

Coaching for Performance: The Art of Coaching Distant Professionals

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Coaching is about improving performance. Coaching online faculty provides two unique challenges for the prospective coach: the individuals being coached are all highly educated, and all are located at a distance. It is proposed that coaching this unique group of individuals in this distinct context will require combining effective, service-focused leadership, with multiple coaching approaches. Servant leadership requires a focus on the follower, which is an approach favored by the highly educated faculty member, as it demonstrates a level of respect that has been earned through academic achievement. Additionally, these educators value coaching that comes from those above them on the organizational chart, as well as peers who have shared experiences. The relational focus of the Christian Scriptures provides a nice template for those who follow Jesus, who demonstrated the ability to listen intently, foster critical thinking, and teach in multiple settings – all of which are important for distant faculty members.

Coaching, regardless of context, is about one thing: improving performance. However, there are many different forms, styles, and perceptions of coaching. The word itself can be used ambiguously. This paper is intended to serve as a resource to heighten academicians' knowledge and understanding of what is crucial to consider when attempting to coach highly educated members of a team who work from a distance, as is the case with online education faculty members. It is also important to create motivation within the faculty member being coached, which requires a follower-centered leadership approach. Servant leadership is an example of such a follower-focused leadership approach, which provides validation for the faculty and opens the door for coaching.

As many organizations establish coaching programs, people have very different perceptions of what that role might actually entail. A coach is expected to ask questions to identify areas of deficiency and is focused intently on the future and long-term benefits for the organization.

Coaching typically relates to a certain need or task that requires improvement. Consequently, managers often depend on coaches to empower members to become more independent and self-reliant. This thinking directly aligns with a famous quote from Benjamin Franklin, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

One might ask, “Is it the attitude and transparency of the coach that motivates followers to do well?” More importantly, do coaches have to possess a certain level of experience, genuineness, and creativity in order to successfully perform in their role as a coach? When dealing with highly educated followers, what makes one coach better than another? Is it the disposition or demonstrated compassion of the coach that allows him or her to better understand what is needed when leading others? Research indicates that coaching an individual or group at a distance can create certain barriers. Is there an internal desire or specific mindset that allows a coach to successfully adjust to a particular culture or structure that is different from the standard *face-to-face* setting? All coaches know the process entails much more than simply leading a group. It demands creativity, patience, wisdom, and innovation. Coaches in any organization produce better results when serving in an inspirational, motivated, and compassionate manner. Are these traits the key for successfully coaching from a distance?

As coaching is a powerful tool for leaders to utilize and enhance employee performance, it also delivers practical approaches to strengthening relationships. It fosters an awareness of opportunities for change, focuses on unlocking the strengths of others, and offers an appreciation for each member of a group. Do coaches have to think strategically? Absolutely! Seeking positive approaches in working with members versus *telling* them what to do is a much healthier method to use when addressing any situation where coaching is needed. Moreover, reflecting on past successes can provide a foundation for future effective coaching practices (Suess & Clark, 2014). In regards to faculty, who hold key positions in a university, it is vital that they are coached adequately and granted a feeling of community with other faculty members who share the same common purpose. Being that part-time faculty members generally hold a full-time position elsewhere, they are typically wise in sharing professional insights and experiences while teaching (West, 2010). However, it is imperative that they receive ample training, adequate resources, and opportunities for awards and recognition. Regular coaching and empowerment throughout their tenure is necessary. Yet, who should serve in the role as a faculty coach? Is it one person or more; such as a leader coach vs a peer coach?

Time is one factor in life that coaches seem to struggle to manage and attempt to control. Rogers (2003) suggests factors which may contribute to the development of sufficient processes include: innovation, communication channels, time, and social networks. The adoption of significant processes and effectiveness in delivering them are major criteria to consider when planning on-line training for faculty. Adoption relates to how many people are using the various online teaching tools and effectiveness relates to the depth of how well the faculty are using technological tools within their online teaching strategies. Adoption without effectiveness will hurt students’ learning outcomes and, in turn, the reputations of both the faculty members and the institutions with which they are affiliated. Therefore, academic leaders who serve as coaches should be included in the design of training programs, which specifically address online faculty requirements, such as course set-up, classroom management, and engagement.

In regards to coaches following a certain protocol for training purposes, the trainees' knowledge and skills are enhanced and better developed. While richly developing each member, it is vital that continued support, motivation, and a congenial environment for learning and growth is provided. A deficiency in skill determines whether or not a member needs coaching to complete a specified task; whereas, a deficiency in motivation pertains to one's willingness to master a task and may require coaching. An organization's environment must welcome and support each member as they receive training and intervention. Does coaching faculty at a distance occur during the on-boarding process only or should it occur daily, weekly, or indefinitely over time? Certainly, ongoing coaching demonstrates a commitment to standards and a concern for faculty effectiveness in performances.

Romisowski (1981) proposes a systematic framework which guides the improvement of online faculty development. He notes that in terms of the adoption consideration, some faculty members have the appropriate skills and conditions for teaching online, yet they do not have any incentive for doing so. This could lead to the problem of having few early adopters. Training may help in some small way, but it is not going to address the real issue. Faculty members' concerns may be that their traditional courses will be cannibalized once they move to teaching online—which presents the perception that good performance is punished—or they may fear that they will not receive the same kind of recognition for teaching online as they could for teaching traditional courses. Some faculty may fear that they will have to invest more significant time in designing online courses. Experience has proven that these concerns can be easily addressed by affording appropriate recognition, an equal or greater teaching stipend, and instructional design support. When planning to develop faculty, organizations should consider the following (Romisowski, 1981, p.18):

- Does the institution maintain a user-friendly learning-management system?
- Does the institution maintain effective communication channels which allow all faculty to share their online teaching experiences and best practices with other cohorts?
- Does the institution form/implement an effective social network which allows members to coach each other?
- Does the institution have an effective organizational structure which is staffed with qualified personnel? This structure includes an administrative team, a designer team, and a technical team to handle the various kinds of support needed by the on-line faculty member.
- Do highly effective processes exist to support online teaching; course development and research findings?
- Does the institution offer a culture of collaboration, innovation, and knowledge sharing which prohibits on-line faculty members from feeling isolated from each other and from other teams in the university?

Ciutiene, Neverauskas, and Meiliene (2010) suggest in most higher education institutions, academic leadership, staff members, and faculty work in different geographic regions and cultures. Staff members are often viewed differently than faculty and a disconnect in experience and academic freedom often exists. Many faculty feel more comfortable collaborating and training with their fellow academicians than working with support staff. Given this preference, is it

advisable to have staff perform classroom monitoring/evaluations to share with online faculty members regarding their teaching performances?

It is wise for administrative leadership to provide an online support center with a well-categorized pool of resources for frequently asked questions about tasks that faculty can locate and utilize. Tutorials or animated demonstrations on how to update courses between semesters, how to manage each resource embedded within a course, and/or how to implement policy is a much easier venue for faculty (particularly, at a distance) to use as a tool/resource if coaching is not readily available. Should coaches serve as the model for demonstrating the implementation of effective practices deemed necessary for an educated group of online faculty? It seems reasonable to deduce that highly educated team members will be able to find solutions if they know where to look. Perhaps with this group, it is best to provide clear expectations, illuminate resources available to meet these expectations, and provide support for specific issues as they arise. In other words, it is not about them knowing everything; rather, it is about them knowing where to find answers to their questions.

Today, it is very common for coaching to be considered one of the principal strategies employed to effectively develop an organization's employees. In order to feel competent as an on-line instructor, effective coaching is needed as a means to deepen the knowledge base and skill sets, to assist in improving performance measures, and as a result, to enhance quality. Success among members also creates success for the organization (Ciutiene, et al, 2010). How members are approached and treated during the process is the key to a healthy coaching initiative. Should all coaches seek to be viewed as supportive, trustworthy, genuine, motivational, and compassionate? Will this type of character displayed by coaches increase the likelihood of success for distant faculty seeking to improve their overall work performances?

Adult education and motivation theory suggests that developing more of a *learning coach approach* promotes a relationship that is productive and facilitative when working with older, more experienced learners who are looking for someone to coach them (Harlow, 2007). Efficient coaches help others become their best. They make a positive impact on others by helping them establish smart goals and a wise path to achieving them. They support others through struggles and victories. By helping others make better decisions, they also help them unlock their potential for development and growth. Most importantly, they give of themselves to help others prepare and do a better job—simply by being available and willing to give of their time and expertise. Stack (2014) asserts there are seven principles which must be asserted for effective coaching: (a) track your team's productivity, (b) ensure a productive working environment is provided, (c) offer meaningful feedback; with suggestions on how to improve, (d) set realistic goals, (e) respect team members as individuals, (f) support people when they need it most, and (g) praise members liberally.

Coaches who think as servant leaders not only assist others, but also share power in decision-making, promote a sense of community, form trusting relations with other individuals, and humbly serve others. They are aware of their followers' needs and ensure they are met; while providing a path for the followers to become wiser, and more autonomous (Greenleaf, 1970). They are clear in their purpose for coaching and concise in their expectations.

The connection point between coaching and leadership comes in the area of motivation. Each individual will be motivated differently, which is where personal (possibly servant) leadership becomes critical. Experience has shown that unless an individual is motivated to change; and has a desire to accept the coaching provided, little impact will be seen. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed mediating effect of motivation on key factors of the coaching process, and the final result, which is improved individual performance.

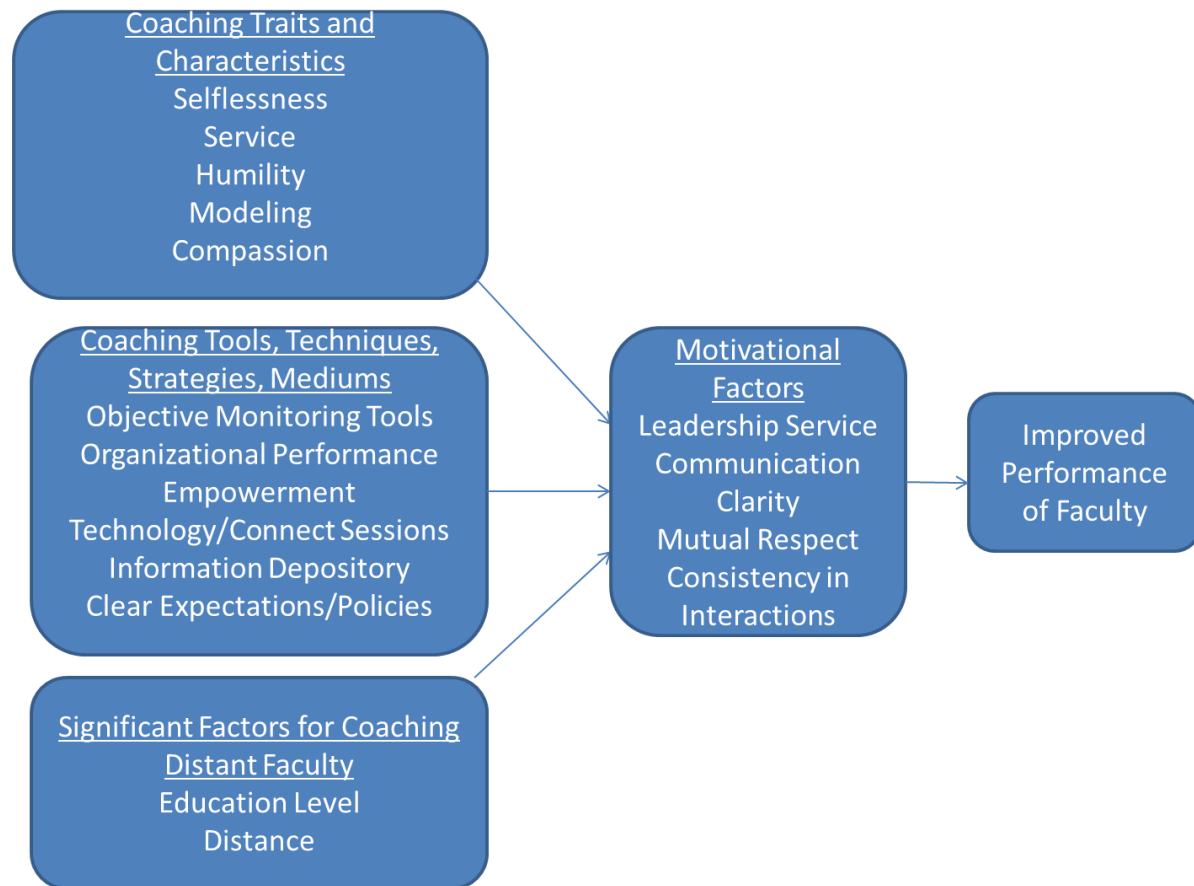


Figure 1: Proposed Mediating Effect of Motivation on Coaching Process

A compassionate coach practices the habits of caring and kindness, displaying humor and soft-heartedness; yet, tackling issues expeditiously as they occur. Showing mercy and kindness is an attribute which allows educational coaches to follow what was modeled by perhaps the greatest leader of all time, Jesus Christ. He continuously demonstrated the importance of generously helping others in need.

Coaching is not telling someone what to do. It involves an empowerment which allows people to change and improve. It consists of effective listening coupled with probing questions and most importantly encouraging others while providing genuine support. Effective coaches inspire members to think and they help them to set realistic goals for overcoming obstacles while proving successful in achieving their own goals. Good coaches understand the importance of asking good questions and listening intently. No one has ever been proven to listen quite as well as Jesus. He

proved that listening shows value towards a person. It not only pays tribute to their existence; it also gives credit to what they are willing to share. Demands are not given when coaching; instead, carefully posed questions are asked that allow others to think about what it is they need to do and how they can do it better. How often did Jesus teach through questioning? When asked a question, He often responded with a question of his own to promote what would be called ‘critical thinking’ today – He encouraged others to think for themselves. Then, wiser choices were made as a result.

We were created with the need to form relationships and to learn from one another. Proverbs 27:17 reminds us: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (NASB). Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 denotes: “⁹Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰If either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. ¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (NASB). Both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes illustrate that companionship is necessary and one who will offer a listening ear, a timely word, or the ability to bring thoughts and intentions to the surface can truly welcome and manifest relational empowerment (Roehl, 2017). In the New Testament, Barnabas was known as the ‘Son of consolation or encouragement’. He was willing to walk with Paul when others would not. Barnabas was willing to work through issues with other members of the group. In his coaching, he encouraged others and helped them stay on track, so they didn’t lose their purpose or their desire to follow Jesus. He is thought to adequately represent the quote: “The great leader is not the one in the spotlight. He’s the one leading the applause” (Roehl & Ogne, 2003, p. 4).

Jesus’s teachings were detailed in the four gospels in which it was noted that that He taught about truths with eloquence, wisdom, authority and direct inspiration. This is a best practice for all who teach. Jesus was often followed by large crowds; teaching with parables while sitting on a boat, on a mountain, or in the synagogues. Therefore, educators can teach from different settings; with wisdom and desire. Jesus knew people’s thoughts and answered questions without even being asked, taught as a leader, and demonstrated/modeled servant leadership. He trained and organized his twelve disciples to preach, empowered them, and provided guidance where and when it was needed. He mentored them through demonstration and feedback staying visible and connected; displaying love, humility, and self-control (Elliot, 1996).

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