Peer Coaching: The Wave of the Future
Shana Montesol Johnson
PEER COACHING: THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE

The Ins and Outs of Peer Coaching .............................................................. 2
Preparing for Success .......................................................................................... 4
Benefits....................................................................................................................... 9
Challenges and Pitfalls ......................................................................................10
Try Out Peer Coaching ......................................................................................12
Conclusion ..............................................................................................................13
References & Resources ................................................................................... 14

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Sample Check-In Questions for Peer Coaches ........................................15

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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

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• 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.

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**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.