



Peer coaching as a strategy to increase learning and development in organisational life – a perspective

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Abstract

This article draws on the researcher's collective research and experience in using peer coaching as a strategy to improve professional and performance learning over the past 20+ years. This work has influenced training approaches to learning in the health industry as well as in corporate leadership training. By exploring the concept through research, practical applications in academic and industry settings and advances in the neuroscience of learning, this article bridges several concepts to encourage leaders, organisational development staff and university faculty to consider broader and more cost effective ways of leveraging learning and transfer of learning in to their workplace.

Key Words: Peer Coaching, Organisational Learning, Training and Development

Introduction

Organisations as well as individuals make substantial investments in training in order to ready themselves for the workforce. Individuals do this to remain competent and competitive in the employment marketplace. Organisations do it to maintain or increase productivity, deliver high quality outcomes and to sustain the business. An important question to ask however, is “how much of this training and development actually gets translated back in to the workplace?” One estimate is that transfer is as low as 15 percent (Cromwell & Kolb, 2004). Other questions that are often asked are whether the return on investment is worth the cost of training and whether individuals and organisations more productive, engaged and innovative as a result of this training and education.

We often hear that the most valuable resources an organisation has are its human resources. But the question remains around whether organisations and individuals really capitalise on this resource, particularly from an organisational learning perspective. One way of increasing the return on investment is to tap in to the learning potential of workplace peers.

Work peers can be a good resource for learning if it is leveraged properly and strategically. Organisations and individuals can create a culture of continuous improvement and learning by rewarding and motivating staff and peers to excel in their job (Balle', Morgan, & Sobek, 2016). A good example was the author's first professional job as a physical therapist. New graduates want to build their skills and competence quickly. The quest to learn to do your job at the best of your ability is a huge motivator for newly graduated staff. The author worked alongside two other individuals who had graduated from university within one year of one another. Everyone was more or less at the same stage of professional development and clinical reasoning (Higgs & Jones, 2000) and keen to grow and develop their skills. As a result, this triad of three peers was an extraordinary motivating and creative time for learning as everyone worked cooperatively to improve their knowledge and practice. Management allowed this to

happen and supported the time spent between peers on coaching and reflection-in-action and reflection-about-action (Schon, 1991). They saw this as a valuable learning and development process for the three novice physical therapists as they worked together to solve work place challenges.

In any medium sized organisation individuals possess skills and competencies at varying degrees depending on their tenure and practice within the work place. This knowledge can be leveraged effectively to help others who need to develop their performance capabilities to a higher level in a safe, non-threatening and collegial environment. This is where peer coaching becomes highly effective.

While it may seem very obvious that peers should support peers, it often doesn't happen naturally. A range of obstacles in organisational life prevent peer support from occurring. First of all, the organisation has to support learning by enabling individuals to take some risks and lowering blame when things don't turn out exactly as planned. This is not to say that we should not manage risk, but rather we should support individuals who make mistakes as they build their professional capabilities and competencies within the organisation. Everybody has to learn new things in their job and new graduates and individuals undertaking new tasks in the workplace are particularly prone to making errors in judgement and reasoning. For example, novices are slower, represent problems at a more superficial level and are less aware of errors than their more experienced counterparts (Glaser & Chi, 1988).

There is much evidence suggesting that an organisational learning culture that focusses excessively on efficiency and reduces the importance of learning will stymie potential for creativity and productivity (Balle' et al., 2016; Edmondson, 2008; Goleman, 2000). Organisations and individuals suffer if they do not encourage problem solving, have rigid systems in place and only have unilateral feedback practices from top to bottom. Employees and learners in these scenarios will do their best to 'appear' as though they have their skill set under control. However, in reality these individuals will often struggle to remain engaged in their work. Take for example the newly promoted manager, a new employee, a new graduate from university or a student on a work integrated learning experience. Every one of these individuals wants to demonstrate to others that they are the right candidate for the job or capable of doing the work that is required of them. To disclose to others, however, that one may be feeling overwhelmed by one's job or unsure of what to do can be difficult. This is punctuated further if individuals sense that these type of displays of vulnerability are looked down upon in an organisation, particularly if they are being evaluated as part of a probation system, have a line manager with unrealistic expectations or they need to pass a university practicum. These contexts may not be the safest places to grow professionally and can limit learning. This limitation on learning occurs because of the heightened defences that are put in to place by the worker. These defences, activated by parts of the brain's limbic system, block creativity and the potential for learning (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Rock & Schwartz, 2006).

As Barbara Fredrickson, a prominent American psychologist, notes, this blockage stems from having twice as many negative emotions as positive ones (Fredrickson, 2001). Negative emotions protect us from danger which is why they exert a more powerful influence on our behaviour. To unleash the learning potential of employees, businesses have to develop systems that minimise negative emotions in the workplace such as fear, shame, guilt or blame and increase more positive states such as empathy, action, curiosity, hope and interest. These positive emotions unleash the potential of working memory and tap in to the core learning centres of the brain where exploration of performance, learning and transfer can occur more effectively.

The psychodynamics of learning therefore require us to rethink traditional accountability systems within a business unit or an apprenticeship/fieldwork programme. Most systems have the manager/supervisor¹ holding their direct reports accountable for the outcomes associated with their jobs.

¹ Manager is used in this context to describe a work place individual responsible for the performance of paid employees. Supervisor refers to an individual within an organisation who is responsible for the performance of a student or apprentice in a work integrated learning placement or practicum.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with this line of accountability as the manager/supervisor is ultimately accountable for what occurs within their unit, it does create problems for ongoing learning if the learning is tied to performance appraisal and management, punishments and rewards. The power difference between a manager/supervisor and an employee/apprentice can prevent the latter from being completely open about their performance. Differences in power may cause the employee/apprentice to withhold information about their performance to their manager/supervisor in order to portray a better position. This influences learning negatively.

Managers and supervisors need to be good coaches to their staff and apprentices if they are to help them learn. For many individuals in these leadership positions, however, they lack the time, the attitude or the ability to perform this role effectively (Goleman, 2000; R. Ladyshevsky, 2010). Hence, peer coaching is a great strategy that supports the manager/supervisor in developing his/her employees/apprentices. The learning benefits that occur in peer coaching arise because the collegial peer-based nature of the relationship is non-threatening. Confiding in a peer coach that we are unsure of how to deal with something in our work can feel safer than approaching a manager or supervisor. After some discussion if neither peer can solve the problem then it truly is a difficult problem and the pair can feel much more confident and secure approaching their manager/supervisor for answers. It also keeps the time of the manager or supervisor protected for resolving those 'difficult' problems with his or her staff or apprentices.

In the author's own research it is clear that peer coaching can enhance the professional development and performance of individuals across a broad range of sectors. Among physical therapy students in the educational setting, those who experienced peer coaching did significantly better on a test of their clinical reasoning than those who did not receive peer coaching (R. Ladyshevsky, 1999, 2004). These same physical therapy students also completed a simulated patient assessment. Those who completed this task as peer coaches significantly outperformed those who undertook the task independently. The peer coaching pair also experienced less anxiety and were more confident during the simulation (R. Ladyshevsky, 1999, 2004).

In the university setting, academic programme coordinators used peer coaching to increase their reflective practice and transfer of training as part of a leadership development programme. Building influence, communicating more effectively and managing upwards were developed from participation in the programme and aided through the use of peer coaching (R. Ladyshevsky & Flavell, 2011). A two year leadership programme in a large government agency used peer coaching to support participants in leveraging their learning in to practice. The results of the programme and peer coaching demonstrated overall gains in assessed leadership capability through three 360 degree leadership measurements (Ladyshevsky, 2007). The effectiveness of using peer coaching to enhance learning and professional development, productivity and performance is clear.

Peer coaching works because the individuals in the relationship share equal status. They do not supervise one another, nor are they formally accountable to one another. As long as a trusting and confidential relationship can be developed, with appropriate coaching techniques used to facilitate learning, the inclination to engage in conversations about improving performance increases. This sense of safety creates a positive emotional state and facilitates the neural mechanisms that support learning. These neural mechanisms have been described in the SCARF model (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). The five elements of this model are shown in Table 1 and how each element has the potential to influence learning in peer coaching is described. Collectively these five elements create a more positive emotional state and broaden and build the individual's capacity to learn and work on improving performance (Fredrickson, 2001). Innovation and creativity are likely outcomes.

For peer coaching to work, managers and supervisors have to give permission to their staff and students to engage in this type of learning activity. The organisation has to support this methodology as it is time away from 'production', but will certainly increase 'efficiency' over time (Edmondson, 2008).

Managers and supervisors have to sell the idea that learning and peer coaching will increase the productivity and performance of the organisation and increase the learning outcomes for the students.

Element	Impact
Status	The equal status of the peer relationship removes authority from the learning equation and enables more open disclosure about learning. Learners do not fear reprisal or consequences like they may with a supervisor because status is equal.
Certainty	The trust and confidence that is created over time between peers provides certainty that the learning relationship is secure and confidential. There are no surprises as it is a safe place to learn.
Autonomy	The coachee determines what they want to improve or address in regards to their performance. This gives them autonomy over their work role and practice. This sense of control and self-determination is liberating.
Relatedness	The ongoing relationship builds positive emotions between the parties. Laughter, trust, hope, excitement create positive energy for learning and expand action tendencies for learning.
Fairness	Provided the non-evaluative feedback that is shared between the partners is honest and both parties are acting with integrity, even difficult conversations about learning and performance do not detract from the relationship because of the strong psychological contract that is in place. The relationship is seen as honest and fair in the communication that is exchanged.

Table 1: Peer Coaching and the SCARF Model

Implementing the peer coaching strategy is fairly straightforward but does require some training for the participants to gain maximum value from the experience. First, peers select an individual which they would like to work with in their organisation. The person they select does not have to be an expert. In fact, there are benefits to working with a peer coach at a similar level to oneself because of the way in which problems are analysed and resolved. Experts use a forward reasoning process because they have worked on the problem many times before whereas those with less experience use a background reasoning process because they have limited experience with the problem. These differences in reasoning between experts and novices were noted in early studies of chess players and physicists and have been demonstrated subsequently in numerous other studies in other disciplines (Chase & Simon, 1973a, 1973b; Chi, Feltovich, & Glaser, 1981; de Groot, 1965; Larkin, McDermott, Simon, & Simon, 1980). Because experts see problems in different ways from novices they may not necessarily be the best coaches. Further, experts may not be readily accessible in workplaces so peer coaching provides an excellent strategy for individuals to engage in workplace learning and problem solving.

Some basic rules are needed to set up the peer coaching partnership. First, the partners need to establish the relationship by getting to know each other a bit better, building trust and talking about confidentiality and self-disclosure. Second, each party needs to identify what they are struggling with at work or wanting to learn or improve. They should also have an idea of their goal or target. Third, coaches need some training on how to ask non-evaluative questions to ensure the five elements of the SCARF model remain intact. Non-evaluative questions get the coachee to think about their experiences which is

an important part of reflective practice and competency development (Schon, 1991). Good questions make the coachee think more laterally about their practice, to consider new evidence, and to think about their thinking - a process called meta-cognitive thinking – which is important in trying to understand and solve more complex and novel situations (Flavell, 1979; R. Ladyshevsky & Ryan, 2006). The coach supports the coachee to try new things, consider different perspectives, to come back and talk about it after they have tried things out in practice. This approach is modelled on experiential learning principles which requires that individuals reflect on their experience, make conclusions about the experience, and then re-apply this learning to build performance (Honey & Mumford, 1987; Kolb, 1984).

Asking non-evaluative questions is the most challenging part of the peer coaching process. The natural tendency is to want to help or provide advice. But this changes status and makes the coach an evaluator and consultant. As a result, the relationship starts to suffer because of changes to the dimensions in the SCARF model. Rather than telling individuals what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ about their practice and what they ‘should’ do, non-evaluative questions start with the words who, what, where, when and how. Starting questions with these words moves the coachee through the experiential learning cycle and increases the likelihood of knowledge transformation and metacognitive insight. So for example, a coach who observes their coachee managing a difficult meeting with strong personalities would not ‘tell’ them what they did wrong and what they should have done. Instead, they would ask questions like, “What were the most difficult parts of the meeting to manage?”, “Who are the difficult personalities in the group?” “How could you manage their interruptions more effectively?” “What action will you take place in the next meeting and when?”

Peer coaches do not need to be experts. They just need to be able to ask the right questions to create more deep thinking about the performance quest. More often than not coachees will be able to work through problems themselves and discover their own solutions. The peer coach merely serves as a respected guide, who gains the trust and respect of the peer coachee over time as a result of the positive changes seen in learning and performance. This process is different from mentoring which is often confused with coaching (D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003). Mentoring is very status driven because the mentor is seen as a wise and experienced individual. The mentor adopts the mentee and provides unilateral advice and support in a one way direction from mentor to mentee. This is distinct from peer coaching, which is often reciprocal and driven from the bottom up by the coachees who set the goals and objectives for their development.

The following two case examples provide support for the effectiveness of peer coaching. The first is a leadership development programme in which the author built-in a peer coaching initiative (Ladyshevsky, 2007). The second example was part of a simulation designed to measure differences in performance between when peer coaching was in place and when it wasn’t (R. Ladyshevsky, 1999).

Case Example 1: During the administration of a leadership development contract with a large government transport department, participants worked together as peer coaches to explore their leadership and development. In this example, two participants happened to be contract managers and both had worked for the transport department for 10+ years in different areas. Neither had formally consulted other colleagues about their work practices in their role. The ‘safe’ space created by the programme and the supportive culture of the workplace enabled the two contract managers to meet regularly to discuss their roles and strategies when negotiating major contracts. These discussions were linked to their leadership development. Both were amazed by the amount of learning they received from each other and how they could approach their work differently. They could not believe they let all those years lapse without realising the benefits they could have achieved by working through difficult contract negotiations with one another as peer coaches. Over time, the leadership programme demonstrated a progressive increase in the leadership capabilities of the participants - aided in part by the peer coaching aspect of the programme.

Case Example 2: A simulation was set up to create a standardised problem scenario for novice health care professionals. Novices who worked together to work through the simulation in a peer coaching team significantly outperformed those novices who worked independently on the simulation. The novices who worked in peer coaching pairs also did significantly better on a knowledge test of the simulation. Those novices who worked alone not only performed less well, they scored more poorly on the knowledge test and they expressed significantly more anxiety and less confidence during the simulation in comparison to those in peer coaching partnerships.

Organisations have many of the resources needed to enhance learning and development for its staff at its finger tips. Yet many are ineffective at leveraging this potential. Research by the corporate leadership council, for example, noted that only about a third of employees are effective at peer interaction and only seven percent of organisations focussed on initiatives to improve these interactions to enhance work engagement (Corporate Leadership Council, 2011). They argue that building peer relationships and linking these interactions to success of the work team enables the organisation to use best practice learning approaches in their day to day business operations. Managers have a large role to play here in making this cost-effective learning strategy work. A final example illustrates this point.

Typically, someone is sent on a course to learn something which is important for the business unit. They take the course, come back and implement some of that learning and perhaps transfer some of that knowledge to others in the work group. With a peer based approach to learning, at least two people would be sent on the course and they would come back with a brief to peer coach one another to ensure maximum transfer of the course material. The manager would be a key driver in holding the peers accountable for this learning and transfer as part of the opportunity to gain training. The manager would also set the permission and time for them to work on this as part of their support for peer based learning in the team. With this integration and transfer complete, the two individuals in turn would start to peer coach others who need to integrate this new learning in to their work. Capacity is built across the team more effectively and the benefits of peer based learning, supported at all levels by the management, benefit the group. There is much truth in the saying that two heads are better than one!

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<p>Richard Ladyshevsky is a Professor of Leadership and Management and a Fellow of the Curtin Academy and the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. He has used peer coaching extensively in his own classroom work and in aiding organisations and universities to improve learning outcomes. This paper attempts to bring together in an opinion piece his views on peer coaching.</p>
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