

Peer Coaching for Systemic, Reflective Growth

Adopting a proactive, rather than a reactive, approach to coaching can transform organizations.

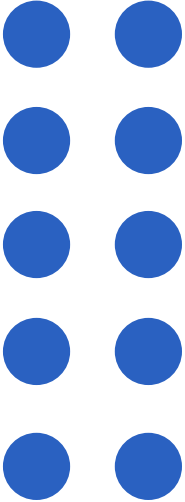
BY PETE HALL





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aniel is a team leader at an international marketing firm. A few weeks ago, his team began a large project with a tight deadline. Several new members joined the team, and Daniel found himself having to go back to coach and mentor his new employees. He lamented the time he lost, time that he could have better spent spurring the project forward and using his creative energy. He knows his new teammates need him, but so does the project, and the clock won't stop ticking.



Jessica is a branch manager of a regional credit union. Upon her return from a leadership seminar, she took on the responsibility of coaching her direct reports to become more independent, autonomous problem solvers. With considerable enthusiasm, she began conducting walk-throughs, providing feedback, and encouraging her team members to stretch themselves and grow. Recently, however, she has been struggling to manage her day-to-day responsibilities and keep up with her coaching goals. Her direct reports need her, but so do her inbox and her customers.

Coaching is a well-known strategy for improving employee performance. In addition to developing competency and skills, providing coaching can enhance organizational effectiveness, increase employee retention, develop talent, and bolster leadership impact. However, that's only when talent development professionals use coaching as it's intended—and even then, only when we do it well. What if organizations could create and implement a peer-coaching model that generates enduring benefits to the coach-coachee partnership and transforms organizations simultaneously?

The typical use of coaches: For implementation or correction

Because the research on coaching's positive impact is plentiful, many employers use the strategy. However, they often implement it reactively: They tend to use coaches to either train people in a new approach (including onboarding new staff) or remedy struggling employees. That makes perfect sense on the surface,

considering that in my conversations with talent developers, they identify change and performance concerns as two of the most immediate, highest-priority areas where they can make an impact on employee effectiveness and organizational growth. Change is hard, and leadership wants it to go well, so they often bring in coaches to help. And when employees have some sort of performance deficiency, it can cost the company clients, money, time, and other valuable resources.

Unfortunately, that inadvertently creates a stigma around coaching: If a supervisor suggests coaching to a direct report, the employee's perception is either "I'm new" or "I'm struggling." If the direct report has been with the company for some time, all arrows point to the latter. The result is often a reluctance on the employee's part to be vulnerable and honest, an unwillingness to take risks and try new strategies, or a hesitancy to ask questions or request help. Reactive coaching carries with it a threatening posture that erodes the culture of the organization.

A better way: Coaching for reflection

Employees need not view coaching as a negative, corrective action. Coaching works for everyone. It's a strategy that high-performing organizations use with intentionality and transparency with all members of the company, from C-suite executives to hourly workers and all roles in between. So, why not use coaching across the board? And why not build a model that supports everyone, without sapping the energy of those charged with supporting their team members and direct reports?

Enter a coaching approach that builds individual and collective capacity by developing self-reflective abilities through peer collaboration. Rather than emphasizing skills and actions, the self-reflective peer-coaching model focuses on the thoughts and reflections that precede and follow actions.

By building frequent, accurate, and deep reflective habits about goals, strategies, impact, and adjustments, employees and managers alike will be more likely to focus their attention, make strategic decisions, determine the level of success of their actions, and adapt their approaches. Thus, proactive coaching will build individuals' capacity for success and enable them to generalize their learning into new circumstances.

Elements of reflection

As architect of the self-reflective peer-coaching model, I have more than two decades of experience implementing it during my career, and I have coached hundreds of companies in incorporating the model in their day-to-day operations. The results are consistent: higher personnel retention, higher job satisfaction, greater outputs as measured by key performance indicators, and lower absenteeism.

The coaching model itself is based in part on the reflective cycle (described in *Creating a Culture of Reflective Practice* and *Pursuing Greatness*), which is the predictable pattern of thinking all people use when they're learning something new, building their skills, or progressing toward expertise (see figure). The reflective cycle comprises four elements:

- **Build awareness.** Individuals must first become cognizant and thoughtful of the goal, the context, or the desirable outcome.
- **Make intentional decisions.** Whatever individuals do, they do it on purpose to achieve the identified goal.
- **Assess and analyze your impact.** This emphasizes individuals identifying the cause-and-effect relationship between their actions and the results that follow.
- **Become responsive.** People can only tinker with their processes to change the outcomes if individuals are clear about how their previous actions affected the outcomes in the first place.

Interestingly, that four-element cycle is not the way the human brain operates by default; it is only the pattern individuals use when the goal or outcome is of immense importance to them. People tend to focus on shiny objects, things that are new and different—for instance, a line of code that's out of place in a program, a rustle in the bushes, or an unfamiliar van driving through the neighborhood. Evolutionarily,

The Reflective Cycle



that makes sense: Something different could be dangerous, and becoming alert to that stimulus serves to protect the individual.

However, when it comes to learning and getting better at something, those distractions are just that: distractions. So, people must intentionally direct their attention and focus on the topic at hand if they are to successfully learn, grow, and improve their practice. Progressing through the reflective cycle, then, is a habit individuals must build.

A symbiotic partnership

In the self-reflective peer-coaching model, employees partner with each other to coach the other's thinking rather than get bogged down in the other person's doing. Anyone and everyone can participate, even if they work in different departments, at different pay grades, and have different roles. The theory of action is straightforward:

If I can help you think through your goals and responsibilities; create thoughtful action plans; understand the connection between what you do and what results you get; and prompt you to reflect on the process in order to learn and grow next time, then we all benefit. And if you can reciprocate that level of support to me, we can create a symbiotic partnership that strengthens our collective impact as an organization.

During my career, I've seen time and time again that peer coaching can boost participants' confidence, enhance their problem-solving skills, foster a culture



of knowledge sharing, amplify collaboration, increase employee engagement and retention, and be a cost-effective strategy (compared to bringing in outside experts) to customize learning plans, all while improving performance and coalescing organizational culture. Who wouldn't want that list of outcomes? By building reflective capacity throughout the organization, all parties are more likely to retain the skills and reflective habits over time, enabling them to apply the skills and habits in various novel situations.

Questions for Coach-Coachee Interactions

These are sample questions for each of the elements of the reflective cycle.

Build awareness

- What is your problem of practice?
- What is the goal you would like to accomplish?
- Why is that goal important to you?
- Where did that big idea originate?

Make intentional decisions

- Do you have some strategies you would like to incorporate?
- Where could you find additional approaches or guidance on how to implement them?
- How will you decide which strategy to tackle?
- What tools or resources will you need to bring the strategy to life?
- How can I help you?

Assess and analyze your impact

- What results will you be looking for as you implement your chosen strategy?
- Can you envision what success will look like?
- What will happen when you do this work spectacularly well?
- How will you focus your attention on the direct cause-and-effect connection between your actions and the outcomes?

Become responsive

- What changes will you be willing to make if things don't go as planned right away?
- How will you know what to adapt and adjust?
- When can we have a follow-up conversation about this? Let's put it on our calendars right now.

Facilitating the process

Creating a successful self-reflective peer-coaching model requires some front-loading. To set the tone, TD practitioners can establish an environment ripe for professional, collaborative peer coaching by:

- Bringing a team together to discuss the ideal outcomes of a robust peer-coaching program (for example, by working directly with each other to solve real-world, real-time problems, the team would be building a stronger collaborative environment)
- Identifying and clarifying the norms for interactions (such as establishing pairs that maintain confidentiality by not discussing their work with other colleagues without mutual permission)
- Walking participants through the process in advance during a staff meeting, team huddle, identified professional-growth session, or any time in which the team gathers.

A peer-coaching initiative is much more likely to be successful when the TD function establishes clear expectations and provides a high level of support up front. Such an initiative involves three steps.

Build a peer connection. Not all partnerships are created equally, so it's essential for supervisors, TD, or HR to identify the right people for each pairing. Perhaps a novice-expert partnership would work (for example, when an expert is eager to share, and the team has a newer member who soaks up information like a sponge); maybe the decision is based on personalities (such as when two teammates happen to gel together or have particular interests in common that draw them to each other); or possibly forge a duo among individuals with similar work assignments or responsibilities (for instance, when two teammates receive a mutual project assignment and proximity dictates they'll need to lean on each other to be successful).

Because humans are unique, partnership selection will occur on a differentiated, case-by-case basis. TD professionals can work directly with employees to facilitate the peer connections to increase the likelihood of a successful partnership, if needed.

Identify a problem of practice. A problem of practice is an element of work that vexes an employee. It's something that provides a confounding struggle for which a worker could use support to address or overcome. Questions that leaders or TD can

ask peer-coaching participants to help them identify their most pressing problem of practice include:

- What's a goal you're working toward?
- What seems to be getting in the way of your progress?
- When do you get frustrated with your work responsibilities?

Naturally, TD staff are also keen to current organizational challenges, short- and long-term goals, and upcoming initiatives. Such insights can help guide the conversations to uncover employees' level of understanding, self-awareness, and needs to position themselves for success in the future.

Work through the reflective cycle together. That involves participants asking and answering a series of reflective prompts designed to hone each other's focus, challenge and clarify each other's thinking, and refine each other's ability to analyze and evaluate specific situations. (See the sidebar for sample questions pairs can use as they work through the reflective cycle.)

During the conversation, both participants have a role to play. To achieve the primary goal of unpacking the coachee's thinking and decision-making processes to hone them for future use, the coach must engage in active listening strategies to follow up with deeper, inquisitive prompts, offer paraphrased recaps, and request clarifications as needed. Doing so ensures that both parties are fully engaged in the process—and if the problem of practice is indeed pertinent and pressing, both parties will desire a mutually beneficial outcome.

TD professionals may want to provide workshops in which they share active listening strategies; probing and clarifying questioning techniques; and approaches for handling tough, sensitive situations between partners. Peer coaches will likely have questions, suggestions, and needs regarding the process, and it can be a powerful experience to surface them in a group setting, brainstorm ways to address the matters, and refine the program.

Making peer-coaching for self-reflection the norm

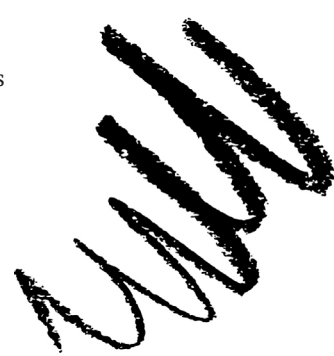
Let's return to the scenarios presented in the introduction to see how they may generate different results in a self-reflective peer-coaching model.

Daniel knows that company onboarding and orientation tends to only cover the nuts and bolts of the work and that his new employees will need more on-the-ground support to be successful. Who better to provide that support than existing teammates? After a couple of team meetings and some discussions with his team members, Daniel creates a partnership map

and encourages pairs to build peer-coaching plans together, identifying common problems of practice and embracing the reflective cycle as an engine of growth.

With pairs working collaboratively, Daniel is free to unleash his creative energy on the project, communicating with clients to keep the timeline on track for success. Company morale, meanwhile, has never been higher.

Jessica still believes in the value of walk-throughs and tailored feedback for her people; however, she also believes in the power of collaboration and a supportive team environment. Implementing a peer-coaching model that emphasizes reflective practice enables her to build a culture that values interdependence, celebrates growth, and welcomes risk-taking and innovation.



Establish an environment ripe for professional, collaborative peer coaching.

Jessica's direct reports share their successes, recruit support when they struggle, and develop slick procedures for handling the day-to-day responsibilities they must get done. That opens some time for the team to brainstorm ways to improve its efficiency and augment the services it offers to customers. Jessica is proud of the environment she's curating and can't wait to see what's next.

Theories on organizational change like to push organizational leaders into the top-down or bottom-up camp; the answer is that neither works every time. The self-reflective peer-coaching model blends a mixture of both: the top-down of initiatives and performance goals as well as the bottom-up of peer relationships, strong teams, and in-the-trenches inspiration. Meanwhile, the emphasis on developing proactive self-reflective habits ensures that every individual can grow and learn, and every organization can thrive.

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