THE COACHING AND MENTORING PROCESS: THE OBVIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL SET FOR ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION PROFESSORS

ROBERT H. STOWERS
The College of William & Mary

RANDOLPH T. BARKER
Virginia Commonwealth University

ABSTRACT

This article explores the uses of coaching and mentoring as they apply to organizational communication professors. The authors contend that these professors already are proficient at coaching and mentoring and the coaching and mentoring processes are routinely undertaken as part of their standard university teaching responsibilities. As coaches, these faculty members assist their students in improving student communication abilities through observation, discussion, and follow-up. As mentors, these faculty members enter into a developmental relationship with students that extend beyond the classroom. A greater knowledge of coaching and mentoring will enhance instructional efforts and benefit students in multiple ways.

INTRODUCTION

Coaching and mentoring are obvious professional capabilities for organizational communication professors. A serious consideration of the coaching and mentoring processes for faculty finds that these processes are integral to a productive learning relationship between professors and students. What is not-so-obvious is these processes are not adding work to a faculty member's life. In fact, these processes are routinely undertaken as part of traditional faculty

responsibilities at a university. True, university faculty members are expected to teach classes, and at many schools significant research is required. In addition, these faculty members often serve as student advisors. This advisory role traditionally is academic in nature with faculty assisting students with the selection of classes and majors. However, organizational communication faculty members also fulfill key roles as coaches and mentors.

As coaches, organizational communication faculty members assist their students in improving their students' communication abilities through various ways, including observation, discussion, and follow-up. Acting as their students' mentors, faculty members enter into an important developmental relationship with them, building a special bond with students that extend beyond the classroom. Both important processes solidify a strong teaching relationship that enhances the teacher/student association. Coaching and mentoring relationships build bonds that add a new dimension to students' learning processes. Some contend that they are just as important to effective instruction as the traditional classroom educational interaction between a faculty member and a student.

COACHING AND MENTORING

Linda Watt [1] has stated, "Today, more than ever, organizations have realized the importance of providing leadership development opportunities to its people to motivate employees, stay competitive and, ultimately, positively impact the bottom-line of business." Two processes that have become synonymous with developing leadership competencies are coaching and mentoring.

Coaching, sometimes referred to interchangeably with mentoring, is a different process than mentoring. The essential difference between a coach and a mentor is that the coach does not give advice or answers but asks effective questions to help reveal the individual's current reality and vision for themselves. Ultimately, a coaching relationship has the objective to change or improve something about the person being coached [2].

Coaching has become more commonplace in business because of practical reasons. In fact, Wright [3] says that coaching is one of the fastest-growing professions in the Western world. It can be postulated that coaching increasingly is looked to by management as a better way to improve employee performance because traditional methods of managing people simply have not worked well. Coaching has become a key tool in helping executives and managers to grow and succeed [4].

Earlier styles of managing people have involved being directive; that is, one person giving directions and another person following them. The plain truth is that directive styles of management do not cultivate the abilities of their employees. Rather, directive managing increases the reliance on a manager by an employee. Starr [5] states that the increasing dependence of employees on their superiors decreases the personal resourcefulness of employees and that this

dependence is difficult to change once it is in place. Simply put, directive managing does not encourage employees to think on their own. Eventually, this dependence is counter-productive and discourages employee motivation and productivity.

By definition, coaching is a collaborative relationship in which the person being coached (coachee) is coached by an experienced person who is an active inquirer and instrument for change. The more experienced person coaches the less experienced person by identifying the needs of that person. However, Frisch [6] says that the strongest motivator for coaching is internally experienced: a career goal, a stretch challenge, and the desire to be a better manager.

After the specific coaching needs are determined, the coach identifies what processes may be required to meet those needs. Ultimately, the coach finds ways to initiate and implement changes that benefit the junior executive and may be short-term or it may be long-term. According to Battley [7], most coaching situations address employee performance development issues although it is the high achievers that want to participate in coaching arrangements the most. These high achievers perceive coaching as a method to supercharge their productivity and thus increase their chances for promotion to the high executive levels for which they are striving.

Normally, coaching does not involve wholesale training with the learning of new tasks. Coaching typically takes place where people want to be more effective in their jobs or want to qualify for a higher level position [8]. The coach, in these cases, is a facilitator who provides the necessary opportunities and tools to enable the person being coached the ability to reach his or her performance objectives. In cases like these, the coach hopes that the person being coached undergoes a transformation process whereby this person (the coachee) naturally selects the correct activity for the desired outcome. Ultimately, it is the hope of the coach that through discovery of the coachee's assumptions and beliefs, and through an alignment process, the coachee will adapt his or her standards and objectives to those of the organization for which he or she works. Starr [5] sees this process as unexpectedly difficult for the person being coached. Since coaching is about someone else improving his or her performance, this improvement often means pushing that person through his or her own success barriers. Often, this is not an easy process [9].

Where the focus of the coaching relationship is on the professional needs of the less experienced person, the focus of the mentoring relationship traditionally has been the information and advice that a more experienced executive can impart to a lesser experienced person. According to Schneider [10], mentoring has become a big trend as business executives look for ways to progress in their career goals as quickly as possible. Stone [11] contends that companies see mentoring initiatives as a way to shorten learning tracks, speed up managerial advancement, and add new people to their executive management teams.

Mentoring programs have taken various forms, but in industry mentoring is generally understood to include a support system arrangement between an experienced senior executive (mentor) and a less-experienced junior executive (mentee). These two people enter into an arrangement whose purpose traditionally has been to advance the development of a less experienced executive. Watt [1] has stated the following: "The driving force of mentoring is the relationship between the two people involved in the learning process."

By taking advantage of the know-how of a more experienced individual, a knowledge transfer takes place from the senior person to the junior one. In offering advice and information, mentoring becomes a learning solution for junior executives to prepare them for the professional challenges that may lie ahead.

Unique relationships have become part of mentoring relationships. For example, reverse mentoring relationships have become necessary where the mentoring relationship is established from a younger person to an older one. The focus of this relationship is on the specific knowledge needs of the older executive. Where traditional mentoring has been developmental, reverse mentoring is designed to keep an organization's executives familiar with the latest developments. Stone [11] has stated that General Electric executives, including Jack Welch, were mentored by younger technology experts about Internet technology to help the older executives make better decisions. The young mentors were carefully selected because of their expertise and self-confidence. The mentoring relationship was a serious one. The younger mentors required the older executives to keep scheduled instructional times and keep up with knowledge-building assignments. Stone also mentions that Proctor and Gamble (P&G) also has a reverse mentoring program, albeit with a different purpose. P&G's program is designed to help their senior executives to become more aware of their personal styles of behavior.

In addition, the configuration of other mentoring programs includes employees mentoring each other or single employees being mentored by multiple mentors over a specified time. This multiple mentor configuration takes advantage of the specific knowledge and expertise areas of each mentor to meet the particular development needs of the person being mentored.

Regardless of the ages and numbers of the participants, the source of the information for the learning solution is the mentor. Mutual trust, respect, and open communication are foundations of this relationship because the quality of the knowledge transfer depends upon the quality of the relationship established between the mentor and the mentee. This does not vary depending upon the personal characteristics of the people involved [4].

FACULTY AS COACHES AND MENTORS

Just as mentoring and coaching have taken on important roles in industry in developing the leadership competencies of executives, these corresponding

processes continue to take on important roles in the lives of organizational communication faculty and the students that they teach.

An essential component of our educational role as organizational communication professors is coaching and mentoring. As instructors, we not only teach theory, but we also expect students to demonstrate important communication skills. Therefore, coaching is something that faculty do regularly. In fact, Wright [3] defines coaching as a person who provides support to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the person being coached already has. To some, this would define the role of the teacher. It is the contention of the authors that this is a natural process and activity for organizational communication faculty.

Acting as faculty coaches, organizational communication professors assist students in improving their communication abilities. Interactively, these faculty aim to develop their students' personal and professional capabilities. Through a four-step process:

1. observation and preparation;
2. discussion;
3. active coaching; and
4. follow-up.

Students are coached by:

1. revisiting a situation;
2. defining the current situation;
3. getting agreement;
4. sharing benefits; and
5. crafting a message.

Each of these steps is essential to ensure an effective coaching experience [6].

Organizational communication faculty members also act as their students' mentors. As defined, these faculty enter into a developmental relationship between a more experienced person (faculty) and others (students) who are less experienced within the academic environment.

Some say that mentoring discussions are conversations with goals. This may be true; however, the faculty/student mentoring relationship can be a special one and is built upon the connections that faculty and students share.

There are five keys to mentoring:

1. developing a deep understanding of the student's academic challenges and his/her background;
2. seeking students' ideas;
3. complimenting students to make connections;
4. developing a meaning and beneficial relationship; and
5. working to bridge gender, race, and generational differences.

As mentors, organizational communication faculty model professional behaviors in the classroom and are often asked by students about communication careers. This idea of faculty mentoring has recently been carried to new levels in the Association for Business Communication (ABC). In 2006, ABC began a formalized program for faculty members to mentor other ABC colleagues by initiating a mentor matching program [12].

Successful faculty mentors demonstrate effective communication principles by looking to their students' behaviors, using open-ended questions for clarification (much like counseling; and are always on the lookout for nonverbal hints about what really may be on their students' minds. With mentoring as described, the faculty member plays an essential role, challenges the students' thinking, and allows the students' own solutions to emerge [10].

In fact, this process describes most valuable learning experiences. Enhanced learning takes place when more knowledgeable individuals describe vital knowledge, information, and experiences and relate these to someone who can put this knowledge, information, and experiences to use on his or her own terms. Some would consider these factors to also be qualities of effective leaders [13].

In business, and in typical leaner and meaner workplace environments, the ability to think and reflect upon important business matters may be more problematic. However, even in that environment, the need for good mentoring is becoming more valuable. Watson [14] writes that in education the need to think and reflect upon new material is an indispensable part of learning. Since organizational communication courses normally involve both theory and practice, the importance of the mentoring role for organizational communication professors is paramount.

Academic mentoring is seen in other fields as well. Borman [15] has written about how less experienced Chemistry professors at the University of Maryland are being mentored by more experienced colleagues at the university and through national scientific organizations. Younger faculty members were targeted specifically by the university and the national organizations with strategies begun to assist younger professors in applying for national grants more successfully, researching more productively, and teaching more effectively.

The article "The Good Mentor's Guide" by Stern [16] states that mentoring involves:

1. listening;
2. honesty;
3. future-focused; and
4. sharing relevant experience and insights.

Mentoring does not involve telling people what to do or patronizing or belittling people. Again, good faculty/student relationships are built upon honesty and trust. Students need to be receptive to the information that their instructors are presenting to them. Students need to believe that their instructors are offering

essential information to them because of its potential benefit to them. In addition, great instructors also have to be great listeners as they need to be able to understand and diagnose student needs and issues to prepare their students for the challenges that they may be facing in the future. All of these describe what Stern delineated in his list. Further, the two items that he mentioned that detract from good mentoring relationships also are impediments to good learning relationships [18].

Much like good employer-employee relationships, good learning happens because students are motivated to want to learn; not because faculty members tell them that they must learn. In addition, faculty should never belittle or patronize their students. It is a given that faculty generally know more about their subject matter than their students. It is not a faculty member's role to make students look foolish or to ask their students questions that deride them or prove a faculty member's depth of knowledge and the student's lack of experience. These are counter-productive to a great student/teacher relationship

BENEFITS OF COACHING AND MENTORING

As coaches and mentors, we need to constantly strive to communicate clearly inside and outside of the classroom. Playing a part in two dimensions of our students' educational and career development, we provide valuable advice, criticism, and insight for our students. Since feedback is an essential part of effective communication, useful feedback may be the most important information that we may provide for our students. Coaching and mentoring allow for this transfer of information to happen [2].

Valuable lessons in the coaching and mentoring processes provide great opportunities for faculty to stress the importance of attitude. One part of attitude is the need for students to be open to change. In fact, faculty must also be open to change. This openness will encourage students to change as well. Sometimes this change means greater self-awareness. Like change, greater self-awareness allows students to question their assumptions, beliefs, and values. Faculty mentors need to be the first to do this and act as role models to encourage students to do the same. Doing so will likely increase their teaching and feedback effectiveness.

Other significant benefits in this relationship we have observed include those presented in the following listing:

- developing new ways of thinking about oneself, the task and the impact of the environment;
- increasing accountability and ownership by both individuals;
- creating mutual respect and learning;
- increasing job and life satisfaction;
- understanding the developmental aspects of the relationship over time and space;

- enhancing the message construction, observation skills, and feedback abilities of both individuals; and
- identifying trust issues as the relationship grows [17].

The authors also believe that with the benefits provided in this article that faculty and students must be aware of potential cautions as well. Some of those cautions include: guarding against hidden agendas; timing of feedback; packaging the message so it can be heard as intended; being helpful and simply not finding fault or correcting behavior; and the realization that if the behavior is beyond the scope of the relationship, that employee assistance programs may need to be employed.

SUMMARY

The coaching and mentoring processes are essential, but not-so-obvious, professional competencies of organizational communication professors. It is common knowledge that coaching and mentoring are regularly accepted in business and, in many situations, have replaced older management styles of developing employees for promotions or organizational growth. However, these processes are also important responsibilities of organizational communication professors as well. What may be surprising to some is that these coaching and mentoring processes are not adding work to a faculty member's life. Instead, a consideration of these processes provides an interesting perspective on the educational responsibilities of organizational communication faculty. For these faculty members, a greater knowledge of coaching and mentoring helps enhance and strengthen their educational relationships with students. In this way, it is a necessary and natural knowledge and skill set for these professors.

REFERENCES

1. L. Watt, Mentoring and Coaching in the Workplace, *The Canadian Manager, 29*:3, pp. 14-17, 2004.
2. S. Natale and T. Diamante, The Five Stages of Executive Coaching, *Journal of Business Ethics, 59*:4, pp. 361-374, 2005.
3. J. Wright, Workplace Coaching: What's It All About? *Work, 24*:3, pp. 325-328, 2005.
4. Anonymous, For Success with Corporate Coaching: Begin with Assessment, *HR Focus, 83*:8, 2006.
5. J. Starr, The Manager's Role in Coaching, *Development and Learning in Organizations, 18*:2, p. 9, 2004.
6. M. Frisch, Coaching Caveats: Part 2: Characteristics of the Coachee, *HR. Human Resource Planning, 28*:3, pp. 14-17, 2005.
7. S. Battley, Coaching Myths, *Leadership Excellence, 23,* p. 10, 2006.
8. Anonymous. Coaching and Mentoring: How to Develop Top Talent and Achieve Stronger Performance, *The Canadian Manager, 30*:1, p. 31, 2004.
9. D. Machles, Coaching and Mentoring Skills, *Professional Safety, 50,* p. 64, 2005.

10. S. Schneider, Coach or Mentor? It Depends, *Human Resources, 11,* p. 42, 2004.
11. F. Stone, Leadership Coach, *Executive Excellence, 21*:2, p. 5, 2004.
12. Anonymous, *Undergraduate Programs Committee Report,* Association for Business Communication, 2006.
13. D. Goleman, Leadership That Gets Results, *Harvard Business Review, 78*:2, pp. 78-90, 2000.
14. K. Watson, Facilitating Reflective Learning Through Mentoring and Coaching, *Personnel Today, 38,* June 20, 2006.
15. S. Borman, Renewed Focus on Academic Mentoring, *Chemical & Engineering News, 8*:27, p. 24, 2005.
16. S. Stern, The Good Mentor's Guide, in *Human Resources,* p. 11, January 2004.
17. R. T. Barker and R. H. Stowers, Learning From Our Students: Teaching Strategies for MBA Professors, *Business Communication Quarterly, 68*:4, p. 481, 2005.
18. R. T. Barker, C. G. Pearce, and I. W. Johnson, Assessment of the Listening Styles Inventory: Progress in Establishing Reliability and Validity, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 17*:1, pp. 84-113, 2003.

Other Articles On Communication By These Authors

R. T. Barker and R. H. Stowers, Focus on Teaching: "Team Virtual Discussion Board: Toward Multipurpose Written Agreements, *Business Communication Quarterly, 72*:2, pp. 227-230, 2009.

R. T. Barker and R. H. Stowers, The Perception of Communication Related Value-Added Educational Activities: A Survey of Graduate Business Students, *Journal for Technical Writing and Communication, 37*:3, pp. 347-354, 2007.

R. H. Stowers, Sometimes Less is More: Teaching Presentation Skills to Large Classes, *Business Education Forum,* National Business Education Association, Reston, April 2004.

R. H. Stowers and R. T. Barker, Improved Student Writing in Business Communication Classes: Strategies for Teaching and Evaluation, *Journal for Technical Writing and Communication, 33*:4, pp. 337-348, 2003.

Direct reprint requests to:

Robert H. Stowers
Mason School of Business
The College of William & Mary
P.O. Box 8795
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795
e-mail: robert.stowers@mason.wm.edu