

Untapped World of Peer Coaching

Becton, Dickinson, and Company creates a successful coaching culture.

By Joseph Toto

THERE IS OFTEN an untapped wealth of coaching expertise already residing within any organization. As a workplace learning and performance professional, your job is to find it.

For peer coaching to thrive in any organization, it is critically important to have a coaching culture in place. One model is the culture at Becton, Dickinson, and Company. The global medical device and technology company cites strengthening organizational and leadership capabilities to compete in the ever-changing healthcare environment as one of its top three strategic objectives.

At BD, coaching culture:

- places high expectations on corporate leaders to model coaching as a productive and effective way to improve performance
- expects leaders at all management levels to be coached as well as to coach the development of others
- establishes coaching as a norm. Leaders must view coaching and development as one of the key responsibilities and deliverables in their roles.

A frequently asked question about peer coaching is how it relates to other types of coaching that take place within an organization, such as performance, career, and developmental coaching. The answer is that peer coaching, though different in its range of application and topical focus, fundamentally supports and enhances other forms of constructive coaching practices within an organization. Peer coaching thrives in an organization when other types of constructive coaching are effectively and frequently practiced.

One way to introduce peer coaching into an organization is to include it in existing leadership development programs. This particular tactic was successful when BD's Chief Learning Officer and Vice President of Talent Management, Edward Betof, used it in the formative stages of BD University five years ago. In addition, peer coaching was a key component in the company's master strategy to use leaders as teachers to build, sustain, and grow BD University. (See "Leaders as Teachers" article in March 2004 issue of *T+D*.)

Applications

As indicated earlier, peer coaching can be applied in a variety of circumstances within an organization. At BD, peer coaching is embedded in both its regular and recently launched advanced leadership development programs. Validation of peer coaching's success has come in the form of positive feedback from BD's 1,500 leaders worldwide. That feedback stresses the fact that when peer coaching is practiced within these leadership development programs, the participants gain invaluable insights into the topic attached to the coaching, while the coach gains confidence in her abilities.

Some of the topics that are used for peer coaching sessions within BD's leadership programs include

- ambiguity as a change agent
- job challenges as a catalyst for development
- emotional intelligence
- discipline of execution
- how to influence others
- learning agility
- action learning for leadership skills development.

Another reason to expose leaders to peer coaching within their program experience is to demonstrate the value of peer coaching and to practice the skills outside of the program structure. Often, program participants use peer coaching outside of the program with the same individuals that they coached inside the program through follow-up lunch sessions, periodic meetings, or as-needed calls or conferences. Other times, participants apply the peer coaching techniques to a variety of different circumstances and individuals, and in doing so, they broaden the visibility of value of peer coaching well beyond the original program parameters.

Finally, by placing peer coaching into existing development programs, companies stress business strategies, such as building organizational capabilities and workplace development. Participants readily see that use of peer coaching is aligned with their business imperatives.

Necessary skills

Successful peer coaching is dependent upon how the coach and participants approach the process and what techniques are used. An effective peer coach should believe in helping, supporting, and guiding a peer and not appear as someone who has all the answers or is eager to tell others what to do. Participants to be coached should be open-minded, interested, and appreciative of peer learning, not defensive, closed-minded, or preoccupied with their reputations. When peer coaching is approached effectively, there is a certain vulnerability for both parties—the coach is reaching into his experience

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and expertise to help an employee, and the participant is being honest about weaknesses that need to be strengthened.

Before the first round of peer coaching in BD's leadership programs, officials take a few minutes to give participants a short primer on the basic skills needed to be an effective peer coach. The basic skills that are highlighted include listening, facilitative questioning, sharing personal experiences, and supportive challenge or acceptance.

Listening and paying attention without interruption is critical for the coach to understand participants' issues and points of view. Listening will lead the coach to ask facilitative questions, which are open-ended and require more in-depth answers. This will help uncover the participant's positions, beliefs, and possible solutions.

Sharing one's personal trials and tribulations and expertise can be valuable for the coach. It can help the participant gain a better understanding of the issues discussed.

Finally, skilled coaches must be prepared to challenge any assumptions or approaches displayed by the participant that might prove to be counterproductive if enacted. In BD's culture, which highlights respect for the individual as one of its core values, participants in peer coaching are encouraged to act with courage, but always in a supportive and respectful manner.

In addition to the preparatory primer on peer coaching provided in BD's leadership programs, all BD leaders are expected to attend "Coaching for Performance Development," which provides them with more knowledge and skills practice—all of which is applicable when specifically engaged in peer coaching.

Success at BD

During the "Dealing with Ambiguity" session that is part of BD's leadership development program, peer coaching played an important role in learning. When the concept—how leaders need to effectively deal with ambiguity if they are change leaders—is presented, participants are asked to examine their own strengths

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and weaknesses against a set of behaviors that help them deal effectively with ambiguity (enablers) and that get in the way (restrainers). They pick one behavior they are willing to present as the subject matter for their peer coaching session with two other participants.

Once the participants become familiar with the identity and meaning of the clusters and sub-bullets, they privately select three enabler clusters or sub-bullets that represent their strengths. Next, they select two restrainer clusters or sub-bullets that may be a problem for them in dealing with ambiguity. Participants now are prepared to select one enabler or restrainer that has personal relevance for them and assemble into groups of three for peer coaching. In the groups, each person presents an issue for approximately 20 minutes, describes his initial thinking about how to deal with it, and receives coaching.

The participants select the location for their discussion if they leave the main meeting room. When the participants return to the full session at an agreed upon time, the program facilitators extract both general reactions to the peer coach-

ing experience and specific learning that might be valuable to the group.

BD has found many examples of how peer coaching is practiced outside the program. One method asks leaders to get together periodically with their coaches from the earlier leadership program or as needed when leaders reach out to either their previous coach or to another associate receptive to the notion of peer coaching. They use peer coaching to discuss an issue they face in running their business or implementing their leadership development or action learning plans.

Peer coaching can be a masterful supplement and reinforcement of a coaching climate. By incorporating it into existing internal leadership development programs as well as in frequent and self-organized sessions outside of the structured settings, real development can happen. **TD**

Joseph Toto is director of leadership development and learning at Becton, Dickinson, and Company; Joseph_Toto@bd.com.