

Peer Coaching: The Wave of the Future

Shana Montesol Johnson



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If you are looking for a low-cost, high-impact, customizable way to promote professional and personal growth, develop leaders, and influence positive organizational culture change, consider peer coaching. Called “the wave of the future” by Marshall Goldsmith, an executive coach and global leader in the field, peer coaching is often an overlooked resource for promoting organizational goals related to L&D and to employee engagement and cultural transformation.

Peer coaching is an interactive, collaborative process through which individuals of equal status support and facilitate each other in shifting their mindset and behaviors in a way that will enhance their impact and results. There are a host of ways you and your organization can use peer coaching, including as a freestanding program, as an add-on to another program, or to support a network or change.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, you will learn:

- what peer coaching is and the various forms it can take
- the potential benefits of peer coaching

- methods to set up peer coaching to succeed
- the potential pitfalls and how to address them
- ways to test out peer coaching if you aren't ready to launch a full program.

The Ins and Outs of Peer Coaching

Peer coaching is characterized by self-directed and mutual learning, in support of each individual's development goals. Peer coaches listen, encourage, support, provide new perspectives, and offer accountability.

Peer coaching may take place in person or virtually via videoconference or phone. It may involve two people (coaching pair) meeting together and taking turns coaching each other, or it may involve a group of people (usually three to six individuals) who meet to coach each other. In certain cases, especially when a group is new to peer coaching, a facilitator may guide the group discussions and facilitate the coaching interactions. In other cases, particularly with more experienced peer coaches, the group is self-facilitated.

To better understand what peer coaching is, let's explore what it is not. It is not mentoring, when an employee with prior experience or relevant expertise to a colleague's challenges shares tips, guidance, or advice. It is not an instance of employees getting together to merely vent or chat about their respective work challenges. While peer coaching is a form of internal coaching because it uses internal coaches as opposed to professional external coaches, for purposes of this *TD at Work* issue, I will focus on reciprocal peer coaching, in which each person being coached also coaches.

How to Use Peer Coaching

Peer coaching is highly customizable. Lynne Feingold, a certified leadership coach who helped bring peer coaching to the U.S. government, likens peer coaching to a buffet. "Just like every good buffet has a range of cuisines, there is no one way to do peer coaching," she states. It can be adapted beautifully to the learner's individual needs, a group's specific interests, or an organization's particular context.

Peer coaching can support:

- application of learning from training courses
- leadership development
- problem solving
- navigating change and transition, including organizational culture change
- building coaching skills and embedding a culture of coaching
- onboarding new staff or supporting newly promoted staff
- promoting work-life balance and resilience
- team building or cross-organizational collaboration and integration
- networking
- strategy alignment.

Further, here are some different forms it can take:

A component of a formal training program. Peer coaching could take place in face-to-face workshops or classes as a set time when pairs or small groups of learners come together and coach each other on a topic relevant to the training. This may happen a single time during the class or as multiple sessions during the course, which may be particularly relevant in the case of multiday classes.

Follow-up to a formal training program. Whether in person or virtual, pairs or small groups of learners could meet after completing a training program to coach each other on applying their new learning. This may be a one-off peer coaching conversation or a series of regular, virtual or in-person peer coaching meetings.

Stand-alone program. An organization could invite employees to participate over time in giving and receiving coaching with peers on relevant professional development challenges. This can take place in pairs, triads, or groups.

Industry association benefit or program. This type of peer coaching brings together people from different organizations.

Support group for entrepreneurs or business owners.

Popularly called "Master Mind Groups," these groups meet together to support, challenge, and coach each other.

A range of organizations, industries, and geographies use peer coaching. It has deep roots in education, where teachers have engaged in peer coaching to improve their classroom skills. The U.S. government has also used it at agencies such as the Federal Aviation

Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Food and Drug Administration. Further, Fortune 500 companies—such as Microsoft, BP, and Lufthansa—use it. It is used in small businesses, nonprofits, and international organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations.

Lynne Feingold, a certified leadership coach who helped bring peer coaching to the U.S. government, likens peer coaching to a buffet.

Frequency

The frequency of peer coaching meetings depends on the participants' needs and interests. Peer coaching can, for example, take place on a regular schedule (such as weekly, bimonthly, or monthly) with dates set in advance. Once a peer coaching pair or group is well established, a different frequency may be desired. Peer coaching may take place on an ad hoc basis, when one of the participants has a challenging issue or decision that he would like to address. However, in the early stages, meeting regularly helps build trust and momentum.

Pairs Versus Coaching Groups

Coaching pairs and group peer coaching each have advantages and disadvantages. A coaching pair can be a practical way to tap into the benefits of peer coaching, because it is typically easier for two individuals to find a suitable time to meet in person or virtually. Over time, the two develop a sense of trust, rapport, and mutual support. With a pair, there are also no group dynamics to manage. Once a pair of peer coaches has received training in peer coaching skills, the two are usually able to self-manage the process—with the program coordinator's support on any troubleshooting, as needed.

Peer coaching groups, by nature of the greater number of participants per cohort, provide exposure to more people, perspectives, and sources of support and accountability. Experiencing the camaraderie, connection, and trust of multiple colleagues, coupled with the satisfaction of contributing to and supporting others' growth can be extremely meaningful for the individuals who participate. Group dynamics—while something members should be savvy about navigating if the group is self-facilitated—can also create surprising synergies and a powerful sense of support.

Peer coaching groups may require additional resources—in the form of a facilitator—than peer coaching pairs. Having a skilled facilitator, either someone internal to the organization or an external consultant or coach, to guide the discussions, elicit coaching questions from the peer coaches, and provide teaching or feedback on coaching skills and approaches contributes significantly to the program's success. This is particularly relevant at the start, when coaching skills are new to the participants and the group is still learning to work together. As cohort members gain greater familiarity with the peer coaching skill set and build trust with each other, they may rely less on an outside resource and be able to self-facilitate group meetings.

Some peer coaching programs provide a facilitator for the first four group meetings, with the expectation that the group will subsequently self-facilitate. Other programs provide a facilitator throughout the program's entire life span. In these cases, the facilitator may not only guide the peer coaching interactions but also teach new skills related to coaching or leadership or other relevant topics.

Another issue related to peer coaching groups is the challenge of consistent attendance at group meetings. Having more participants means a greater number of busy schedules to juggle, and the chances of 100 percent attendance are slim. When group members agree to a meeting date but then cancel, there may not be enough members available to warrant meeting, leading to postponement. If this dynamic is not well managed and happens repeatedly, it can stall the group formation and even be demoralizing for those who are committed attendees.

Preparing for Success

Peer coaching is a relatively low-cost way to provide access to professional development, learning support, and coaching to a broader population than professional coaching could support. However, a peer coaching program requires a certain level of support to maximize its success and avoid any pitfalls.

Identify a Program Coordinator

A program coordinator is critical to the success of a peer coaching program. This person will ensure that the different types of support needed throughout the process are accessible, either by providing support directly or by tapping organizational or external resources as needed. I describe many of these forms of support in this issue.

Set the Foundation

As you establish a peer coaching program, these approaches can help you enhance the initiative's success.

Be clear on the big picture. Why is the organization interested in peer coaching? What are the program's objectives, and how do they align with the relevant division's or organization's overall goals? How will you define success from an organizational perspective? Clarity on these points will inform key decisions around how you should design, implement, and evaluate the program.

Frame the program as a positive investment in development. Coaching is generally seen as a positive solution, yet in some corners, people may still view it as a remedial measure for problem staff members with poor performance. As with any coaching solution, frame the peer coaching program as a positive investment in employees' development rather than a punishment or a last-ditch effort to fix lagging performance.

Emphasize voluntary participation and individual commitment. Sometimes training programs or other professional development offerings are requirements for all employees or all employees at certain levels. Other offerings are not officially required but supervisors strongly suggest them. In contrast, a peer coaching

Virtual Peer Coaching

Peer coaching can work well virtually, using phone or videoconferencing. It is ideal—but not a requirement—to have the first meeting in person, because this can help people feel more comfortable with each other more quickly.

In choosing the modality for virtual peer coaching, participants' hardware and software needs and requirements will guide your decision. Zoom videoconferencing works particularly well because it's a stable platform, where group members can see each other. It is also easy to break the larger group into pairs or small groups, if desired. However, if group members lack a stable and fast Internet connection to support videoconferencing, it may be best to choose an audio-only option to avoid frustration.

Likewise, it can be problematic if most of the group members are using one modality (such as videoconferencing) and only one or a handful of people are using another (such as the phone). The individuals with only audio may feel less connected to the group, while those on video may literally lose sight of those group members who are only on audio, forgetting that they are present. During the initial discussion, the program coordinator should facilitate a discussion about participants' available hardware and software to determine the best modality for the group moving forward.

program will work best if those who are participating are doing so voluntarily. Peer coaching is not for everyone. It requires individuals who are committed to reflection, openly sharing their struggles, experimenting with new coaching skills, working toward their own growth and development, and helping and supporting others' growth and success. A time and consistency commitment is also necessary. Individuals who join the program out of obligation will likely lack the kind of commitment that makes for peer coaching success.

They may not gain as much from the process and may not contribute as much to their fellow peer coaches.

Provide Coaching Skills Training

To equip peer coaches to succeed, training on basic coaching approaches can go a long way. You may deliver this via a prerequisite training workshop, an internal HR staffer with the appropriate skills, or an external consultant or coach.

Duration and modality depend on the participants' needs and available resources. Some programs require everyone to attend a one- or two-day in-person workshop on coaching skills. Others orient participants via a one-hour call that introduces them to the coaching model they will use and gives them an opportunity to practice and receive feedback. One example is the GROW model.

Skills to cover in a basic training program may include:

- active listening and powerful questioning
- paraphrasing
- balance between challenge and support
- bottom-lining—communicating the essence of the message rather than giving long, descriptive stories
- specific peer coaching models, such as the GROW model or peer learning circles

- Other topics—such as giving and receiving feedback, self-awareness, empathy, and managing conflict—may be helpful as well.

One of the most challenging aspects of training peer coaches or managers as coaches is the nondirective nature of coaching. Most of the participants in a peer coaching program have likely spent their professional lives being rewarded for being the expert, formulating recommendations and actions and providing advice. A muscle that is less-often used is one involved with asking open-ended questions that we don't already know the answers to, listening deeply, and assisting others in discovering a solution on their own. Each peer coaching program will establish its own norms around giving advice and sharing perspectives, but here are some guidelines that may help:

- The coachee should talk two to three times as much as the coach.
- The peer coach should focus on asking open-ended questions.
- If the peer coach wishes to offer ideas, suggestions, and his perspective, he should do so judiciously so as not to disrupt the coachee's reflection and solution-generation process. It can also be useful to frame input as, "What worked for me is ..." rather than "You should do this"

GROW Model

Developed by performance coach Sir John Whitmore in the 1980s, the GROW model for coaching is an accessible yet powerful approach to coaching. The model is comprised of four phases:

- **G**oal. What is the coachee's goal or the purpose of the coaching conversation?
- **R**eality. What is the current reality?
- **O**ptions. What options could the coachee pursue?
- **W**ill (or Way Forward). Which option has the coachee chosen? What will the coachee do and by when? What obstacles may get in the way?

The GROW model can be used in pair peer coaching or in a group setting with one participant coaching another while the rest of the group silently observes and offers its feedback and input at the end. Another way of using this model is as a Group GROW, where group members all ask the coachee questions based on the GROW approach and collaboratively decide when to move from one phase to the next.

The GROW model provides a clear and concise method for coaching a peer. The more participants use the model and experience it as coachees, the more comfortable and skilled they will become in applying it—not only in peer coaching but potentially in other relationships, such as with direct reports.

Ensure Participants Are Well Matched

Should peer coaches choose partners, or should the program coordinator? One view is that enabling participants to choose their partner may give them a sense of agency in the process, facilitate greater buy-in, and set the tone for a high degree of self-direction in the experience. It may also help ensure rapport and chemistry among peer coaches—something that is important in matching a coaching client and a professional coach.

On the other hand, assigned pairings offer benefits. Doug Riddle, with the Center for Creative Leadership, points out that, in particular, junior leaders may not “know enough about their peers in other divisions or departments to make interesting choices” in peer coaching partners. Also, assigning the partners sends the signal that the participants are expected to make the pairings work. That may involve stretching themselves as leaders, communicators, coaches, and partners.

A peer coaching program will work best if those who are participating are doing so voluntarily.

Regardless of who chooses the partners, avoid power differences. Well-matched peer coaches have similar levels of authority and experience; they see each other as equals, without hierarchical differences. Bringing together people from different parts of the organization can be beneficial in providing diverse perspectives.

Support the Contracting Phase

The start-up, or contracting, phase of any peer coaching relationship can be instrumental in laying the foundation for success. Be sure to support this phase.

Settle Logistics

Establish the logistics of the peer coaching program early on to give participants a helpful sense of structure and

stability. Work with the program coordinator, who may be in charge of establishing these logistical elements for the group, or give the group the freedom to decide them for themselves. They include elements such as the meeting location; who will book the meeting room (if in person); who will set up and send out the videoconference link (if virtual); meeting length and frequency; agenda content and who will facilitate the agenda flow (such as taking turns); how the meetings begin (such as in a group, each individual providing an update on progress); and how the meetings end (for example, each participant sharing one key insight from the session).

Setting Individual Goals

When a peer coach identifies an overarching goal that he would like to focus on, this can give him a sense of purpose to guide his participation throughout the experience. He may refine or adjust the goal as coaching progresses, but the goal must be crucial to sustain his interest and commitment to the peer coaching process.

In the contracting stage, peer coaches should share their goals, reflecting on why these are important to them and what success would look like in terms of observable outcomes. This will anchor the episodic peer coaching interactions in relation to a longer-term objective. It also helps at an individual level to answer the question, “How do we define peer coaching success?”

Developing Guidelines and Norms

Peer coaches should develop agreed-upon guidelines and norms for working together. These may be tailored to the participants’ needs and interests. You can provide coaching pairs with a sample list of questions to discuss to generate their agreed-upon norms. You can do this with the peer coaching group or have the facilitator guide the group in developing ground rules during the first meeting.

For groups, participants should discuss and collectively agree on how the group will handle issues such as:

- cancellations, late-comers, or no-shows
- a participant who dominates the conversation
- a participant who does not speak or contribute much to the conversation

- a peer coach who consistently gives advice rather than coaches.

Reflection and feedback on the coaching is another area the group can address through their group norms. If group members take time after coaching a peer to reflect and share what the experience was like for them as a coach, all participants can benefit from that learning. Similarly, a peer coach may ask the coachee, “What could I do next time to be a better coach for you?” This can set the stage for reflection, learning, and growth in coaching skills.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a critical norm for peer coaching success. Because many peer coaching programs take place with employees, participants may know each other previously; may work with each other currently; and may know their peers’ co-workers, bosses, direct reports, and clients. There is an inherent vulnerability in being coached—peer coaches must be able to trust that other participants will keep confidential the thoughts, feelings, and challenges they candidly share.

Peer Learning Circles

Developed by Ernie Turner of Learning in Motion, peer learning circles are groups of five to six people who gather to use Turner’s six-step structure for peer learning. Each six-step process takes about 45-60 minutes, during which one participant volunteers to be the coachee (sometimes called the “challenge owner”), and another agrees to be the timekeeper. A trained facilitator supports the group as the individuals learn the method, participating in the group to model the steps. Over time, as an intact group meets repeatedly and becomes more familiar with the approach, the members may no longer require a trained facilitator.

Step	Time	Action
Rules of engagement	1-3 min.	Group members introduce themselves, as needed, and establish ground rules (such as confidentiality).
Presentation	5 min.	The coachee describes the challenge she would like to solve, ending with a focus question (rather than a statement) that is her challenge—for example, “What can I do to improve my ability to manage my team?” as opposed to “I need help managing my team.”
Silence, reflection, and sharing	10 min.	All group members, including the coachee, write down questions on index cards. Questions are open-ended and framed as “I” statements—for example, “What is keeping me from moving forward?” The facilitator reminds participants not to give recommendations or advice or make statements disguised as questions. Next, the coachee reads her questions aloud, followed by all participants who do the same. During this time, no one answers or discusses the questions. The coachee can take notes to identify questions to follow up on later. Once everyone has read the questions, participants give the index cards to the coachee for reflection or follow-up. Optionally, the group may choose to complete a second round of silence, reflection, and sharing to allow more questions to surface.
Offers, requests, next steps	10-15 min.	Group members offer ideas or assistance (called <i>offers</i>) for the coachee’s consideration. For example, “Write in a journal every day on the questions that came up today,” or “I’m happy to meet with you to share my own experience with a similar challenge.” They write these on index cards, and the coachee writes any specific requests for her peers’ assistance, such as asking for recommendations of relevant books, articles, or practices. Group members give the index cards to the coachee, who reads them aloud without elaboration. The coachee then reads her requests to the group members.
Feedback	5 min.	The coachee shares how the peer coaching helped her.
Takeaways	5-10 min.	Participants silently reflect on and write about the learning they gained from the process, such as insights, awareness, resonance, questions, or any follow-on actions they would like to take. They may choose to share this with the group.

—Cathy Raines, Coaching and Leadership Specialist, Foreign Service Institute

Program coordinators, particularly if present for group meetings as facilitators, must also be clear about confidentiality and how this relates to their unique role in supporting the cohort.

Defining Success

Part of a peer coaching pair's or group's start-up should include a discussion on expectations, hopes, and fears: What do the participants expect from the experience? What is the best outcome they are hoping for? What is the worst? This candid conversation can also inform the pair's or group's agreement on what success looks like, both at the individual level as well as collectively.

Schedule Periodic Check-Ins

Establishing a schedule of check-ins can aid the peer coaching process. At various points—such as after the first, third, and seventh coaching sessions—peer coaches can check in with each other and with the program coordinator and share how the experience is going. For peer coaching groups, the facilitator may lead this, or the group can self-manage the process using a set of sample questions to start the discussion.

Check-ins give participants a structure around which to reflect, share what is working, and surface any issues or problems with the process, relationships, or overall experience. This takes the onus off any one participant for bringing up issues or problems. It also normalizes the process of reflection, as well as sharing their own perspective. Participants then have the opportunity to address any issues and make adjustments to improve the experience for everyone. From an organization perspective, the periodic check-ins can provide data on the impact of the peer coaching program.

In one peer coaching initiative within a government agency, the program coordinator holds quarterly calls for all participating peer coach pairs to reflect and share how they are progressing in terms of their own goals as well as their coaching skills. They likewise use the call to deepen their coaching skills, practice with each other, and gather feedback.

Troika Consulting

Liberating Structures are open-source facilitation techniques that aim to unleash and involve everyone in a group. One technique is called Troika Consulting, which is an approach you can use in a peer coaching group.

The recommended number of participants in a Troika Consulting group is three, but it has been used with four or five people. A group of six could be split into two groups of three. Arrange chairs in a small circle, without a table, with knee-to-knee seating recommended.

In each round, one participant is the client, and the others are consultants. Everyone has an equal opportunity to receive and give input on a self-identified challenge or issue. Each participant reflects on the questions “What is your challenge?” and “What kind of help do you need?”

At the start of each round, the client shares his challenge (one to two minutes). The consultants ask the client clarifying questions (one to two minutes). The client then turns around, putting his back to the consultants. The consultants generate ideas, suggestions, share their experience, and provide information. They talk about the client in the third person, as if he is not present. The client listens and may take notes, if desired. This process takes five to seven minutes. The client then turns around and shares what was most valuable about the experience, including any new insights or chosen action steps, if applicable (one to two minutes). The group then repeats the process with a new client.

This approach exposes the clients to a broad range of perspectives, suggestions, and information in a short amount of time. The brief timing may also afford more group members the opportunity to share their challenge in a single meeting. Since this is more of an advice-giving approach than a nondirective coaching approach, there may be fewer insights around the client's reflection and more takeaways related to the information and ideas that consultants shared.

Coordinate On-Ramps and Off-Ramps

Structuring the peer coaching program with scheduled on- and off-ramps—that is, opportunities to join or exit the program—may enable success. For example, although participants may certainly leave the program earlier than the scheduled off-ramps if there are problems, these give participants a clear sense of the commitment length they are making to the peer coaching experience. Knowing it is for a finite period rather than in perpetuity may lead individuals to commit to peer coaching.

Scheduled on-ramp times may be at the beginning of a quarter, for example. Or, when using peer coaching after a specific training program, request that interested participants sign up within a week of the training course.

Scheduled off-ramps enable participants to exit the group gracefully if it is no longer serving their needs. Without a structure like this, peer coaches may feel a sense of obligation to the group or guilt at leaving and a desire to avoid conflict, or they may not feel comfortable voicing what isn't working for them. This process facilitates healthy transitions within the group. The length of time between on- and off-ramps will depend on the goals, structure, and context of the group coaching pairs or cohorts.

Facilitate Closure and Measure Success

As the peer coaching engagement wraps up, provide the pair or group with a structure to help them end well: to acknowledge progress toward their individual goals, celebrate their enhanced coaching skills, appreciate each other, identify gaps or the next development edge, brainstorm sources of ongoing support, and say goodbye to the experience. This structure may take the form of a set of questions that participants can use to self-facilitate the final meeting or the facilitator guiding the group in a final meeting to discuss and explore these themes.

End-of-program evaluations assist the organization in measuring impact. If possible, also conduct a post-program evaluation, such as six months later. This can provide an enhanced perspective on the impact of the peer coaching. What you measure is directly related to the initial motivation for offering peer coaching in the first place. This is why it is important to establish a

foundation for the program and have a full grasp at the beginning why your organization wants peer coaching.

In addition to participants' self-evaluation, solicit input from the participants' managers, peers, direct reports, customers, or other stakeholders. Executive coach Goldsmith recommends administering a short stakeholder survey before and after the peer coaching experience to obtain these individuals' perspective on how the participants have made progress toward their goals. Measuring impact this way has the added benefit of involving stakeholders, who otherwise may not be aware of an individual's development efforts.

Benefits

Peer coaching has potential benefits to peer coaches—both as they give and receive coaching—and the organization.

Individual Benefits

Like any recipient of good coaching, peer coaches may achieve greater clarity and self-awareness through this experience. It may give them access to other perspectives, insights, and information or support them in shifting behaviors and mindsets, setting and achieving goals, and enhancing performance and engagement. Peer coaching can provide accountability, encouragement, and support—all of which enhance accomplishing professional and personal development goals.

Peer coaching participants may also feel less isolated. In a 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article, the U.S. surgeon general identified loneliness at work as a growing health epidemic. Individuals taking part in peer coaching have the experience of contributing to and benefiting from a network of support. They can develop collaborative and positive working relationships with fellow employees that they otherwise may not have developed.

There are also benefits to giving advice. Chief among them is developing coaching skills, including active listening, how to ask questions, and how to assist someone in discovering his own answer rather than giving advice or direct guidance. Being a coach helps individuals

enhance their leadership capabilities. For organizations seeking to promote a coaching culture, this hands-on experience can be invaluable. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation reports that “peer coaching produces more effective managers who are better coaches, and that leads to improved individual and organizational performance.”

Organizational Benefits

Like other forms of coaching, peer coaching can be a way of developing the workforce. By using internal resources instead of hiring external professional coaches, organizations can save significant financial resources. This may enable them to expand access. Peer coaching also can be a way to democratize coaching. In this way, more people can experience and receive assistance via coaching. This doesn't need to be a pricey investment for only certain employees—typically senior leaders and high potentials.

Peer coaching likewise can contribute to a positive organizational culture change. Experiencing peer coaching, both on the giving and receiving end, can shift the way employees see themselves and how they see their colleagues. Receiving support in finding solutions and helping someone else have a breakthrough without telling the individual what to do gives participants a strong sense of the power of coaching. Based on their positive experience and their practice applying coaching skills, they are able to use coaching approaches in the wider organization.

Feingold, who runs peer coaching programs in the federal government, remarks that program participants often see peer coaching as “one of the biggest cultural transformers,” something that could change the organization's culture in desired ways. “Peer coaching is people helping people, through conversations. Conversations are what create culture.”

Those conversations can also assist in breaking down silos by linking people from disparate parts of the organization to collaborate in ways they otherwise would not. It enables knowledge sharing and cross-functional collaboration.

And the all-important employee engagement challenge can be helped through peer coaching. A 2016 Gallup

study found that 67 percent of U.S. employees are disengaged at work, which research suggests can be costly in terms of productivity, customer service ratings, safety incidents, absenteeism, and profitability. According to CEB (now Gartner) research, peers—not managers—deliver 36 percent of the most important drivers of employee engagement. The research reveals that only 7 percent of organizations include peer-to-peer interactions as part of their engagement initiatives.

Individuals taking part in peer coaching have the experience of contributing to and benefiting from a network of support.

Peer coaching may be particularly relevant in increasing engagement for Millennial workers. Microsoft, which uses peer coaching in its high-potential and college-hire programs, has found it effective with the Millennial age group. Shannon Wallis, who ran the high-potential program in 2010-2011, said, “Peer coaching works particularly well for the millennial generation. ... Structured peer coaching ... ensures learning and feedback beyond specific educational events and gives participants an opportunity to share their Microsoft work and career experience in a way that is not afforded by a manager/subordinate relationship.”

Challenges and Pitfalls

While peer coaching has many potential benefits, there are also challenges to smoothly implementing peer coaching programs.

Keeping momentum. It can be difficult to maintain regular meetings and keep momentum when group members cancel because of day-to-day job demands. If a group

doesn't meet regularly, particularly in its early stages, it can be difficult to establish momentum and the safe space that is conducive to peer coaching. While some groups choose to cancel or postpone a meeting until all group members can be present, others take the approach that 100 percent attendance is unrealistic. Instead, they establish an agreed-upon number of attendees that will constitute a quorum. It may be better to proceed with 75 percent of the members in attendance than let another month go by without a group meeting.

Lack of coaching skills. In a peer coaching environment, none of the participants is a professional coach, and many will be new to coaching. A measure of grace and patience for all involved will be helpful to the group process. However, if after the initial learning curve phase, one or more peer coaches regularly gives directive advice instead of coaching, this can be demoralizing to the coachees and counter-productive to the program's aims.

Establish an agreement at the start about how the group will handle a situation in which a peer coach repeatedly gives advice. This could be handled with humor, with an agreed-upon hand signal or code word, or via feedback at the session's end. The group will also have an opportunity to assess and discuss this through periodic check-ins and reach out to the program coordinator for additional training support on coaching skills, if needed.

Uneven commitment levels. Participants who are habitually late to meetings, do not attend consistently, or appear less engaged during the meetings can affect the other group members. In cases like this, the program coordinator may reach out to a seemingly disengaged peer coach to inquire—even using a coaching approach—about what may be going on and to explore together potential options. In cases like this, the structure of regularly scheduled check-ins as well as on- and off-ramps will help surface issues and provide a graceful exit, if it is determined this is best for all involved.

Peer Coaching or Outside Coach?

There are no hard-and-fast rules about when peer coaching is ideal or when an external coach is more appropriate. Consider these questions to help you determine which type of coaching to pursue.

- **What is the coachee's potential coaching topic or area for development?** Would support from a peer or group of peers who deeply understand the context further support this development? Or would the coachee benefit from working with an external coach who can bring in outside perspectives gained from working with a range of people at different organizations?
- **What is the coachee's comfort level with sharing a challenge with a peer or group of peers from within the organization?** Some individuals may not wish to divulge to others the details of their development.
- **What is the coachee's comfort level with working with an outside coach?** Some people are more open to working with an individual from inside the organization than with a professional coach.
- **What options are available, affordable, and timely?** Peer coaching may be a good option for a particular individual, but if a peer coaching group isn't available for the individual to join or a peer coaching partner to pair with in a timely manner, an external coach may be a more practical choice. On the other hand, if budget constraints make it difficult to bring in an external coach, peer coaching may ensure that the coachee receives the needed support.
- **How flexible is the coachee's schedule?** A professional external coach is typically available to meet at times convenient for the coachee, working around the individual's schedule and constraints. If the coachee needs to reschedule, an external coach is usually flexible. In peer coaching, because all participants are equals, they agree on a mutually convenient time to meet. If the coachee has an extremely full and demanding schedule or one that changes unpredictably, peer coaching may not work as well.

A pair's coaching relationship doesn't seem to work. As with mentoring or professional coaching, there may be times when the peer coaching match doesn't work well. This can be due to a lack of chemistry or an inability to establish rapport and trust. Similar to a situation involving uneven commitment levels, the program coordinator has a role to play in listening to the affected peer coaches' perspectives and exploring solutions. However, if the pair has met multiple times and the two are no longer willing to continue building a relationship, they may be better off being matched with new partners. As in the example above, the structure of regularly scheduled check-ins as well as on- and off-ramps provides helpful scaffolding.

Peer coaching offers a buffet of options that you can customize to your taste.

Try Out Peer Coaching

If you are intrigued by peer coaching but aren't ready to launch a full program in your organization, consider these options for testing the waters.

Personal Participation

Experience peer coaching firsthand. Ask a colleague—or a fellow HR practitioner from another organization—to form a peer coaching pair or start a group to coach each other over a certain time period. Your experience will inform not just the design of your future program but also the way you market and speak about it with potential participants and sponsors.

Incorporate It Into Other Programs

Your organization may have ongoing training programs or learning experiences in the pipeline that you could enhance by including a peer coaching exercise. In

consultation with the training design and delivery team, you may identify topics or learning opportunities that lend themselves well to peer coaching. It could be as simple as matching up training participants to listen to each other discuss how the training topic relates to their real-life work challenges and then brainstorm together ways to address it. It could involve forming small groups of participants to coach each other once during the training program or multiple times (for example, coming together in the beginning and toward the end of the training course, especially if it spans multiple days). Observing these interactions or seeking out specific feedback from participants and trainers on this component will give you data on how peer coaching could work in your organization.

Add a Peer Coaching Circle After Training

Adding a peer coaching experience as a follow-on to an upcoming training program is another way to test it out. Research from *Public Personnel Management* suggests that providing weekly coaching as a follow-on to training in management skills leads to an increase in productivity by as much as 88 percent. Using peer coaching in place of external coaching can be a more affordable and sustainable way to support productivity increases like this. This can be done on a limited basis, say with one cohort from an existing training program, to test out the concept and see how participants respond and benefit and what issues arise.

Introduce It Through Lunch & Learns

To give your organization a taste of peer coaching, you may offer informal learning opportunities—such as a brown-bag lunchtime learning session—on the topic. This could include a brief overview of peer coaching approaches and skills, an opportunity to practice, and a time of reflection and feedback on what it was like. Participants could take away a one-page resource on conversation starters and questions that they could try out in their day-to-day interactions. You could offer a workshop like this to the organization at large, to a particular department or division, or to a specific team for whom it would be particularly relevant.

Use a Peer-Based Approach to Learning

Rather than sending one person from a business unit to a training course or workshop with instructions to return and share the learning with the colleagues who did not attend, take a peer-based approach. Send at least two people to a professional development opportunity, with the expectation that, upon return, they will peer coach each other to apply the learning. As they make progress toward implementing what they have learned, the two peer coaches may then peer coach others in the business unit on the same topic.

Conclusion

Peer coaching offers a buffet of options that you can customize to your taste. As such, there is likely one that is right for your organization and the learners you support.

The process of partnering with equals for listening, encouragement, support, new perspectives, and accountability can bring about many benefits for the individuals giving and receiving peer coaching as well as for the organization. Peer coaching can be a highly effective and affordable way to expand access to coaching to learners who otherwise may not receive this form of development. While there are some potential pitfalls to be aware of, there are several ways to establish peer coaching to succeed and proactively address challenges that may arise.

Peer coaching can be a low-cost, high-impact, customizable way to promote professional and personal growth, develop leaders, and influence positive organizational culture change. If organizations are not ready to launch a full peer coaching program, test it out by incorporating elements into existing programs to see whether peer coaching would be a good match to meet organizational goals.

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Sample Check-In Questions for Peer Coaches (Part 1)

Use these check-in questions with peer coaching pairs or peer coaching groups. Ask each peer coach to answer the questions individually and bring their responses to a peer coaching meeting for discussion with the other participants. An external facilitator or peer coaching coordinator may guide this conversation, or the group may self-facilitate, with one participant designated to assist with the facilitation. The discussion should lead to a set of agreed-upon recommendations for addressing any issues that have emerged. Note: These questions are adaptable to the pair's or group's needs.

Part 1

Rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5, where: **1** = strongly disagree **2** = disagree **3** = neutral **4** = agree **5** = strongly agree

The logistics of our peer coaching meetings (e.g., timing, frequency, duration, structure, content of meetings) are working well for me. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

Our agreed-upon norms are effective, complete (nothing missing), and working well for me. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

Confidentiality is respected in our peer coaching group/pair. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

The level of participation and engagement of my peer coaching partner(s) is excellent. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

I have the peer coaching skills I need to participate effectively in the program. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

Receiving peer coaching is helping me develop professionally and achieve better results. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

The level and quality of support provided by the peer coaching coordinator meets my needs. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

Participating in peer coaching is worth my time and energy. 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

I would like to further develop these peer coaching skills: _____



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