Coaching

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is coaching?

There is no single universally recognized definition of coaching. In the context of the workplace, common elements of coaching definitions include a one-on-one systematic relationship, learning, behavioral change, self-awareness, and improved performance (Grover & Furnham, 2016). Some notable differences in definitions include who receives the coaching, who conducts the coaching, the type of behavior change that is targeted, and the nature of the coaching behaviors. For example, several definitions focus more exclusively on top leaders receiving coaching from external, professional coaches (e.g., Kilburg, 1996); known more commonly as executive coaching, this was a common arrangement when workplace coaching first flourished. Despite the variability in definitions, there is general agreement that coaching is different from therapy, consulting, mentoring, training, and supervision, each of which involves different goals, roles, or processes than coaching (International Coaching Federation, n.d.). The following definition accounts for much of the evolution and expansion of coaching in the workplace over the last several decades: "the use of coaching methodologies in the workplace for the purpose of helping employees, managers, and leaders attain work-related goals in terms of skills, performance, or developmental outcomes" (Grant, 2017, p. 39).

Coaches can be either external or internal to the organization, depending on resources and needs. External coaches may be experts in the coachee's area of work or in coaching in general. There is disagreement about who can serve as an internal coach. Some argue that supervisors and peers do not qualify as coaches, because in true coaching relationships, there should be no formal organizational connections (as would be present in a supervisor-subordinate or peer-peer relationship; Jones et al., 2016). Others adopt a broader conceptualization and include managers, supervisors, or peers, with whom the coachee has existing working relationships or that work in another area of the organization (e.g., Grant, 2017). There are also internal coach practitioners, such as human resources or professional development personnel, whose official role is more focused on employee development.

Coaching occurs in both private and public sectors. For example, there are training programs and consortia of coaches for private business, non-profit organizations, state and federal government agencies, and the child welfare field in particular (e.g., Center for Non-Profit Coaching, Office of Personnel Management, Capacity Building Center for States).

Just as there are many definitions of coaching, there are many different models of coaching as well. One way to categorize them is based on the type of change that is targeted: specific skills, job performance, or overall development (Witherspoon & White, 1996).

▷ In skills coaching, the focus can be on introducing and building brand new skills or on increasing proficiency of a skill that was assumed at hire or was previously introduced (e.g., in a formal training or on the job) but not sufficiently mastered. Unless the skills are very generic and widely applicable (e.g., problem solving, public speaking), this type of coaching requires the coach to have expertise in the job at hand. Relative to other types of coaching, in skills coaching, the coach is often more engaged in demonstration and modeling of the desired behavior and in providing immediate feedback. The coachee observes the coach, practices the behaviors, responds to feedback, and participates in self-reflection (e.g., Hafer et al., 2013).

▷ In performance coaching, the focus is on improving certain areas of job performance that may be lacking. Relative to other types of coaching, in performance coaching, the coach needs to spend more time helping to diagnose the underlying issues (e.g., knowledge, skills, opportunity, motivation, confidence) first (Witherspoon & White, 1996). Then the process can shift to goal setting, action planning, and monitoring and evaluation of progress (Grant et al., 2010).

▷ In developmental coaching, the focus is on building a person's capacity to meet future challenges, either in their current job or one they aspire to have (Witherspoon & White, 1996). Coaches help with identifying strengths and liabilities and how to achieve the changes needed to succeed in the future. Among the more common areas of focus are things like interpersonal skills, communication, delegation, time management, conflict management, motivation, and planning (Bono et al., 2009). This type of coaching is more common among top leaders and typically takes longer than other types of coaching (Grant et al., 2010).

Though this framework helps with thinking about how coaching purposes and strategies can differ, it is important to emphasize that in practice, coaching is highly diverse and therefore difficult to describe in a uniform way. Though there are some standardized coaching models (e.g., see Capacity Building Center for States, n.d.) and some similarities in how professional coaches are trained, individual coaching arrangements are likely to be highly customized to a given situation. Additional aspects that vary include communication methods and duration. Coaching sessions can take place in person, virtually, or through blended methods (Bono et al., 2009). In terms of duration, some people use just a few sessions, whereas others work with their coach for 6 to 12 months on a series of topics. Regardless of all the variation, the goal is to help move the person to action—the way a stagecoach moves a person from one place to another—thereby increasing self-efficacy and performance.

Why is coaching valuable?

Because of the large variation in how coaching is defined and implemented, there are challenges with evaluating its effectiveness. Thus, research has lagged behind practice. At this time, the available meta-analytic research has a much more limited focus than all the approaches described in the previous section. Specifically, the most recent and comprehensive review is limited to one-on-one workplace coaching that is provided only by coach

practitioners, not managers or peers, and that focuses on work outcomes. Though the availability of rigorous research is a general problem, it should be noted that the exclusion of manager and peer coaching here is not about research availability; rather, it is based on a more narrow definition of coaching.

Coaching is valuable because it is associated with changes in attitudes, stress indicators, and behaviors (Jones et al., 2016). After coaching, there is a large improvement in self-efficacy and well-being. There is a small degree of skill development through coaching, and coaching has a large positive impact on job performance.

The research is contradictory about whether the impact of coaching is affected by the type of coach (i.e., internal or external) or the length of coaching engagement (e.g., Jones et al., 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015). There is evidence, however, that the relationship between coaching and positive outcomes is stronger when multi-source feedback is excluded (Jones et al., 2016) and when the coach and client have a trusting relationship and shared understanding about the coaching process and goals (GraBmann et al., 2020).

Given all the ways that coaching can vary, there is a lot that is still unknown about the impact of coaching. Relative to how frequently coaching is used, the overall number of studies is very low. Thus, more controlled studies are needed. To be most useful, those studies need to include details about the nature of the coaching relationship, such as who provided and who received coaching; the number and duration of coaching sessions; the intended purpose and goals; specific techniques, tools, or models used; and the measures used to assess outcomes (Jones et al., 2016)

The increasing popularity of coaching in child welfare agencies presents valuable opportunities to contribute to the evidence base, especially on the use of supervisors as coaches, which is more common in child welfare. Researchers or practitioners who are interested in assessing the effectiveness, impact, and efficiency of coaching programs should refer to Peterson & Kraiger (2004), which provides five steps to planning and conducting a successful coaching program evaluation.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► There is no single universally recognized definition of coaching, and there is large variability in practice.
► Coaching has a large impact on attitudes, with self-efficacy increasing after coaching.
► Coaching has a moderate impact on stress indicators, with better well-being and coping after coaching.
► Coaching has a large impact on behavior, with job performance and self-regulation improving after coaching.
► Coaching has a stronger impact when multi-source feedback is excluded and when the coach and client have a trusting relationship and shared understanding about the coaching process and goals.

► For advice on planning and conducting a successful coaching program evaluation, [Peterson & Kraiger (2004)](#) is a recommended resource.

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