



Peer Coaching: A Practical Model to Support Constructivist Learning Methods in the Development of Managerial Competency

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Abstract

Peer coaching (PC) processes have been described in the literature in an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for this social learning phenomenon. However, the absence of a practical and holistic methodology to support the implementation of such processes within an organizational context is noted. In this research, a conceptual framework for PC was developed converging the works of several practitioner based models described in the literature. This model was then validated using PC experiences within several organizational contexts. The learning outcomes that stemmed from the PC experience were captured to determine the utility of the proposed PC framework. Learning outcomes in the areas of knowledge acquisition, cognitive skill and metacognitive awareness were captured. Findings indicate that when the PC model proposed in this study was followed, the further development of reasoning to promote managerial competency within an organizational context is possible.

Introduction

It has been noted that managerial competency progresses through five stages: novice; advanced beginner; competent; proficient; and expert. (Quinn, Faerman & Thompson, 2003) Boyatzis & Kram (1999) argue that many managers will cycle through these stages as they move around within industries as part of their career progression. Achieving expert status, therefore, is an ongoing process and requires knowledge, cognition and metacognition (Higgs 1997). Metacognition is particularly important to achieve the deep learning associated with managerial excellence as it involves knowing what one knows, knowing when and how one comes to know it, being able to think and plan strategically, and the ability to monitor and consistently evaluate one's own competence. Peer coaching (PC) can

enhance critical thinking and metacognition and support the development of managerial competency.

Theoretical Base

The influence of PC on managerial competence is supported by cognitive development theory. (Piaget 1977; Sullivan 1953; Vygotsky 1978; 1986) Peer interaction promotes cognitive development because it often leads to critical cognitive conflicts. For example, when a learner discusses authentic problems and concerns with another peer, they often become aware of a contradiction in their knowledge base. The learners experience a lapse in equilibrium and will attempt to initiate strategies to restore equilibrium, for example, by engaging each other to find a solution that both can accept. This inquiry, which is framed around an authentic task, enables learners to re-construct (Biehler & Snowman 1997) their understanding of the phenomenon under question.

For PC to work, partnerships must be based on trust and respect (Ladyshefsky, Baker & Jones 2001; Zeus & Skiffington 2000). The equality that is present in PC supports a mutually rewarding discourse because of the absence of power and evaluation pressure. Learners can be more open with one another and explore more fully areas of critical cognitive conflict. Since peers are at an equal level, the coaching discourse is far less threatening than, for example, a discussion with a supervisor. Even if after this exploration, peers cannot resolve the cognitive conflict, they may feel more empowered to approach their supervisor as a dyad for support.

This absence of power and evaluation is important to maintain in the PC relationship. Joyce & Showers (1995) state that traditional feedback is problematic in a PC relationship as it often becomes evaluative. Evaluative feedback negatively influences the coaching experience because of the emergence of status differences. Information exchanges must remain non-evaluative (Ackland 1991; Showers 1984; Skinner & Welch 1996) which are achieved by providing non-judgmental comments that focus largely on inquiry. By confining discourse to learning objectives, and using a predominance of inquiry methods, the integrity of the PC experience can be maintained. This integrity is important as the coaching process is highly influenced by the social and psychological aspects of the relationship (Ackland 1991). Hence, peer coaches must be good at active listening, questioning, probing, paraphrasing and summarising (Zeus & Skiffington 2000).

Peer coaching has features in common with other forms of traditional coaching, mentoring, teaching, supervision and counselling. However, PC has unique dynamics that neutralize status imbalances and provide reciprocal metacognitive learning opportunities. To achieve a functional PC relationship, the dyad must progress through several distinct stages. Different facilitation skills are needed at each stage. The eight stages are described below:

- Step 1 Assessment and Trust Building
- Step 2 Planning - Time and Place
- Step 3 Formalize Process and Scope
- Step 4 Define Purpose and Goals
- Step 5 Clarify Facts and Assumptions
- Step 6 Explore Possibilities
- Step 7 Gain Commitment to Actions
- Step 8 Offer Support and Accountability

The eight stages comprising this conceptual PC model were developed by comparing and contrasting different types of coaching relationships (Dotlich & Cairo 1999; Fournies 1987; Horst 1999; Krisco 1997; Kushel 1994; MacLennan 1996; Rylatt 2000; Thorne 2001) and then modifying them for peer coaching.(Varey 2002) Each step in the PC model is directed towards achieving a specific and necessary outcome. The outcomes for each stage, and the negative consequences if that stage is not fulfilled are explained more fully in figure 1.

The model provides a way of consciously managing the PC process. The use of additional tools to enhance the application of this PC framework can also be applied to further increase the effectiveness of the relationship. These tools include: learning journals; personal learning objectives; and reflective summaries of actions and outcomes of PC sessions.

What is unique about the PC process is its reciprocity. It assumes that in any cycle of PC, the role of the coach, who is a co-facilitator of the process, and the role of coachee, who's learning objectives are to be the focus of the particular coaching session, are made distinct. But once the learning focus changes towards the needs of the other party, roles are reversed. Often this alternating action is done concurrently or in parallel or even simultaneously. The particular learning needs of the participants, their level of proficiency at the management of the logistics of the PC relationship and their respective required learning rates influence the adoption of the most efficient configuration. It is noted that to prevent an

imbalance from developing, both participants should over time have equivalent participation in both roles as coach and coachee. This maintains the level of perceived reciprocity and equality between the participants thus maintaining the dynamic that enhances the prospects of ongoing commitment and learning.

Given the theory in support of PC, it is useful to validate whether this model actually leads to the deeper metacognitive insights needed to promote managerial competency.

Methods

Forty-three students (14 women: 29 men) participated in a PC program. Students were enrolled in a post-graduate business certificate/diploma or masters level course. Forty-one students (95 per cent) were studying part time. Students were required to establish personal learning objectives and to maintain reflective learning journals that related to the content being studied within their unit and their own personal learning experiences. The learning objectives were to be applied to a specific problem or challenge in the workplace. The learning objective(s) and journal entries were the resources the student used during PC discussions. This helped to keep the focus on the student's personal learning needs as related to their project.

Students selected a peer coach from the class and were required to meet 'at least' once every two weeks. In most cases a face to face meeting took place but in some cases, because of work commitments or geographical distance, telephone or e-mail was used to maintain contact. The purpose of the meetings was to provide students with a safe place to discuss learning objectives and questions stemming from their projects.

All students received a one-hour orientation and booklet on PC and its relationship to their professional development. The PC relationship lasted for one trimester (12 weeks - 32 students) or two trimesters (24 weeks - 11 students). The duration depended upon which unit the student was enrolled. To receive credit for the PC experience, **all** students were required to submit one or two reports that described their experience. This report, along with their learning objectives and an excerpt from their learning journal was worth 20 per cent of their grade.

Students submitted a total of 71 PC reports for this research. These reports, including learning objectives and journal excerpts, were entered into N-VIVO, a qualitative data management software program, for analysis. The investigator

developed a series of coding formats that represented conceptual themes that emerged from reviewing the written reports and excerpts. A research assistance was employed to code the transcripts. The research assistant was briefed on each code by providing a written definition. Once the research assistant felt that he had a good grasp of the coding definitions, both the investigator and research assistant coded 10 pages of data. Comparisons were then made between the coding labels attributed by both the investigator and research assistant. This process was repeated three times at which point the inter-rater reliability of the research assistant to the investigator was comparable. The research assistant then coded the remaining transcripts. The codes reported here represent those that provide insights into the depth of learning that resulted from the PC experience and assist in validating the PC model described in this paper.

Results and Discussion

The eight stage PC model presented by Varey (2002) was evident in the written comments from the students. In stage 1: assessment and trust building, successful relationships were based on careful selection of a peer coach. As the partnership began to develop, trust was established as is evident in the following quotations.

“It is important to pick a peer coach that has some knowledge at a comparable level to you relating to your learning objective.”

“In selecting a peer I decided to choose someone with whom I could speak frankly and was not in a direct competitive situation.”

“By building a professional rapport and getting to know each other at a deeper level, it broke down any barriers to open and honest communication and feedback.”

“I hadn’t shared my writings with anyone, outside of family and friends, so for me to do this required trust beyond normal working relationships.”

In stage 2: planning – time and place, the relationships that flourished had commitment from both parties. Meeting schedules were adhered to and people came through on the commitments they had made. Coaching relationships that floundered shared stories of missed or cancelled meetings and delays between contact. The momentum was lost and the perception of a lack of interest eroded the relationship.

In stage 3: formalising – process and scope, an element of formality was needed to ensure the PC sessions were focused and directed towards the achievement of learning outcomes. Regular meetings, an agenda, a focus on objectives and journal entries were some of the formal processes used to ensure that the PC

sessions were effective. The validity of these processes are evident in the following quotations from the students.

“The need to peer coach in a formal sense dictated that a simple framework should be adopted to obtain the best possible result.”

“Participants must be given the time to get to know the norms and adapt or adjust accordingly to encourage honest evaluation. A certain amount of ground rules, delegation of tasks must be set to enable equal contribution.”

Dyads that did not follow a formal process noted that greater attention to this stage of the framework would have improved their PC experience.

“...there was a need for us to add a bit more formality to our discussions so that we can identify actions and responsibilities...”

“...we may have missed out on opportunities to learn. This could be due to the lack of formality in our reflection and critical thinking on the when and why of our approach...”

In stage 4: defining – purpose and goals, the reflective learning journal and personal learning objectives provided the content and material needed for peer coaching. Coaches could use this information to focus on learning experiences, targets and goals.

“The learning journals tended to provide a good input to the peer coaching sessions and were often the basis for our discussion by sharing what we had learned and forming an opinion on how relevant that information was to our own situation.”

“John had felt that he had lost focus on this objective, but realized by talking his objectives through with me, how he can now move forward.... We engaged and focused on his learning objectives in great depth over time.”

In stage 5: clarifying – facts and assumptions, the ability of the coach to clarify some of the facts and assumptions from the coachee depended to a great degree on their own coaching, questioning and communication skill. Application of these skills in a non-evaluative way, helped to preserve the relationship.

“...my peer coach is a good active listener and reminded me of the importance of actively listening, not just planning my next sentence.”

“...the process adopted for the coachee’s first feedback session was to focus more on reflective insight. To do this we used an open reflective enquiry process to discuss each objective, why it was relevant to her, discover insights from events observed already, go into depth with these examples, reflect on how these examples relate to the goals, discuss how to create more opportunities for reflective observation, explore

next steps to achieve the stated outcomes, envision possibilities for work role application and discuss progress...."

Where good communication principles were not employed, or the coach did not try to clarify underlying facts or assumptions, participants became skeptical or critical of the relationship.

"...on a few occasions John was too quick to give advice. I would have preferred that he helped me to discover the best course of action by asking questions."

"...Fred began to criticize my learning objectives since they contained 2 spelling mistakes, and also stated that I was trying to achieve too much. I started feeling a little defensive towards Fred at this point since he had started with this negative feedback."

In stage 6: exploring – possibilities and alternatives, discovering new insights helped to boost the coachee's self-confidence and self-efficacy. By exploring personal knowledge and examining new possibilities and alternatives, the belief in one's own abilities increased and promoted transfer of skills into authentic situations.

"[my coach]...gave me insights into my own behavior and that of my work colleagues which provided me with guidance as to whether my actions were right or wrong and gave me much increased confidence on how to take the next steps."

"I believe self confidence or self efficacy is one of the most important ingredients to assist in personal development and the peer coaching situation has helped my personal development."

"In the past I would be filled with self doubt and feelings of failure during critical learning events. With the help of a coach I found that this was dramatically lessened."

In stage 7: commitment – create action, and stage 8: accountability – offer support, it was clear that a commitment to the relationship and collaborative action helped to progress the learning of the coachee and team. The coach provided a 'safety-net' for the coachee to explore knowledge gaps and uncertainties about their management. Managers were, in turn, encouraged to take more risks in their learning and management action. The support offered by the coach was also an advantage to help process learning events and work-life balance issues.

"...it was a relief not to feel alone. We also spoke with other members of the course and it was reassuring to find that we all felt the same."

"...treating each other as colleagues acknowledges the mutual risk and establishes the sense of safety in facing the risk."

In addition to the validation of the PC model, learning outcomes that supported knowledge, cognition and metacognition were also evident. These learning outcomes were broken down into five thematic representations to best describe the learning that took place: knowledge expansion, perspective sharing, verification of knowledge, cognitive conflict, and alternative perspectives. These categories are more fully described in Table 1.

By actively engaging in dialogue with another learner about authentic task problems, the possibility of knowledge expansion became quite evident.

“There were many more insights that came out of the structured reflective listening process that had not, and may not otherwise have come into awareness, creating both value for the learner.....”

Perspective sharing was another benefit. Through the process of evaluating one’s knowledge base, and seeing that it was a shared view by another credible source, learners could construct knowledge frameworks that helped to ground their practice as managers. Bandura (1971; 1997) refers to this as vicarious reinforcement.

“By involving John in the design reviews, I was able to pick up some of the knowledge that he had. The knowledge transfer was both ‘explicit’ and ‘tacit’. The ‘explicit knowledge transfer consisted of John pointing me towards past designs as examples of how things had been done previously. The ‘tacit’ knowledge related to some good tips on how John approaches design review.”

While expanding and strengthening knowledge frameworks is important, so too is the verification of existing knowledge. Through the verification of knowledge, learners can generate operational norms to guide their management actions.

“John was pleased with the peer coaching I was able to provide as he felt my techniques helped him further explore his current thinking and he gained real value from the sessions.”

The presence of cognitive conflict was a particularly a rich metacognitive experience as it required participants to articulate ‘what they know’ and ‘what they do not know’. The structured conflict increased each parties’ understanding of the concept under debate and often led to shifts in perspective.

“ A fundamental result of our peer coaching has been to encourage a balance between thinking in parallel and in deliberately provoking constructive conflict

between us in an effort to further explore possibilities, and this has worked well for us."

"...on a number of occasions the peer discussions involved heated discussion on some aspects due to differing points of view. This reinforced my own learning experience by allowing me to see that others may have sharply opposing opinions or interpretations of events"

The discussion of learning issues during moments of cognitive conflict also produced insights that had not been considered before. This was achieved by gaining access to an alternative perspective. This enriched the metacognitive experience by requiring participants to retrieve what they knew and to compare and contrast it with what they were hearing in the discussion.

" ...through the process of being coached by Jane, I had a major shift in my view on marketing and where it sits philosophically with my future."

" one of the most outstanding spin-offs from the sessions was the experience and information I gained from the other member's learning objectives."

"...my peer coach was very supportive and also assisted by advising of his observations of my style which were at times different to what I perceived."

The outcomes of this PC experience provide support for the PC method as a framework to support learning. Competency development requires that managers continually reflect upon and construct new meaning from their experiences. It is this reflection-in-action and reflection-about action (Schon 1991) that leads to the development of mastery. Peer coaching supported the development of self-awareness and enhanced critical thinking by engaging students in metacognitively rich discussions on management. The emergence of cognitive conflict and the realization that there were different perspectives increased opportunities for thoughts and feelings to emerge about one's own thinking.

The PC process also aligned closely to the eight stage model described by Varey (2002). Students appeared to assess their compatibility for partnering (stage 1) and then worked towards planning how and when their PC sessions would take place (stage 2). The learning objectives and journals were used to scope out the learner's needs (stage 3) and the coach used this information to help the coachee further work through their knowledge gaps (stage 4). The dialectic that took place during PC sessions helped coachees to separate facts from assumptions and to consider previously unknown perspectives (stage 5). From here, coaches supported their partners by exploring possibilities and new ways of managing the authentic tasks under question (stage 6). Supporting the coachee in implementing action and supporting them during action was also evident (stages 7 and 8).

Much of this success was attributed to the appropriate use and practice of coaching skills and communication. What appeared to make the relationship flourish and promote learning was the use of non-evaluative communication. Successful PC partnerships were able to maintain the social and psychological aspects of the relationship through their use of appropriate coaching technique. (Ackland 1991; Zeus & Skiffington 2000) By applying appropriate coaching technique, the critical element of trust was established. Having trust meant that students could explore their own learning about their work with peers, without fears that the self-disclosure would be used against them. This equality dimension was an important co-requisite.

In this PC program, participants were able to expand their knowledge base through discussion and through access to the tacit knowledge of their coach. The structured conflict and controversy and exposure to alternative perspectives heightened learning. Intense debate, argument and disagreement, within an environment of trust and support, encouraged deeper reflection and learning and further grounded what participants did and did not know about their management skill. These experiences are metacognitively rich in that they require learners to think and plan constructively and to represent their knowledge effectively in ways that permit efficient retrieval. It also provides them with the ability to monitor and consistently evaluate their own managerial competence, an essential constructivist learning element.

Conclusion

Peer coaching appears to be a viable strategy that management and leadership programs should consider as part of their development framework. The PC model reported in this research is a useful template to assist learners in understanding the coaching process. Investment in each of the eight stages appears to yield a positive coaching and learning outcome. Hence, participants in PC situations should be encouraged to develop the necessary skills and practices so that they can effectively apply this coaching model to their personal development experience.

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Figure 1: Peer Coaching Component Stages

Description	Objective of Each Stage (Desired Outcome)	Integrated Dependency (Effect if Missed)
Assessment & Trust Building	Peers assess each other for compatibility, personally, as to their stage of development and as to the compatibility of their respective learning needs.	Trust and understanding are not built into the relationship and participants do not see themselves as equals – relationship fails due to lack of reciprocity.
Planning	Timing and place for formal peer coaching sessions are agreed to distinguish a commitment to a structured process rather than an informal program.	If sessions are cancelled, held at inconvenient locations, inappropriately timed or consistently interrupted the sessions will be seen as unproductive and motivation for both participants will decline.
Formalizing Process and Scope	The learner’s particular needs at present and the scope of the individual session are determined based on a balance of priority of interests and available time.	If the coachee’s needs do not drive the process and determine the scope - actions will not be relevant. Commitment wanes. If scope not balanced effectively within constraints no outcomes will result again resulting in declining commitment.
Defining Purpose and Goals	The Coach explores with the learner the focus of their learning objective(s) and asks coachee to further define goals and objectives as necessary to achieve clarity.	Unless the both parties gain this understanding only symptomatic and surface level solutions will be discovered and the main goals will not be uncovered or desired objectives will not be achieved.
Clarifying Facts and Assumptions	The coach asks the coachee to separate assumptions from facts and may in doing so provide alternative and non-evaluative perspectives to assist in objective clarity of actual position.	If not challenged, misconceptions easily resolved by third party objectivity are left unresolved and may compounded learning barriers. The coachee does not develop self-awareness and previously unknown areas for improvement or development that are relevant to the coachee not discovered.
Exploring Possibilities	Conversations move from correctly identifying the issue, event or dilemma to developing possibilities for solutions. The learner finds their own path out of the learning maze assisted by the Coach who creates space for exploration of different scenarios. The coach shares information and possibly suggestions but does not offer definitive advice.	If the range of solutions are not constructed by the coachee, the coaching experience leaves the coachee feeling unempowered and dependent on coach. Lack of exploration runs the risk of partial solutions and strategies are acted on in a trial and error manner, negating the benefit of the reflective meta-cognitive learning process. Time taken at this stage to develop satisfactory answers (as seen by the coachee) generates commitment, increased prospect of action.
Gaining Commitment to Actions	Conversation moves to creating verbal commitment to identified actions with clear outcomes. Required resources and flow on effects are considered.	If constraints, real or imagined, are not explored, actions may be frustrated and trust in the process will decline. If actions are vague the assessment of outcomes is difficult - reducing further reflection..
Offering Support and Accountability	The coach offers up follow up support with genuine interest in the results rather than imposing accountability. Follow up is structured by the coach to assist in motivation, learning support and ongoing trust building reinforcing cycle and reciprocity in the learning relationship.	Without structured ongoing support and investment in the joint relationship, follow up is seen as obligated accountability only. The PC process becomes strained, trust declines and is likely to stop with only one or two cycles. Without the ongoing support there is no link between sessions to reinforce the structured part of the process as a complete cycle.

Table 1: Critical Thinking and Metacognition Thematic Definitions

- **Knowledge expansion** – Coachee gains more knowledge through the dialogue of peer coaching. This can be new knowledge or it can be knowledge that value adds to existing knowledge frameworks. It is constructed from the knowledge base of both parties.
- **Perspective sharing** – Where both parties recognize that they have similar perspectives on issues which serves to solidify knowledge.
- **Knowledge verification** – A situation where either party experiences a verification of knowledge they already possess.
- **Cognitive conflict** – A phenomenon of PC whereby existing knowledge frameworks of both parties are thrown into question. There is evidence of questioning and uncertainty expressed by both parties around a specific knowledge set.
- **Alternative perspectives** – One or both parties gains a different perspective on a common theme from the other party's approach or background.