

**Peer Coaching: Enabling Skills
Development and Diversity Awareness in
Corporate South Africa**

Research

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PEER COACHING: ENABLING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSITY AWARENESS IN CORPORATE SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The changing business and socio-political climate in South Africa, together with a global context marked by ecological degradation and globalisation, has meant that there is an increased need for lifelong learning. This research explores how peer relationships utilise coaching skills and processes to enhance professional development in the context of these needs.

A qualitative approach was used in this study with a narrative design focussing on world construction. Snowballing techniques were applied to find a sample of six relationship-pairs within Johannesburg Stock Exchange listed companies in South Africa. The sample was diverse in terms of gender and cultural groups. The data was analysed using an approach based on grounded theory.

This research found that peer-coaching offered unique advantages in supporting professional and personal development. Successful peer relationships were found to have three levels of mutuality; the exchange of knowledge, roles and rank. This supported empowerment in the relationship and enabled effective experiential learning.

Various coaching skills and processes were found to be operating in successful peers. Common values and clear purpose were established to be important in matching peers. For the relationship to sustain, the pace of development between the pair needed to be aligned. The development of professional and personal competencies was interlinked.

The study suggests that coaching as a discipline legitimises and develops peer coaching to increase the extent of its impact. Recommendations for the design of peer-based coaching interventions for organisations are given. It is also proposed that peer coaching be utilised to address diversity awareness and skills development.

INCREASED NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Coaching is increasingly used for ongoing professional development within organisations both globally and in South Africa. The challenges resulting from globalisation and environmental degradation faced by organisations, as well as the transforming socio-political context and skills backlog in South Africa, have meant that additional vehicles for coaching delivery need to be considered by organisations.

Professional coaching is costly to roll out on a large scale and typically has been supplemented by mentoring or “manager as coach” programmes. Peer coaching has been found in this research to offer a preferred mode of delivery supporting diversity awareness, ongoing learning and professional development. This is particularly suited to the current trends in South African organisations, which rely on collaboration and interdependence in the marketplace.

Interdependence can be seen as a golden thread running through many current South African and global challenges. These economic, socio-political and environmental challenges (Capra, 1982) are likely to only be successfully addressed through collaborative learning, thinking and acting (Ploughman, 2000). This interdependence has led to an ever-increasing complexity around decision making in both the South African and global business environments, which can be seen to substantially accelerate the need for ongoing professional development and mutual support between employees.

The global context can be seen to impact on the demands made by South African organisations on their employees. Increasing levels of globalisation has led to complexity, increased competition and job uncertainty. This has forced businesses and employees to take more risks (Ploughman, 2000). Ecological uncertainty further demands humankind to adapt and change (Capra, 1982). This current business climate of continuous change and uncertainty increases levels of anxiety that are associated with the stress of risk taking. This places further emphasis on the large scale of the need for continuous professional development.

The changing nature of organisational hierarchies further impacts on the demands made organisations on their employees. Traditional notions of hierarchy are giving way to networks (Ploughman, 2000). Flatter organisational structures have resulted in employees having increased isolation and pressure due to managers’ larger spans of control (Holbeche, 1996). Employees therefore need to learn how to operate effectively in increasingly projectised environments harnessing lateral resources.

South Africa has particular needs for professional and skills development in organisations deriving from the need to redress historic inequalities around education and labour (Suzman, 1994). Black economic empowerment and employment equity policies have accentuated the need for accelerated professional development. The fast changing national environment demands new solutions to be co-created. This is often difficult from an expert or authority driven vehicle for professional development such as mentoring or “manager as coach” initiatives, where historic solutions are often imposed and limit new explorative thinking and collaboration.

Thus in both a global and South African context, organisations need to find innovative and effective ways to enhance professional development on an increasingly large scale. Peer coaching is submitted to be an invaluable vehicle to meet some of the above-mentioned needs.

METHOD

This exploratory study investigated how peer relationships utilise coaching skills and processes to enhance professional development within South African corporations. A qualitative approach was used with a narrative design focussing on world construction. The emphasis is on detailed description and understanding of phenomena within the appropriate context (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995).

Snowballing techniques were applied to find a sample of six relationship-pairs within Johannesburg Stock Exchange listed companies in South Africa. The sample was diverse in terms of gender and cultural groups. The data was analysed using an approach based on grounded theory.

Two interviews per participant were scheduled. In the initial 60-minute individual interview I attempted to establish rapport with the participant. To ensure consistency, a standardised statement of context and question was used to begin each interview. Subsequent to this, the interview was guided by a set of research questions. These were applied with some flexibility.

A second round of interviews was conducted after the individual interviews. These were 60-minute depth interviews, which sought to unpack themes that emerged from the initial round of interviews. Participants were also asked to complete reflection forms between the interviews that acted to focus their attention on the relationship between the two interviews, allowing for a deepening of their reflection in the second interview.

Transcriptions were reviewed for themes and hypotheses throughout. The associated process of data analysis was informed by Post & Andrews (1982), and involved exploring the data for categories, derived from preliminary hypotheses, which showed commonalities across cases.

FINDINGS

This research found that peer relationships and consequently peer coaching offers unique advantages in supporting professional and personal development. Key findings are presented below:

1. Peer Relationships

Peer coaching needs to exist within a peer relationship. A peer relationship can be considered any relationship in which each party has a perception and experience of **equality** in the relationship (Kram & Isabella, 1985). One respondent expressed this as follows:

“We both see each other on the same level.”

Peer relations are quite distinct from traditional mentoring relationships in which the higher rank of one is continuously in focus, which creates a boundary in the relationships, limiting the dialogues to work-based topics. These relationships resulted in one of each pair not getting their needs adequately met. This often seemed to put the relationship at risk of termination. As one respondent commented:

“I am beginning to wonder if the investment of my time was worthwhile.”

Successful peer relationships were found to have three levels of mutuality, namely, the exchange of knowledge, roles and rank. This supported empowerment in the relationship and enabled effective experiential learning. The following principles derived from the study are put forward as tenets of peer coaching:

- The **exchange of information or knowledge** was foundational to these relationships and was typically psychosocial and career enhancing. This demonstrated that there was an integration of personal and professional development in successful peer relationships.

An important consideration for people engaging in peer coaching is that this exchange of information was most effective for learning when it was a real-time reflection.

- The **exchange of roles** allowed for a deepening of learning in the relationships. In successful examples of peer relationships, each partner in the pair would only temporarily take up the role of facilitator or coach. This is aligned with the principle of lifelong learning where continuous adaptation is required and the learning is never complete.

Individuals participating in peer coaching should be aware that learning can take place both when coaching someone through an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) as well as when being coached.

One participant described this phenomenon as follows:

“I often bounce ideas off her, or phone her and share my thoughts, or blow off steam. So I draw on her as much as she draws on me.”

- The **exchange of rank** was found to be present in effective peer relationships. Rank is used broadly to describe amongst others, holding

authority, maturity, an expert role or a higher psychosocial awareness. The important factor is that both partners in the peer relationships had rank at different times in the relationship and that this rank was temporary, shifting from person to person.

Adult learning is self-directed (Knowles, 1990); learners who feel empowered are more likely to take responsibility for their own learning. Acknowledgement of temporary rank can be considered important in peer coaching as it allows for one of the peers to lead the dialogue without taking power from the other peer.

2. Coaching Processes and Skills

The research shows that several criteria are essential if a peer relationship is to successfully act as a coaching relationship. Individuals engaging in peer coaching relationships should consider the following:

- Good matching is fundamental to a successful peer relationship. Peer coaches should work to find peers with **common personal values**. This enables the pair to use a common language towards life and work.

In cases where the relationship pair was from different cultural backgrounds, differences around diversity still gave way to personal values. The point of connection in the relationship was seldom attributed to commonalities around cultures or cultural values:

“I didn’t know that Eddy¹ was coloured, when I met him...I always thought he was Greek...and then I wondered what his background was, because he was always just ahead of most of us in his way of thinking and talking.”

- For a peer relationship to sustain, the **rate of development** of both partners in the pair needs to be similar. The misalignment of this factor resulted in judgments that prevented the pairs from seeing deeper problem contexts.
- Peer coaching relationships should attempt to adopt a stance of **unconditional acceptance** that enables vulnerability, curiosity and learning.
- Peer relationships needed a **clear and specific purpose**. This is similar to formal coaching relationships (Flaherty, 1999; Peltier, 2001; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998). Peer coaching relationships should consider either a mutually understood and agreed purpose or link the relationship to external outcomes derived from an educational programme, project or work outcome.

¹ Names of interviewees have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

3. Professional Development

In the relationships classified as peers, there was little distinction between personal and professional development. Rather personal limitations and sensitivities were dealt with in the context of understanding that they had bearing on professional growth. When personal and professional developmental needs were both dealt with simultaneously, this seemed to lead to enhanced growth and performance, enabling the person to reinvent him or herself.

A broad range of professionally enhancing skills and development areas were covered in the relationships. Personal developmental skills are included in the peer-coaching category as this was handled simultaneously with professional development in these relationships. These are presented in Table 1 and contrasted to those of the relationships demonstrating more of a mentoring approach:

Table 1: Comparative relational outputs

Peer Coaching	Mentoring Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership skills • Broad range of psycho-social skills • Academic development • Diversity awareness • Decision making skills • Assertiveness skills • Systemic thinking (pragmatic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical skills • Skills transfer • Decision making skills • Self awareness skills

Professional development could be seen in the peer relationships as a continuous process of adapting to the changing needs of the work environment. This can be viewed as a process of lifelong learning. This not only allows the individual to adapt to the work environment but also supports the individual participating in the ongoing process of adapting the work environment and organisational culture for more effective functioning:

“Our departments have worked better together than ever before.”

4. Diversity and Systemic Thinking

In this particular case, acceptance between a culturally diverse pair proved to be both a characteristic of the relationship as well as a learning outcome of it. When asked about the learning experienced through the relationship, the participant responded:

“I think it was also tolerance to understand people... understand the person for what they are or who they are.”

The other participant in the relationship pair expressed an aligned view that she had learnt a “deep appreciation and tolerance” in her interpersonal relationships.

This deep appreciation for difference or diversity impacted on this participant’s ability to think systemically. Whilst systemic theory was covered in a corporate university course that both participants attended, the relationship seemed to enable them to apply systems thinking pragmatically in the workplace. This Moslem participant, a financial manager, shared her deep appreciation for the Zulu participant, an IT manager in the same company, who was in the relationship pair with her. Their joint exploration of cultural differences was vast, in that they had worked, studied and traveled together. Furthermore, their families had become friends.

Through the relationship, the participant who is a financial manager reported to have developed an increased level of tolerance for individuals in the IT department. She linked this to her ability to understand the unique dynamics of the IT environment. These had often led to her and her colleagues in the financial department making unjustified assumptions about individuals in the IT department, particularly when there were IT problems in the department:

“We sit on opposite sides and never blow up. We have a deep abiding respect and seem to know what the other one is thinking.”

As a leader in the organisation she had passed this attitude on to her subordinates and actively encouraged a different approach based on tolerance and understanding in communications between the departments. As such, the joint functioning of the two departments had improved:

“Our departments have worked better together than ever before.”

As she reflected in the interview, she linked this experience to the improvement of her relationship with her manager who had shown an increased interest in understanding her cultural background. This increased their overall ability to communicate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study affirm the success of what could be termed peer coaching, and put forward that peer relationships successfully utilise coaching skills to enhance professional and personal development. The practical application of the findings will now be considered.

1. Organisational Interventions

The findings of this study suggest several implications for organisations. General recommendations are given for designing organisational interventions based on peer relationships. Peer coaching has been found to be particularly suited to the development of leaders and accelerated development processes on the basis of their pragmatic emphasis and reflective component.

Peer coaching can also effectively support succession planning in bridging the gap between manager and owner or business executive. The mutual exchange of knowledge, rank and roles, as demonstrated in the study, would support a gradual process towards the equality of perceived rank between the two.

It is proposed that peer-coaching interventions should be designed around a particular area of focus within personal or professional development such as leadership development or an accelerated development programme. The findings suggest that peer relationships are most effective when used in tandem with a structured learning programme with clear objectives.

Peers should be matched in pairs in a way that ensures an alignment of personal values and should include consideration of levels of ambition. In the findings, ambition was linked to pace of development and was shown to be an important indicator of the sustainability of the relationship. Furthermore, peers should experience a personal fit and a sense of equality between them.

The positioning of peers in a relationship-pair was found to be of significance in this study, as it facilitates the peer thinking systemically in viewing other parts of the organisational system. Pairing individuals across different divisions, national offices or organisations is likely to increase learning outputs and value-adds.

The intervention design should prescribe a structure for meetings, reviews and objectives. Peers should practice mutual exchange of information along with the exchange of roles and rank.

A further recommendation is that review sessions, which could take the form of action learning sets, or group dialogue or individual professional coaching sessions, be periodically arranged to facilitate a reflection on learning and/or the relationship. In the study, the process of interviewing was shown in several cases to deepen the participant's learning from their relationship.

2. Developing Diversity Awareness

The results suggest that peer relationships offer a unique contribution to developing diversity awareness within organisations. Peer relationships were found to effectively enhance the ability of each peer to respect and understand difference, as well as develop effective interpersonal skills. This enabled them to work across socio-cultural barriers.

This was found to have an influence on the ability of the peers to think systemically. This meant that he or she was better able to consider the relative perspectives emerging from different positions in various parts of the organisational system.

In a South African context, post-apartheid sensitivities around authority seemed to act as a barrier to communication in relationships with positional power that drew on a mentoring approach.

Currently in South Africa, the workplace is likely to be one of the only forums in which diverse cultural groups, on a large scale, are forced to inter-relate in a meaningful way. It is therefore a useful point of leverage for the development of diversity awareness that underpins the social reconstruction of the South African population.

The study indicated that not only were peers more able to adapt to their environment, they also played a part in shaping the evolution of organisational cultural norms. It can be argued that this is a crucial aspect of social reconstruction, which enables the formation of a new social culture operating across the diverse historical socio-cultural groupings.

Peer coaching goes beyond the common use of “manager as coach” in emphasising equality rather than rank or positional power in the relationship. This enhances the ability of peer coaching relationships to raise and work with diversity around culture, gender and other areas.

3. Implications for Coaching

The research affirms the need for coaching as a discipline to consider the use of peer relationships in the workplace as a legitimate platform within which coaching processes and skills can be effectively utilised. Moving beyond direct commercial relationships offers a potential point of leverage for the discipline to make a substantial contribution to the development of society at large.

This research is not claiming that the use of peer coaching replaces the need for a professional coach. Rather, I am claiming that peer relationships offer an effective platform for coaching to be practised, and that this platform offers several unique advantages that can be harnessed.

The professional coach can thus engage in direct relationships, as well as training and facilitating peer based coaching interventions. Internal coaching can be particularly effective in a South African organisational context by responding to rank sensitivities and working within relationships based on equality rather than relationships influenced strongly by positional power.

It would seem that there is an opportunity for coaching as a discipline to move beyond current norms around service delivery to effectively address local and global challenges pertaining to globalisation, diversity, ecology and power.

CONCLUSION

Peer coaching has been shown to be a viable and effective delivery vehicle to enhance personal and professional development on a sustainable basis. Several advantages have been identified whereby peer coaching has been shown to be particularly suited to supporting South African organisations develop diversity awareness and accelerate the skills development process within the workplace.

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