

# PEER GROUP COACHING - COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE IN ACTION

BY ALY McNICOLL

Peer coaching groups combine the benefits of one-to-one coaching with the power of peer-to-peer learning. They are groups of four to six individuals, from similar levels in an organisation, who meet on a regular basis to fulfil a coaching contract. They don't require the presence of an expert coach - the group manages the quality of the coaching experience themselves. In a peer coaching group, each takes a turn as a coachee and collectively, they coach each other using specifically designed tools that tap in to the inherent knowledge, experience and wisdom within the group.

Coaching is all about helping people reflect more deeply on their experience in order to gain insight in to why things turned out the way they did. The multiple and diverse perspectives that are gained from a group coaching process provide a powerful catalyst for new thinking.

Peer group coaching addresses some of the challenges organisations face in providing coaching to all those who need it including the availability of skilled and qualified coaches who know the business plus the resources it takes - both time and money - to ensure coaching is accessible to all.

In a peer coaching group, all members are equal and no one has anything to gain or lose by speaking openly and honestly about the realities they face at work. The blame free, shame free, consequence free exchanges that occur when you take managers out of the mix ensure that the conversations that will make the most difference take place.

Realising that others face similar choices and challenges helps people normalise their experience and frees them up to do their best thinking. Coaching is about unlocking people's potential. Rather than teaching them, it is helping them learn (Whitmore, 2009) and peer coaching groups create the ideal conditions for transformational learning.

In *The Connected Leader*, Emmanuel Gobillot writes about the importance

of leading both the formal organisation (as outlined on the organisational chart) and the REAL organisation - the systems of networks and relationships through which most of the real work gets done.

Studies of how learning actually takes place in organisations have shown that knowledge creation is a social rather than an individual process. The most effective learning in your organisation may not be happening in training rooms but in cafes, over lunch, in corridors or through online networks.

Peter Hawkins, Professor of Leadership at Henley Business School, said that these days, the challenges in organisations are too big for individuals - we need everyone thinking like a leader. Lencioni in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, observes that on great teams, accountability is peer-to-peer. Durable changes in leadership behaviours are more likely to occur in a group setting. The need for group and peer based learning processes is here to stay.

So how much of your training and development budget is devoted to equipping people to learn with and from each other? To what degree does your organisation focus on the principles and practice of quality conversations? Are you maximising peer accountability to help people translate learning into action?

A major financial services firm had the call for collaboration from their new CEO. They needed to create better connections, have better conversations and find new ways of working across organisational boundaries in order to remain competitive. They were looking for tools to make this happen quickly so they decided to build peer coaching groups in to all of their leadership development programs. On the first day with each cohort, they set up groups of leaders from different regions or business functions, and ran a half day workshop to get them up and running.

By the end of the day, people felt equipped and enthusiastic about signing up for the experience. The groups met regularly for ten months whilst people

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put their learning in to action. They provided an extra layer of support and accountability that enabled people to try things out and learn from both their own and others' experiences.

Whilst they were getting transformative, leadership coaching for themselves, they were also learning tools for collaborative conversations and gaining the confidence to coach others. The ripple effects were huge as people started to promote peer learning processes in their own teams, use their new skills to have better quality coaching conversations and tap the solid connections they had made with people in their groups who worked in other areas of the business. Many groups continued to meet after the program had finished and the client decided to offer the workshop to senior managers to create a phase 2 for cohorts who had already completed the senior leadership program.

Evaluations from programs using peer coaching groups have shown that people really value finding out how things work in other parts of the organisation and appreciate the tremendous amount of 'local knowledge' that exists within the group. Group members know 'how things actually work around here' and have a deep and shared understanding of the context. As a result, the coaching conversations are high in both relevance and empathy.

Twelve years ago I formed a peer coaching group with three training and development colleagues and started researching and trialling peer and group based coaching methods. That group

still exists today and we have only had two changes of members in that time. It has been an incredibly useful professional development process for us and over time we have refined seven tools for peer group coaching conversations. When we looked at methods for coaching in groups, we found there was a variety of ways of doing it out there but what they all had in common was that they were highly structured.

Groups are complex so you need simple, structured processes to ensure that coaching conversations are focused, that they do no harm and that they enable you to get through a number of coaching sessions in short amounts of time. Our coaching group of four meets once a month for two hours. We all have a turn as a coachee and the tools enable us to gain excellent coaching outcomes in around 15 minutes. The structure of the tools prevents 'task drift' - one of the pitfalls of peer coaching groups cited in the literature provided - and is the key to these groups lasting the distance.

Global trends in coaching indicate a shift towards group and team based coaching methods. Organisations are recognising that team leaders have the greatest impact on results as they are the people who have the most influence on customer facing staff. The time is finally right for peer group learning and peer group coaching. The best learning resource your organisation has is its own people. So what would it take to harness the power of peer coaching in your organisation?

### References

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