

Challenges and Choices in Coach Training Programs

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My review of developmental research suggests that the first half of life is devoted to expanding and extending the use of new skills and knowledge. However, phase two development concerns shifting priorities and perspectives occurring during the second half of life. We don't so much develop by gaining new knowledge and skill; rather, we are seeing the world in new ways and shifting our personal values, needs and ways of engaging other people. Coach-training programs should primarily be in the business of fostering phase two development.

A training program based on the first perspective suggests that the person doing training holds a full pitcher of knowledge and skills. They pour their knowledge or skills into the empty mug of the coach-trainee. We now know—given the second perspective-- that the mug is never empty and the pitcher isn't always full. Participants are in phase two development. They already have knowledge and many skills. It is a matter of shifting priorities, perspectives and practices. Attention must now be given to *retention* and *transfer of learning*. What's already in the mug and in the mug six months later? How have the ingredients of the mug been used during a coaching engagement? Given these shifting, new criteria must be considered in selecting among four primary modes of coach training.

Mode One: Intensive/Residential Programs

Mode One was commonly deployed for many years when coaching was interwoven with leadership development, organization development or clinical psychology programs. Mode One is rarely found in contemporary coach training programs—given the establishment of professional coaching as an independent field of human service. However, we should acknowledge that Mode One potentially yields a large quantity of information. A residential program is filled with challenging perspectives and practices. Trainees are saturated with new skills and knowledge. They tend to talk about it with one another (and with the trainers) over meals, in the evening and during program breaks. Another important advantage concerns community-building. Participants get to know one another in a unique way—especially in a coaching program where participants are coaching one another and learning important things about one another and themselves.

Among the drawbacks are time and money. They prevent most aspiring coaches from attending a residential program. Furthermore, residential programs may offer a high volume of information but there typically are low levels of retention or transfer of learning. The learning occurs in a bubble. It is hard to remember everything that

is taught during training sessions. Other modes of development should be considered when designing an effective training program.

Mode Two: Distributed/Residential Programs

This second mode is widely used because of its convenience for busy adult learners. Furthermore, with program offerings being distributed over several sessions, there is time between sessions for participants to try out their newly acquired skills and knowledge. This mode maximizes retention and transfer of learning.

There are shortcomings. First, there may be certain skills and knowledge that a coach-trainee must acquire before engaging in coaching. In most instances, the first sessions of distributed modes of development should be used for the transmission of “essential” skills and knowledge. It is unfair to set neophyte coaches out on the street without adequate preparation. There is a second drawback. The distributed mode is not very efficient when compared to Mode One. All training programs require a warm up period during which participants are getting back into a learning frame of mind. Warm up reduces the amount of time devoted specifically to new content to be learned or skills to be acquired. Furthermore, information that was conveyed in previous sessions typically must be reviewed during follow up sessions. This increases the retention of previously learned information but further reduces the amount of information conveyed in any one session.

How are these drawbacks addressed? The initial session can be rather lengthy, like in an intensive program, and the follow-up sessions can be rather brief or individualized. Rich learning that occurs in the intensive programs can be coupled with transfer of learning that occurs when additional sessions are distributed (often by means of coaching) over an extended period of time. In the future, we are likely to see more frequent coupling of intensive training with follow-up coaching—and with the third and fourth modes of coach development to which I now turn.

Mode Three: On-Line Programs

This third mode of development is intended not just as a convenient source of coach training, but also as a vehicle for efficient and effective transmission of information. This mode allows for and even requires clarity of learning objectives, solid and consistent course content, and thoughtful sequencing of this content. Participants can usually learn at their own pace, repeat lessons, and clarify their learning by interacting with other coach-trainees in small virtual groups. Mode Three typically includes an extended orientation session, observation of “masterful” coaching, and a self-study guide. Extensive use is made of online media, interactive software, and group mentoring.

The most obvious Mode Three benefits concern not just convenience but also absence of many logistical costs (transportation, housing, etc.). There is also the benefit of potentially working with participants from other areas of their home country or even other countries. The faculty are likely to be of high quality since on-line programs are just as convenient for them as for the participants. The major educational benefit concerns both retention and transfer-of-learning. Learning is distributed over time so that the coach-in-training has an opportunity to practice what they have been taught and what they have observed.

One of the major drawbacks concerns transitions. Even if the program is convened for self-study there is the need to transit from one's "normal" world to the unique world of coach training. This requires a shift in one's mind and heart. There is one other matter. While on-line programs provide structure, they typically do not allow for the spontaneous generation of insights that comes from "teachable moments" found in residential programs.

Mode Four: Just In Time Programs

Technology has made this fourth mode of coach development quite viable. Often yielding "on-demand" learning, this new form of training is perfectly suited to a world of tight-scheduling, continual interruptions, and ongoing change. For on-demand learning to be successful, the content must be brief, easily comprehended, and compatible with digital formats. This mode of training is inherently appreciative in that coaches-in-training are assumed to be self-motivated and self-directed. Just-in-time programs begin with the assumption that those in training can skillfully diagnose their work-related needs so that they might decide what and when they should learn something new. It should be noted that just-in-time programs are also intended for use by experienced lifelong-learning coaches.

The negative side of this fourth mode concerns these assumptions about self-motivation and self-direction. Do we really know what we don't know? Can a newly-minted coach skillfully diagnose the needs of their coaching engagement when they are intimately involved with this engagement? Are experienced coaches any wiser? Perhaps, the first just-in-time session should be devoted to skills in determining what and when I need to access new information as a coach

A more tangible shortcoming of just-in-time programs concerns their startup and ongoing costs. These costs include not only the expense of new hardware and software, but also expenses associated with preparation of multiple training modules that will be available to coaches at any time and in any setting. Another shortcoming: a Mode Four program can't be automatically tailored to the unique situation or needs of coaches. Thus, the program must be everything to everyone—and must often be updated. This is a tall order! Nevertheless, this

form of coach-training is here to stay but not without some costs—and not without that human touch which makes all four training modes come alive for the learner.

Conclusions

The most important mode-related factors to take into account concern amount of learning, retention of this learning, transfer of learning to specific coaching engagements, and training costs. Training must be accessible, inexpensive, and available just-in-time. However, intensive and distributed training programs counter the convenience of on-line and just-in-time training with the discipline of extended, thoughtful development. All four modes should be invited in and each should pull aspiring coaches out of their routine, habits of mind, and rutted way of relating to and helping other people.
