STAFF COACHING:
WHAT'S IMPORTANT FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS?

Background

Staff coaching, sometimes referred to as ongoing staff support, is one component of professional development.[i] Although skills needed by practitioners working in fatherhood programs can be introduced during staff training, many skills can only really be learned on the job with ongoing support and supervision provided by a "coach." The use of staff coaching has grown rapidly in the social services sector over the past decade, however, its role in apprenticeship and sound management goes back even further.[ii,iii] This brief discusses the benefits of staff coaching and provides tips on effective strategies for implementing staff coaching in a fatherhood program.

What is Staff Coaching?

There are a wide variety of definitions found in literature for professional coaching. In general, staff coaching is described as an interactive, action-oriented, goal-setting process that helps individuals implement evidence-based practices and programs with fidelity.[iv]

> **Staff coaching** involves ongoing teaching, reinforcements of newly learned skills, and adaptations of skills and knowledge of the field to fit practitioners' personal styles. Staff coaching includes activities for both individuals and groups, such as on-the-job observation, instruction, modeling, feedback, debriefing, and emotional support. Staff "coaches" maybe other frontline staff members, administrations, outside consultants, or staff supervisors.

Why is Staff Coaching Important for Fatherhood Programs?

Fatherhood programs can derive numerous benefits from staff coaching. While behavior change is difficult under any circumstances, staff coaching can help practitioners overcome the fragility, awkwardness, and incompleteness of newly learned behavior, the three common barriers to implementing evidence-based practices and programs.[v] Additionally, ongoing coaching can help prevent the natural tendency to backslide. Coaching can have positive effects in four areas.

- **Fragility of newly learned behavior:** Because it takes time for practitioners to become adept at using newly learned evidenced-based practices, those affected by these practices (e.g. program participants) may react negatively to them at first. If this happens, effective coaches support practitioners through this period of getting worse before getting better.
- **Awkwardness of newly learned behavior:** No matter how thorough the initial training, newly learned evidence-based practices may feel uncomfortable and even unnatural at first.

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Effective coaches teach practitioners to get a feeling for the nuances of each practice and to find ways to work with these practices in the context of their personal styles and unique circumstances.

- **Incompleteness of newly learned behavior:** Only so much material can be covered during any initial training. Effective coaches guide practitioners as they move from entry-level knowledge and skills toward expert-level knowledge and skills.

- **A tendency to backslide:** Even after new approaches and practices are mastered, it is natural to gradually slide back into familiar ways of doing things. Ongoing coaching can help sustain new behaviors and prevent backsliding.

What Steps Can Programs Take To Coach Frontline Staff Effectively?

Given the important role that staff coaching plays in helping practitioners overcome the fragility, awkwardness, and incompleteness of newly learned behavior, as well as the tendency to backslide, it is critical that fatherhood programs incorporate some elements of staff coaching into their professional development strategy.

- **Step 1: Select coaches who are knowledgeable.**
  Coaches should have knowledge of coaching theory and technique, as well as content area knowledge. If staff members will coach each other (peer coaching), consider providing some initial training in the art of coaching. If employing "expert" coaches, make sure they have experience not only in their field (for example, case management) but also in coaching.[vi]

- **Step 2: Promote positive relationships between coaches and staff.**
  Coaching relationships should be built on respect, trust, and collegiality. To promote such relationships:
  - Roles, expectations, and the purpose of the coaching relationship should be clear from the beginning, and both coaches and staff members should understand and believe in them;
  - Feedback given by coaches should be positive, nonjudgmental, and should not be used for evaluative purposes; and,[vii]
  - When possible and appropriate, staff members should be given some degree of choice in their coach, be it peer or expert.

- **Step 3: Institute team meetings.**
  Coaches and staff or peer coaching teams should meet frequently and should engage in a wide variety of activities beyond observations and feedback. These activities might include providing emotional support and companionship, planning, and reflection.

- **Step 4: Allow sufficient time for program staff to develop new skills.**
  Coaches and program staff should remember that the transfer of new skills takes time, approximately 25 teaching episodes for complex strategies.[viii] Program staff members should allow themselves time to experiment, practice, and make mistakes.

- **Step 5: Support and promote coaching initiatives fully.**
  Administrators should make sure that sufficient time and resources are devoted to coaching activities. Additionally, administrators should cover the responsibilities of staff members

when necessary and help them work coaching into their busy schedules. It may be especially important for newly hired frontline staff members to observe veteran staff in action.[ix]

- **Step 6: Consider coaching as a long-term professional development strategy.**
  In addition to helping practitioners effectively implement newly learned skills and practices, coaching can also encourage experimentation and staff collegiality. For example, coaching has been broadly defined to describe a goal-focused process of assisting individuals and companies to achieve personal and professional goals.[x]

Coaching In Action: Two Case Studies

Literature on staff coaching as a professional development tool in fatherhood programs is scarce. However, data gathered through semi-structured interviews with two fatherhood programs demonstrates that coaching is most likely to occur in structured meeting sessions between supervisors and frontline staff and in formal and informal meetings with co-workers.

<u>Case Study # 1:</u> **Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Fatherhood Education, Empowerment and Development (FEED) Program[xi]**
Program staff reported receiving formal staff coaching and mentoring through regularly scheduled meetings with their supervisor. Additionally, staff reported having frequent informal conversations with both supervisors and peers to discuss questions, problems, and ideas. Staff felt that coaching and mentoring helped them to clarify the program mission, become more organized, relate better to the fathers being served, and improve the service they provide.

Staff shared the importance of coaching for them:

> *"It allows me to not to make mistakes twice. Supervision allows me the opportunity to discuss where I can potentially improve and have a different result and apply new information to get a favorable result."*
>
> *"Coming from another cultural background, it was difficult to understand men from a different culture. [My supervisor] has helped me understand the uniqueness and peculiar challenges they have. I have really achieved a lot and learned a lot from [my supervisor]."*

<u>Case Study # 2:</u> **Detroit Workforce Development Department (DWDD) and the Detroit Workforce Development Board (DWDB)[xii]**
Program staff reported receiving formal staff coaching and mentoring sessions through biweekly one-on-one meetings with their supervisor and through bi-weekly meetings with their co-workers. Additionally, staff supervisors reported randomly observing program sessions. A debriefing session always followed these informal observations and any facilitator needs or issues were addressed at this time.

Staff shared the importance of coaching for them:

> *"[During staff meetings] we share with one another basic life skills as well as experiences that not only help us in our life, but help us convey a message of hope. And I think that's very important for those individuals [fathers] seeing their lives being down or seeing their lives being hopeless."*

Conclusions and Action Steps

More research is needed to determine best practices for coaching fatherhood program staff and whether the strategies vary depending upon the program population served and staff characteristics. Nevertheless, some clear ideas have emerged about effective strategies for coaching frontline staff to implement practices effectively and achieve positive outcomes.

Action Steps for Staff Coaching

Action Step 1
> Coaches should have knowledge of coaching theory, as well as content area knowledge.

Action Step 2
> Coaching relationships should be built on respect, trust, and collegiality.

Action Step 3
> Coaches and program staff or peer coaching teams should meet frequently, both formally and informally, and should engage in a wide variety of activities.

Action Step 4
> Program staff members should allow themselves time to experiment, practice, and make mistakes.

Action Step 5
> Program administrators should support and promote any and all coaching initiatives fully, including making sure that appropriate time and resources are devoted to the coaching experience.

Action Step 6
> Coaching should be considered a long-term professional development strategy.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

- **National Association of Social Workers**
  The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers around the world. The NASW is a membership-based organization offering a variety of social networking opportunities, publications, and an online community sharing the best practices in the social sector. More information is available online at: http://www.naswdc.org/

- **The Fatherhood Coalition**
  The Fatherhood Coalition advocates for the institution of fatherhood, encompassing the full range of human behaviors and endeavors that flow from the father-child relationship. They work to promote shared parenting among divorced and unwed fathers. The Fatherhood coalition offers free online webinars to practitioners working with fathers. More information is available at: http://www.fatherhoodcoalition.org/

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