the past 13 years.

Thought questions:

1. Is Dr. Patel a viable candidate to become an effective coach?
2. What specific faculty development should be offered to Dr. Patel if he were to be selected as a coach?
3. How could Dr. Patel best be supported in a new coaching role?

assessment and evaluation are covered in the previous chapter, but it is important to have clear discussions about expectations upfront. Another advance conversation should be about financial support – which stakeholder(s) will pay for the coaching program? What is the budget? To determine the exact cost of a coaching program, a more detailed needs assessment is necessary. It should be made clear to stakeholders at the initiation that coaching requires faculty who commit their time, and without funding, a coaching program is not sustainable.

A needs assessment hones in on the exact skills and competencies required of coaches in the context of the institution. It also defines the resources needed to get the coaching program off the ground. Individual conversations, focus groups, and/or surveys can be used to conduct such a needs assessment. The essential questions are:

1. What tasks should coaches be performing in order to address the gap(s) or challenges identified, from the perspective of multiple stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, educational leadership)?
2. What personal attributes and/or skills are required of coaches in order to do this job well?
3. What resources already exist that could support a new coaching program?

This helps to identify who, if anyone, is currently performing portions of the tasks expected of the new coaches. In many medical schools, a coaching program replaces a more fragmented system of assessment, advising, and assistance with learning planning. Identifying such systems and the associated faculty serves several purposes. First and foremost, delineating how the new coaching program will interact with pre-existing systems is essential to avoid redundancy and inefficiency.

Secondly, the experience and expertise of

the faculty involved in existing systems may be useful for the development of coaches. In addition, these faculty members may be strong candidates for the new coaching program and/or can help identify others.

Determining the amount of financial support required is an important aspect of the needs assessment. Examples from other institutions can be useful, but remember that there may be significant variability in the scope of coaching responsibilities between different programs. Appendix 4 provides examples of several programs, and illustrates the variability in both scope and support among programs. Note that these examples are from comprehensive coaching programs that assign a coach to all students at an institution. Some programs assign coaches to a subset of students, for example students whose performance falls within the lower academic quartile at a school.

Recruiting coaches

The needs assessment outlined in section 1 is essential pre-work for recruitment of faculty to become coaches. It helps identify the required skills that will inform a job description for the coaching position. A job description should clearly describe the roles and responsibilities of a coach, but also delineate required versus desirable prior experiences and expertise. It is important to remember that coaching requires skills that are different from those needed for traditional mentoring and advising roles. Therefore, it is likely that few faculty will already have those unique coaching skills. This obviously has implications for faculty development, but also for recruitment. Requiring that successful applicants already have the essential coaching skill set will likely limit the pool at an institution greatly. Therefore, related skills and relevant experiences in which those skills were applied should be included in the review of applicants. For example, discussing

feedback with trainees tends to be a large component of the job of a coach, thus evidence of experiences with feedback may be an important qualification. Other examples of coaching-related characteristics include strong communication skills, experience with mentorship, understanding of learning plans, experience with goal setting, organizational skills, amongst others. There may be institution specific aspects to the coaching role that need attention, but again, if this is a new program, being too restrictive may limit the pool of qualified applicants.

Recruitment efforts should not only consider individuals, but also the community of coaches that individual coaches contribute to. Diversity should be a goal. Having a diverse group of coaches is needed to support a diverse student body.² Depending on the exact goals of the coaching program and institutional needs and characteristics, diversity across departments, training sites, clinical versus non-clinical faculty, academic rank, etc. may also be needed.

It is important to connect with and engage leadership from various departments and programs in the recruitment process. Emphasizing the importance of the coach role, the innovative nature of the program and quoting successes from other institutions are all strategies to elevate the status of the coaching program and ensure that strong candidates apply to the program. An overabundance of applicants would be a sign of success in this regard, although it creates the difficult task of applicant selection.

So how are the best coaches selected? There is probably not one perfect approach, but strategies to consider include standardized behavioral interviews, use of case scenarios, and multiple group interviews. Standardized interview questions limit bias, and ensure that each candidate is evaluated on the same criteria.^{3,4} Using one or two case scenarios

help in obtaining a sense of a candidate's real life response to certain situations; good examples describe challenging situations that coaches might encounter with students, such as discussing disconfirming feedback. Group interviews can also decrease bias, and multiple interviews by different people may create deeper insights into a candidate's strengths and weaknesses. Consider creating a selection committee that not only includes educational leadership, but also faculty and staff who will work directly with coaches. Recruiting coaches typically means recruiting faculty from within an institution, and often candidates are known to people on the selection committee. Despite our recommendations to use strategies that minimize bias, it is advisable to take all insider information regarding lapses in professionalism and respectful communication and teamwork seriously. Success in the coaching role is strongly dependent on solid communication skills, and, while not part of the definition, role modeling is almost an inherent part of being a coach. Hence, any red flags in a prospective coach's file require careful investigation.

Most programs hire their coaches in one or multiple cohorts and aim to maintain faculty in the coaching role for several years. But, once the coaching program is established there will be inevitable turnover, as well as short and longer term absences that create gaps that need to be filled. Some programs build in a reserve by training more coaches than needed or create a back-up system by wait-listing faculty from the initial pool of candidates for future openings. An alternative solution is to have other coaches temporarily assume responsibility for students assigned to a coach needing a leave of absence. Whichever system is put in place, it is advisable to think of this ahead of time and create a mechanism for the smooth and consistent on-boarding of new coaches.

Faculty development

A clear problem identification and needs assessment as outlined in the first section of this chapter, followed by delineation of required skills as discussed in the second section, will lay the foundation for the next step: setting goals and objectives for faculty development.

Once coaches are identified, an additional, more specific needs assessment may be useful, to assist with determining what the prospective coaches need most and which educational strategies might work best. To maximize the chances of success for a new program, it is important to make sure that all coaches have a shared understanding of their role and the goals of the program. Make sure to clarify definitions, explain how coaching is different from mentoring and advising, and be explicit about expectations.

In considering faculty development modalities, it is helpful to separate content knowledge from skills, especially if time for in-person faculty development work is limited. Content knowledge, such as policies, guidelines, curricular content students engage with, etc. tends to be amenable to self-regulated learning strategies. Whether delivered as reading materials or on-line modules, the coaches can explore the content in their own time at their own pace. Skill building and application

of knowledge is often best accomplished in small group settings through workshops, case discussions, role-plays or other experiential learning activities.⁵ Simulated student scenarios are one such experiential learning strategy with which a few coaching programs have had great success as it allows for practice of skills, as well as direct observation and feedback.⁶ Most coaching programs utilize a combination of strategies.

The list of required knowledge and skills may be long, and there is inevitably a need to prioritize. It may be tempting to try to do a lot of faculty development up front in an orientation, but there is benefit to spaced learning and allowing time for deliberate practice.⁷ In addition, coaches may identify areas for further improvement as they encounter challenging situations and gain experience in their coaching role. Ongoing needs assessment through surveys and focus groups, as well as informal and formal feedback from the coaches themselves and from their learners can help establish goals and objectives for ongoing faculty development. An on-line repository for reading materials and on-line modules, videos etc. can be extremely useful to support coach faculty development, and, depending on the platform used, can also serve as an on-line forum to share experiences, ask questions, and suggest ideas.



Coaching and supporting coaches: Models for improvement and communities of practice

Ideally, a coach models the behaviors that are expected of the students. This includes evaluation of assessment data, reflection, goal setting, and seeking input from others or their own coach. Asking coaches to create their own individualized development plan with SMART goals is one way to have them authentically experience what is expected of the students. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-related. This activity also stimulates self-improvement and encourages further professional development. An educator's portfolio can be embedded in such an individual development plan, which is especially useful if the institution uses the educator's portfolio for academic promotions.⁸ Portfolios and individual development plans are most useful if coaching is a part of the process, thus determining who will coach the coach is important.⁹ Peer-to-peer mentoring may be a good approach, but some level of oversight and support for the struggling coach is likely required from leadership. In addition, the coaching role may provide opportunities for scholarship that can be explored in the goal setting/strategic

planning part of a portfolio or development plan.

Certainly, peer-to-peer mentoring can be extremely valuable and in particular, for a new coaching program, it can facilitate opportunities for coaches to learn from each other, which can expedite their development of coaching expertise. Such opportunities can help create a community of practice, defined as “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”¹⁰ Strategies to support the formation of such a community of practice include regular meetings in which coaches interact with each other, structured peer observation and feedback programs, and on-line communities through an electronic learning environment or other platform that allows for exchange of ideas and resources.

Community building can further be enhanced with a collective celebration of accomplishments and sharing of success stories, for example during an annual reception or other celebratory gathering. This also creates an opportunity for coaches to learn of program outcomes and any proposed changes in direction, and provide input and program evaluation to grow the program further. Stakeholders who support the program should be invited to this event to keep them apprised of the success of the program and share in the celebration.

In review

Dr. Patel brings experience and strengths as a small groups facilitator of self-directed learners, providing feedback, and academic advising. These strengths may be readily transferrable to a new coaching role for Dr. Patel, and his background as a basic scientist is likely an asset as well. However, whether he is a good fit depends on the exact goals of the coaching program, and the community of coaches the institution is trying to establish. This should be established through the processes of problem identification and needs assessment.

Dr. Patel would likely benefit from a variety of faculty development offerings including those focused on content (for example, how coaching differs from traditional advising and mentoring) and those focusing on skill building (for example, workshops with role-plays to practice discussing feedback). The specific faculty development offerings best suited to Dr. Patel's needs depend on the exact tasks expected of him as a coach, his prior knowledge, and existing skill set. These are best elucidated through a targeted needs assessment, which should also address what modalities best fit his needs and schedule.

Since this is a new program, establishing a community of practice for the coaching program would be a great approach to ongoing support for Dr. Patel. Such a community of practice can be established by ensuring that Dr. Patel has opportunities to interact with other coaches, for example through scheduled interactive coaches' meetings, peer observation of his coaching with direct feedback, and/or an on-line community to share ideas

Conclusion

Creating a coaching program starts with a problem definition: outlining what problem the coaching program is addressing for the various stakeholders at an institution. This helps define the skills coaches require to be successful, and this, in turn, helps identify suitable candidates for the job. Since for most institutions, coaching programs are new, faculty development to further skills will be needed and should be based on a targeted needs assessment. Creating a community of practice with a forum for peer-to-peer mentoring and feedback as well as a venue to celebrate the coaching program helps with ongoing growth, quality improvement, and sustainability.

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