



Peer coaching: An untapped resource for development

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INTRODUCTION

"It's always something. If it's not one thing, it's another." That was a constant refrain of Gilda Radner's character, Roseanne Rosanna Danna, in the early days of *Saturday Night Live*. And then she would go on to say something like, "If it's not a hurricane, it's a revolution across the world. If it's not that, it's a toe nail in your hamburger or toilet paper clinging to your shoe." This is the world environment that the U.S. Army has called the VUCA world – meaning that it is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. In this world the complexity and rate of change exceed our ability to comprehend what is going on around us. We are thus in over our heads.

In such a complex, turbulent world we need to find better and faster ways to adapt and cope. And we cannot do it all by ourselves. We need to use relational resources to learn our way through these challenges. As Jack Welch has said, "No one of us is as smart as all of us." Thus, learning through relationships is a foundation for career growth, and it must be a lifetime pursuit. The ability to accomplish career learning is what helps us make progress, get through work and life transitions, and adjust to changing circumstances.

This learning is not just a cognitive activity, either. Since it means being in a place where we do not initially have the competence we need to deal effectively with a challenge, it creates anxiety and frustration. Thus, successful adaptation requires not only informational but also emotional support, which puts a heavy burden on the relational assistance that we receive from other people.

We face a pretty daunting challenge – finding qualified, effective, motivated learning resources that can respond at very short notice and can be focused on specific tasks at the service of the learner. Even in this era of very constrained resources, such as slashed training and educational budgets, there is a ready source of highly qualified help available: *peer coaching*. We would argue that the "good news" here is that

in everyone's network there exist people who are capable of helping a person learn his or her way through the most demanding problem. We just need to learn how to use it. Peer coaching is a low-cost resource. It has high impact. It can be just in time. It is easily learned. And it is self-renewing, sustainable. When peer coaching is applied specifically to life and career decisions, it can be especially useful for career and leadership development. A relational focus connects the two types of development. And the person's network of relationships is quite varied inside and outside of one's own organization.

Recognition of peer coaching as a potentially invaluable resource for critical learning in today's volatile context closely aligns with what Positive Organizational Scholarship has emphasized for over a decade now. Both theoretical and practical writing on the topics of mentoring, relational learning, and high quality connections demonstrate that relationships have the potential to heighten self-awareness, develop critical skills, sharpen relational skills, energize partners to the relationship, and create a desire for more connection.

However, as we reflect upon our own experiences with using peer coaching in learning situations, peer coaching is not an effortless activity. You can't just put two people together and tell them to help each other. (You can, but not much good will result.) We find in our practice that there are *necessary conditions* that must be in place for peer coaching (PC) to work effectively. In our earlier work we have identified a *three step-process* that helps create successful and sustainable peer coaching. In this paper we expand upon that work to present a practitioner-focused approach to PC (see Fig. 1)

NECESSARY STEPS IN APPLYING PC

In this paper we will discuss how to apply our model in Fig. 1, with three steps, to successfully implement peer coaching.

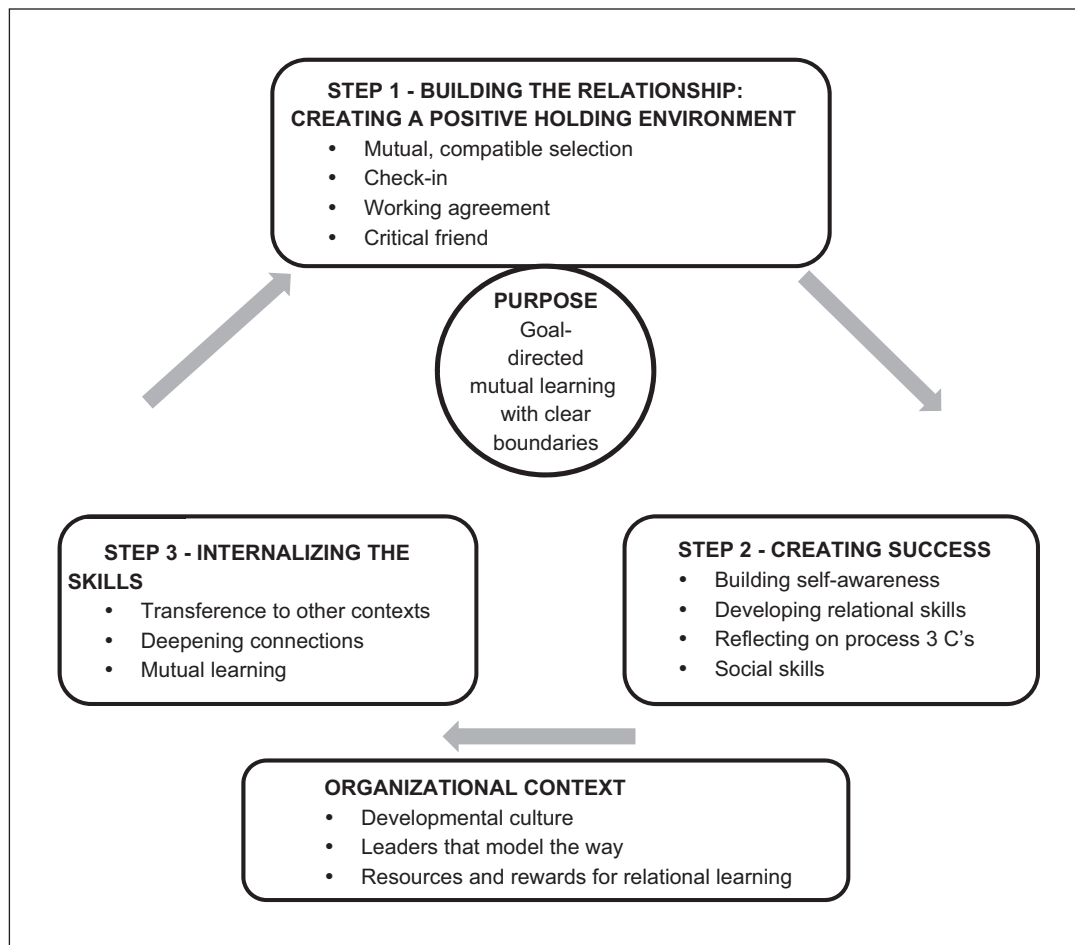


Figure 1 Three-Step Model of Peer Coaching.

We will further develop and expand on both the content and the processes that are involved in completing the three steps. We will proceed as if we were ourselves working alongside a colleague who is implementing peer coaching for the first time, elaborating on the mechanisms that are embedded in both the structure and the process.

First, we discuss three aspects integral to selecting peers. Then we focus on the three steps of the model beginning in step 1, with a focus on *building the relationship*. This includes providing the primary structure for peer coaching, initial processes for engagement and establishing a respectful environment that builds a *holding environment* for peer coaching. Then in step 2 we focus on *creating success*, gaining momentum, by identifying the necessary conditions for success, including developing relational skills and capability aligned with high quality connections, visioning for possibilities, introducing narrative and storytelling to deepen trust. The third step involves helping peers *internalize the skills* so that they can engage in autonomous, self-regulating peer coaching that is sustainable and ongoing.

We conclude by reiterating the value of peer coaching and the range of situations in which it is applicable. We also remind practitioners that the process is more complicated than we (and perhaps they) originally thought. However, its risks can be mitigated by appropriate preparation, planning and practice. Before we get into the details of how to make

these three steps, let us consider the equally important issue of the larger context in which PC takes place.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

A prerequisite for effective peer coaching is first establishing an enabling context in which peer coaching is recognized, valued and nurtured. While an organizational context may be characterized by power relations and hierarchy, pockets in which relational learning and support are valued can accelerate the acceptance of and magnify the outcomes of peer coaching. Individuals are shaped by and in turn shape the contexts in which they are embedded as they individually and collectively enact their careers. Peer coaching, either in dyads or in small groups, represents one of many potential configurations to support developmental growth and learning.

SETTING THE SCENE

A *climate of trust and support* is critical. While trust deepens throughout the process, it has to be established in the earliest phase of the peers' work together. We have found that the underlying premise is the need for what Carl Rogers over 40 years ago called, "a helping relationship that has the intent of promoting growth, development, maturity,

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