

# Mentoring Coaching and Beyond

## Handout 7 Workplace Coaching (includes mentoring)

### **WORKPLACE COACHING (INCLUDES MENTORING)**

**Based on Chapter 6 of *Workwise: A New Zealand guide to managing workplace relationships*, Pat Rosier, 2003, CUP.**

The phrase 'workplace coaching' usually refers to situations where a person has a coach from outside their workplace. Being such a coach requires knowledge of and experience in organisational systems and, workplace relationships. It is not always necessary to have worked in an area in order to coach someone who does. In this circumstance, however, it is important to always check out assumptions as well as making sure that coach and client have a shared value base in relation to the work of the client.

Workplace coaching is about development and effectiveness but is not to do entirely with meeting the needs of a client. It can be professional development for new managers or for managers who want to develop specific abilities. Here is a list of possible purposes for workplace coaching::

- To provide a confidential place where the person being coached can talk about work concerns.
- To provide support and a sounding board.
- To contribute to the person's understanding and insight of their own motivation, purposes and performance.
- To assist people to develop a repertoire of strategies for dealing constructively with workplace concerns.
- To assist people to make sensible career decisions.
- In some cases, to monitor the employment practices of the employer.

The purposes listed place workplace coaching clearly in the training and professional development budget for many organisations. Sessions are best conducted away from the workplace, for several reasons;

- Freedom from interruptions.
- Privacy.
- The value of a separate reflection space.

Ideally, sessions are paid for by the employer of the person seeking coaching. However payment is arranged, and that must be clear before any sessions begin, the coaching is purely formative undertaking; the coach/supervisor has no structural authority in the person's workplace and no direct influence on their promotion or salary.

There has been limited formal training for this kind of workplace coaching, so who gets to be coach? Mostly people with a broad-based working experience and developed skills in training. Some coaches have management training as well as experience. A few workshops and courses for coaching are beginning to appear and

there will be more as this kind of professional development spreads. Mentoring can have some elements of coaching and there are possibilities to explore in the area of peer coaching, within large organisations or across smaller ones.

## MAJOR ELEMENTS OF WORKPLACE COACHING

### **Confidentiality and ethics**

The content of workplace coaching sessions is of course confidential. Confidentiality regarding the identity of people a coach works with is also necessary. Ethically, the client in a coaching relationship can reveal the fact of the relationship and talk about what goes on in sessions, while the coach cannot use any of the information gained in coaching sessions in any other place.

When a workplace is paying the fee for an external coach they will know of the coaching relationship and may ask the coach to sign a contract with them. Such a contract should specify only the frequency of the sessions, the cost and the confidentiality of any information about the workplace.

Occasionally a workplace will ask for a report of some kind on the coaching. This is a reasonable request if they are paying for the sessions. There must be some clear rules for this for the person being coached to get maximum value from the sessions.

- If the workplace is paying for the sessions they are entitled to a list of the dates and times of sessions on request. (These will be obvious from payment invoices; however, some employers like an annual list.)
- A coach should not discuss any person they have coached on the phone.
- A coach should discuss the content of the coaching only in the presence of the person being coached.
- If a written report is requested it should be provided after consultation with the person being coached and with their prior knowledge of its contents.

A coach is working for the person she or he is coaching and therefore they are entitled to know first anything that might be said arising from sessions. This does not mean that a coach cannot include in a written report comments that the client did not wish to be included, but that the client must know this in advance. If there is strong disagreement the client could add their own views. It is essential that any reporting be both truthful and not contain any surprises for the person being coached. In fact, employers seldom ask for reports.

In most situations the only information the coach has to work with comes from the person they are coaching. There are some risks in this and a coach will always have to exercise judgement in relation to the validity and completeness of the information.

### Scenario 22

Huria was an outside coach/supervisor for Al, who managed 16 staff in a health service provider. After about four sessions she was uneasy about the information she was getting from Al, there were some inconsistencies and she thought there might be some important items left out. She asked Al to bring various documents to the next meeting so they could look at them together.

There were several inconsistencies with what Al had told her and she pointed these out, saying 'It says in this document that this is the case, and I remember you telling me something else in the last session.' The third time this happened Al gathered up all the papers he had brought and said 'I thought you were supposed to support me, not show me up.' The conversation continued like this:

Huria: Yes, it is my job to support and coach you and I can do that best if I have accurate information. I asked you to bring these documents so I could check out my suspicion that I wasn't getting all the information. As soon as I was certain I pointed it out to you.

Al: So what now, do I get a smack on the hand?

H: No I am interested to know more about your reasons for not giving me the full picture, so we can work together on real issues.

A: What if I said I am scared I'm not up to the job, that his promotion was a mistake.

H: Then we could look at the job as a whole, what you can do competently and where you could use more help, some of which I may be able to give you and some of which you might need to find somewhere else. I would help you work out how to do that.

### Comment

Huria had successfully used her perceptions to move the coaching into the real situation. If Al had reacted even more defensively and her unease about the information she was getting increased, Huria would have had to decide whether to confront him further or discontinue the sessions. In this circumstance it is likely that Al would have decided to change coaches.

If coaches become concerned that a person they are coaching is behaving unethically or exploitatively of colleagues or a client group or their employer, the coach should state his or her observations and if necessary discontinue working with them. In an extreme situation the coach might contact an employer, after advising the client they were going to do this.

### **What workplace coaching is not**

There is no place for therapy in workplace coaching. Unlike therapy, coaching does not focus on feeling states, or unpicking the early origins of these, or exploring the unconscious, but rather on thinking and planning. Feeling and thinking are not entirely separable and people will of course have feelings, often strong ones, in coaching sessions.

The boundaries between workplace coaching and therapy are quite clear. The coach's role is to validate and respect the feelings and encourage thinking about what actions need to be taken. If it appears to the coach that there are deeper and/or conflicted emotional issues affecting a client's ability to think and act in work situations, then the possibility of therapy — with a therapist — can be suggested.

### WHO ARE THE CLIENTS?

#### **Paid workers in voluntary organisations**

Voluntary organisations by their very nature are often not experienced or well-informed employers. There may be no-one in the organisation who is able to give regular, informed supervision to a coordinator, manager or director. The person in this role is the paid professional and may know more about employment practices than anyone on the committee or board. Workers in voluntary organisations also may lack colleagues with practical experience and knowledge in fields like community development, working with volunteers, and organisational structures. These organisations usually recognise the need for outside coaching and will pay for it, but not at the highest level of fees.

### **Paid workers in social service areas and business**

Paid workers may be managers or front-line workers. They may seek coaching to assist them to maintain a balance in their lives, to explore challenging issues, to increase their understanding of organisational dynamics, to continue to develop their abilities and thinking, to have a confidential space to 'let off steam', to counter isolation, or to maintain a planned career path. Most often, but not always, people in this group pay for the coaching themselves.

### **People who are self-employed and/or run a small business.**

Clients from this group are often isolated in their work and seek confirmation that they are 'on the right track'. They want to maintain balance in their lives, want a sounding board for their ideas, assistance with time management, prioritising, or any other area of their work.

### COMMON CONCERNS

There are a some recurring concerns that come through in working with people from all three groups:

- time management
- dealing with stress
- managing workloads
- dealing with difficult people
- understanding organisational structures
- maintaining personal integrity
- maintaining balance, both in the workplace and in their life.

These are the main areas in which a coach needs experience, expertise and a wide range of ideas, strategies, and ways of thinking. Coaching is an ongoing exploration of ways that will enable the client to develop in their work situation.

### HOW WORKPLACE COACHING SESSIONS CAN RUN

The client controls the content, by bringing along their concerns, or by working to a pre-determined plan, or a combination of these. Some people like to set up a formal agreement with a written list of goals to be reviewed at a specified time. Here are a couple of sample plans:

#### **Workplace coaching Plan I**

Between the coordinator of a community house in a large city and a supervisor/coach.

Goals (To be reviewed after six months.)

- To learn more about issues affecting community groups, such as:
  - power and powerlessness;
  - dealing with conflict.
- To develop productive strategies for being an employee in a voluntary organisation, with particular emphasis on :
  - presently monthly reports that get a response from the committee;

- communicating with steering committee members.
- To develop a vision for the centre that works for myself as coordinator, for the steering committee, and for the users of the centre.

The following plan was devised with the manager of a specialist group within a large organisation that has headquarters overseas. The client manages a staff of eight, who in turn work with a total of forty technicians.

### **Workplace coaching Plan 2**

#### Goals

- Dealing with presenting issues.
- Sounding board and progress check for:
  - reporting on budget issues;
  - refining employment process for technicians;
  - other means of improving retention of technicians within a limited budget.
- Development of skills in supervising staff, including:
  - planning a supervision session;
  - the scope and coverage of a session - including tasks and professional development;
  - making sure supervision time is worthwhile and of value to the staff member;
  - dealing with non-performance.
- Developing abilities in producing written reports

The final plan was developed with a senior manager in a large institution who had excellent financial and planning skills but felt inadequate dealing with staff issues.

### **Workplace Coaching Plan 3**

#### Goals

- Developing skills in giving direct feedback both positive and negative and setting up processes for change where necessary. This is the first and most important priority.
- To run better meetings, including:
  - dealing with people who dominate;
  - staying with an agenda;
  - people being more positive about attending.
- Planning and running supervision sessions with a particularly challenging staff member who it is difficult to keep on the topic in sessions and avoids looking at areas of work that need to be improved.

### **Coaching sessions**

Sessions may begin with a very general question, inviting the client to say something about current workplace accomplishments and/or concerns. After talking for a few minutes a verbal contract for the session may be developed, for example, 'It looks as though today we could spend the time looking at some ideas for that difficult interview

and doing a check on how your new diary system is working.’ It is not always necessary to say this out loud, especially between people who have worked together for some time.

Identifying the concerns that are most pressing to the client is the key to a session the client will leave with a sense of accomplishment, with ‘good work’ having been done. These concerns are not always what is presented; some reading ‘between the lines’ and of body language, tone of voice and energy levels is needed.

Comments like, ‘It seems to me that a big concern for you right now is getting your paperwork into some kind of system. Am I right about that?’ may help to define a concern that was subterranean in the client’s consciousness but actually underlying the issues they were bringing up. If the response to that comment is, ‘Well, no, I’m pretty much on top of the paperwork right now,’ then a coach should simply move on.

It is not the coach’s role to be ‘right’ in every judgement, but to help the person they are working with to clarify and move forward on the concerns that matter to them. If the coach says, ‘Do you think that a more organised system for paperwork would help you with meeting deadlines (when meeting deadlines is a real issue for the supervisee),’ and the response is, ‘No, the problem is to find the time to do the preparation,’ then the coach should drop the focus on handling paper. No matter what brilliant suggestions they might make the person they are working with is not interested in that approach and is not likely to follow-up on any suggestions that are made.

The coach could shift the focus onto ‘finding time’ and if multiple handling of incoming mail is part of the time problem it could be discussed in terms of making it faster to create more preparation time. In this way the coach is working with the client’s perception of what their concerns are and helping to find ways forward that have meaning and purpose to the client.

Most sessions include the coach doing some or all of the following:

- Listening with attention to what the person is saying;
- Validating their experience, eg, ‘I’m not surprised you were angry, that was a rude response,’ without letting the discussion get bogged down in helpless feelings;
- Reflecting back eg, ‘Are you saying, then, that you find it difficult to say no in that situation, even though you want to’;
- Seeking suggestions, eg ‘What ideas do you have about that?’;
- Making suggestion, eg ‘For some people it works to make a list at the beginning of the day and tick things off. Does this appeal to you?’ It is best to make several suggestions and encourage the client to take from them what is useful for them;
- Referring back to previous successes and building on them, eg, ‘Remember how you prepared your arguments in advance for that management committee meeting about your hours, and kept bringing the discussion back to the point earlier this year? Would a strategy like that be useful in this instance?’;

- Encouraging self-recognition and acknowledgement, eg, 'That is an extremely difficult situation and you handled it about as well as it could be handled. Are you giving yourself credit for that?';
- Initiating a learning opportunity from mistakes and disasters, eg, 'Clearly you would like to have acted differently. What ideas do you have now about what you would rather have done? Do you think you would be able to do that another time? What would you need to be able to?';
- \Encouraging realistic evaluation, rather than catastrophising or self-punishing. eg, ' How much of what happened was outside your influence? What can you do in the situation now? What can you do in the future to prevent this recurring?'

The aim is always for the client, by the end of the session, to have at least one new idea, option or action they can make use of immediately.

### PEER SUPPORT AND COACHING GROUPS

In many workplaces peer supervision and support groups are a useful adjunct to summative supervision, outside coaching and line management. Many people have the communication and analytical abilities to be useful resource people for each other. In this section I explore one way such groups of colleagues could work.

#### **Membership**

Peer groups often form from people who already know each other. They also arise from workshops or training sessions where people from across an organisation who do not often meet get together. Members are usually from a horizontal band across the structure of an organisation; they may have quite different content areas but similar levels of responsibility. It is not appropriate for a person to be in the same group as someone who has supervisory or management responsibility for their work. Membership is always voluntary. It is not desirable for people who work together on a daily basis to be members of the same peer support group.

#### *Example: Group A*

Fia, David, Colleen and Louie are all administrators in a large hospital. They are all responsible for supervising other staff and all have some budget and planning responsibilities, otherwise their work is very different. They first met at a training workshop on forward planning run for staff at all the hospitals in the region. They meet monthly over breakfast, and all get to their work half an hour later on that day, with the agreement of their managers.

Peer groups can also form among people who work in different organisations. Training sessions often provide a way for people to meet other people like-minded enough to form a peer group.

#### *Example: Group B*

Sarah, Ruth and Eileen are all managers of small voluntary organisations, answering to volunteer Boards. They know each other socially and discovered their similar work conditions by accident, at a party. They meet every three or four weeks over a long lunch, which each justifies by the fact that they don't always take a lunch break at all.

No-one checks on their hours of work. Ruth is the only one of the group who has outside supervision/coaching paid for by her employer. Sarah is trying to get this, Eileen feels it would be impossible in her organisation, money is too tight.

Three can be enough members for a peer support group, provided everyone reliably turns up, four is good, five is okay, six is too many.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of a peer group is to provide support and share ideas and strategies relating to workplace issues. The focus for Group A for their first few meetings is on helping each other through the first budgetting and planning round under a new system. By the time the plans are completed they agree they have spent hours less on it because of sharing ideas and ways to complete the (major) task. Group B spent their first four sessions devising a strategy — slightly different for each of them — for bringing to their Boards' attention ways in which they (the Boards) could more effectively support the day-to-day workers, paid and volunteer, in each of their organisation.

### **Structure**

Groups usually meet regularly, often monthly.. As the groups are small, formal facilitation is not usually necessary. Taking turns among group members in the role will keep skill levels reasonably even. Where a group does decide to have facilitated, it is important that everyone is clear what the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator are.

Group A decide to have facilitated sessions, each taking the role in turn, to learn from each other about facilitation as they go along. Group B members don't see a need for facilitation as they are so few.

Decide at an early meeting whether and how members will be available to each other individually or on the phone between meetings.

Make peer group meetings a priority, even when you have no particular issues of your own. Regard them as a valuable part of your professional development.

### **Ethics**

Confidentiality must operate on more than one level:

1. In regard to situations and identities discussed.  
Names may not be used but often group members will guess who the individuals concerned are. All information discussed in the group must remain in the group. There is no place for speculation on identities — the purpose of the group is to focus on issues.
2. In relation to what group members disclose about themselves.  
Information gained about fellow members in the peer group should never be used or referred to in any other setting.

For example David, from group A, said in a meeting when Colleen's name came up as a possible chairperson for an internal training session, ' I don't think Colleen would like to

do that, she finds it hard to get up in front of a large group.’ Later he realised that he only knew that about Colleen from the peer group and felt that he had let her and the group down. He phoned Colleen, told her, and apologised, and at the next session they discussed the need for particular care in those situations.

Nothing that happens or is said in the group is to be used to another’s disadvantage or advantage outside the group.

Action taken by any group member following discussion in the group is the responsibility of the member taking the action. For example, Eileen from Group B was very enthusiastic about having prepared a check list for her Board and how well they had received it and how it was making a big difference in how the Board related to staff. Ruth did something similar and was criticised by her Board for ‘trespassing’ on their territory. At the next peer group session she complained to Eileen about the trouble she (Eileen) had caused her. Eileen was able to point out that it was Ruth’s decision to take that step, and what worked in one place might not in another.

### **The meetings**

At the beginning of each meeting decide on an ending time, and how the time will be allocated. Each member can have equal time to raise their issues, or there can be a previously-decided theme, or the whole time can be used to discuss the concerns of one or two members. Members can derive considerable benefit from the ideas and insights generated in relation to someone else’s concern and may not always want to claim time for themselves. Remember also to take successes as well as concerns to the group.

During the meeting, focus on identifying the issues and finding strategies and processes that the person could use to act in the situation. Don’t try and find solutions for someone else. (This is often what we are very tempted to do.)

Here are some examples of useful questions and statements:

- What else do you need to find out?
- What do you think is your next step?
- How big is this issue?
- Had you thought of trying.....?
- When I was in a similar situation I found it useful to .....
- That is hard, no wonder you are stressed.
- What I get from what you are saying is .....

In these examples no-one is telling the person with the concern how to deal with or ‘solve’ their concern, but giving options, suggesting a variety of possible approaches and ways of seeing the situation, and sharing their own experience. Say, ‘I would try .....,’ rather than, ‘You should try.....’. The examples of what a supervisor/coach might say, listed earlier in this chapter, could also be useful.

### **Ending the meeting**

- Stick to the time set.
- Set the time and place for the next meeting, or decide who in the group will do this and let the others know.
- Arrange or confirm who will facilitate next time.

**New members**

Existing group members must be allowed to veto any potential new members. Never suggest to anyone that they might join the group without checking with every other group member first.

**CONCLUSION**

When choosing a coach/supervisor, look for someone who has knowledge and/or experience in the kind of situation you work in. For example, if you manage the staff of the patient records section in a hospital, it does not matter if your coach knows nothing about records filing and retrieval, but she or he should understand the challenges of operating in a large institution and managing a staff from diverse backgrounds. Or if you manage a voluntary organisation seek out a coach who has experience of working with unpaid management boards, and so on. A coach should be able to attend to the particular in relation to the wider picture of an organisation.