

# **The Coach Approach: A Case Study on the Coach Approach Training Plan in Solano County Human Services Agency**

**ARACELY MARTINEZ**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The use of coaching as a powerful tool for effective leadership has been the subject of numerous scholarly articles and has been widely used for many years by high level executives in some of the world's largest corporations (Kilburg, 2007). Coaching can be found in many contemporary models of leadership and is an important part of corporate leadership training programs. A growing number of public agencies are now applying coaching in a range of formats and contexts outside of traditional senior executive coaching (Federation, 2016).

In the Solano County Human Services Agency, the Employment and Eligibility division adopted the use of coaching to create a coaching culture within the department to support organizational success. The two-day Coach Approach training teaches supervisors and managers the initial skills needed to apply the Coach Approach in everyday supervision and encourages the use of coaching to motivate and engage their employees.

---

**Aracely Martinez, Social Services Program Manager I,  
Santa Clara County Social Services Agency**



# The Coach Approach: A Case Study on the Coach Approach Training Plan in Solano County Human Services Agency

ARACELY MARTINEZ

## Introduction

A public agency whose success relies on the skills, knowledge, innovation, and productivity of its front line staff must make considerable investments in the professional development of its supervisors and managers. For many public agencies, executing new processes, dealing with the fall out from change, and preparing staff for change are constant realities that supervisors and managers must deal with. Public program managers and supervisors face continuous pressure on employee performance and program administration and delivery. As program managers and supervisors have a major influence on front line staff and thus the success of a public program's successful administration, the importance of coaching has been recognized as a significant factor in developing staff motivation, innovation, and managerial flexibility (Jones, et. al., 2006). Many public agencies are introducing coaching to their leadership staff and encouraging the use of a Coach Approach to help line staff develop capabilities. Public administrators are looking at the research that shows that investing in the development of coaching not only benefits those on the receiving end of coaching but also those that are doing the coaching and organizing (Tim Theeboom, 2013).

## The Coach Approach Framework

The International Coaching Federation defines coaching as “partnering with a coachee in a thought provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential”

(Federation, 2016). Coaches are asked to use structured dialogue to assist their coachees in seeing various viewpoints and achieving greater clarity about their own thoughts, emotions, and actions. Coaches are trained to use various skills and approaches to allow the coachees the opportunity to develop their goals and create their own action plans to achieve them. Coaching is looked at as a process that supports the development in both individuals and in groups by allowing the facilitation of learning. Coaching works toward building employee confidence and enhances self-directedness, which in turn positively affects work performance (Tim Theeboom, 2013). The research on the benefits of coaching show that 80% of people who receive coaching report increased self-confidence and over 70% benefit from improved work performance and more effective communication skills. Of companies that use coaching, 86% report that they recovered their investment on coaching (ICF 2009).

## Solano County Case Study

Solano county has a decisive view on the potential benefits of coaching and recognizes that developing a coaching culture is not only beneficial to individual staff, but also that coaching leads to improved organizational performance. Solano County began implementing their Coach Approach training program in February 2018 and, as is the case with other organizations that use coaching, Solano County set a goal of creating a coaching culture throughout the organization. For Solano County, this meant that

coaching is happening both informally and formally. Managers and supervisors trained in basic coaching competencies are encouraged to apply coaching skills in day-to-day conversations with their staff by using a coaching style of supervision and management that stresses listening and asking questions rather than directing. In other words, the managers and supervisors lead learning in the workplace on a continuous basis and this in turn helps to build a learning culture.

The curriculum for Solano County's Coach Approach training was adapted from curriculum developed by the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center and the ACS Workforce Institute. The curriculum was developed to familiarize the participants with a coaching model and to customize the coaching application to the individual needs of each supervisor or manager. The training takes two full days to complete and has some follow-up sessions and check-ins.

**Day one** of the training program involves creating a safe space for participants as well as defining and explaining the rationale for coaching. Staff are introduced to coaching by showing them ways in which coaching is connected to the work they may already be doing with staff and clients. Participants are guided into what it means to have a coaching mindset by shifting the way they look at supervision from a directing approach (which is often used in the formative stage for those employees with little or no experience) to a coaching approach. This means that supervisors and managers as coaches create a partnership with their staff and are focused on developing the relationship with their staff for learning and change. By encouraging the coaching mindset, participants are taught to see coaching as not an additional thing to do but rather a more effective way to carry out their managerial and supervisory duties. Participants are asked to look at the ways in which coaching differs from supervision and the ways in which coaching can be used to develop employees so there is less directing and more suggesting. This in turn will lead to more encouragement, thus acting as a coach to the employee. The desired outcome is an

employee that progresses and is motivated to progress even further. Another topic covered in the first day of training is the implementation and transfer of learning. Research from Joyce and Showers is shared with participants that supports Solano County's idea that only when coaching is provided to staff are staff members able to adapt and master new strategies learned in training (Showers, 1996).

While the morning of the first day of training is focused on the theories and research behind coaching, the second part of the day is focused more on the practical. The emphasis on practical learning of the Coach Approach on the first day helps participants retain the theories and the learning experience in their minds. This leads to a better understanding of the material and helps participants try out their newly-learned skills in a safe and supportive environment. Real life scenarios are used so that participants can put the application of the Coach Approach to use.

In the coaching demo, participants observe a coaching session in which an employee has a challenging work situation that is brought to the coach. Participants are provided with two worksheets to use to identify the basic coaching skills and coaching steps in the coaching process in the demo. Prior to conducting their own coaching sessions in pairs, the training sets the foundation by going over ethical guidelines and professional standards and establishing the coaching agreement with staff. Staff learn what is required in specific coaching interactions and tools are provided.

The coaching skills practice segment allows the participants the opportunity to work in pairs. Pairs take turns being both coach and coachee and coaches are observed on how well they are using the skills of being present, engaged listening, reflecting, and clarifying. Participants are reminded of guidelines for engaged listening and to be aware of their nonverbal communication. Participants role-playing as coaches practice reflecting with the person's words, paraphrasing to ensure they are accurately interpreting the intention and emotion behind the message, and clarifying to ensure accurate restatements are given

**FIGURE 1**  
**Format for Giving Feedback Following Practices**

<b>COACH</b>	Share one thing you felt you did well
<b>COACHEE</b>	Share one thing the coach did that worked well
<b>COACH</b>	Share one thing that you believe you need to do differently next time
<b>COACHEE</b>	Share one thing you suggest the coach consider doing differently next time

without over-interpretation and reflecting nuance and what is being sensed behind the words. The pairs then give each other feedback following each of the practices using the format in *Figure 1*.

The afternoon concludes with a focus on enhancing the participants' ability to ask powerful questions during a coaching session. The goal of these exercises is to show that posing powerful questions can engage powerful thinking. Participants are asked to avoid asking "why" questions, which can sound confrontational and elicit defensive responses. The focus of this skill is to show how the coach can allow the coachee the opportunity to explore possibilities and not drive the coachee to "correct" answers. During this segment the trainer emphasizes that coaching is not a way for supervisors to display their own knowledge and expertise; instead, coaching is used to strengthen the coachee's personal experience, knowledge, and insights. The coaches are encouraged to listen carefully and trust that the questions will come from their listening. Common question-asking mistakes are reviewed and coaches are taught not to ask closed, directive, rhetorical, and leading questions.

**Day two** of the training reiterates the focusing activity and then dives into feedback and assessment. Participants are given an overview of how important feedback and assessment are in coaching. The goal is for participants to identify why feedback is so important and how it helps staff be more effective. Trainers

share the key elements of productive feedback and demonstrate the skill for participants.

The next unit of day two focuses on the purpose and importance of accountability. The objectives are for participants to learn what it means to hold a coachee accountable and to demonstrate examples of holding a coachee accountable. The participants look at how coaching holds the coachee accountable to commitments and discuss how accountability can express caring about the person's success. Participants discuss ways in which they currently hold their unit members accountable and the similarities between their current practices and the coaching model. The importance of following up on made commitments is stressed and modeling this behavior is stressed.

The next unit focuses on the final coaching sessions. Prior to the final coaching sessions, participants have one more chance to review all the coaching skills learned. Participants are asked how they use each skill and to list tips on how they use each skill to share with the group.

The final coaching sessions involve putting all the skills learned together and modeling how a coaching session will look. Participants experience being both coach and coachee to gain the perspective of each and share what the experience is like. Participants are given the opportunity to do some self-reflection on their skill level and identify things that they felt worked well and did not work well. Participants also practice providing feedback to their peers on their coaching performance and skills. Following the coaching session, factors for a successful coaching relationship are covered as well as what can cause a breakdown of the coaching relationship.

Lastly, implementation is covered. Participants discuss ideas on how they will incorporate coaching into their practice and how they will introduce their role of coach to their units or direct reports. Participants are given ideas on how they can practice coaching in their daily work and are asked to share ideas on how to support the implementation of coaching in Solano County.

## Impact

The positive impact to the organization of implementing the Coach Approach training to managers and supervisors is difficult to measure. The training has been in use for about 15 months. While it is having a positive impact on the culture in some areas of the organization, there are no current data, surveys, or formal follow-up on the use of the Coach Approach by managers and supervisors that have taken the training. Tracey Lee, an Employment & Eligibility Manager and one of the original Coach Approach trainers, shared that within months of applying the Coach Approach to their supervision, the Staff Development team noticed an increase in creativity and productivity from the training staff. Gene Harrison, the current Staff Development supervisor, uses the Coach Approach in everyday practice and feels that it has improved relationships with his staff. Many of the new supervisors that shared their thoughts during the two-day training also expressed excitement and some endorsements regarding the benefits of coaching. One of the many challenges of the program is the follow up. Several supervisors in the training shared that many managers had yet to take the Coach Approach training, and some managers that took the training failed to follow through with the practice. In addition, even though it is part of Solano County's implementation plan, there are currently no coaching collaboratives for participants to check in and follow up after the training. These collaboratives are needed for coaches to discuss obstacles and successes with other coaches and to continue to promote a coaching culture.

## Recommendation

With the adaptation of organizational learning and its focus on employee engagement and employee satisfaction, Santa Clara County's Department of Employment and Benefits Services appears ready to step away from the traditional model of command and control leadership and embrace a leadership model that is collaborative and encourages employee engagement. As stated throughout this case study,

the research in this area supports the belief that coaching employees to become self-leading and self-sufficient results in a more inspired, fulfilled, and energized workforce. Employees that are coached are more aligned with their organization's vision and committed to helping the organization achieve that vision.

Adding the Coach Approach training into Santa Clara County's existing training program would be beneficial to the managers and supervisors at the Department of Employment Services (DEBS). Training current supervisors and managers on incorporating coaching into their supervision is an available, maintainable, and robust approach to driving change and improving performance (Rock, 2008). Studies show that organizations that use coaching have an increase in retention, engagement, productivity, and performance, especially across organizations that have developed internal coaching.

The Coach Approach training program can be implemented in several ways that would result in beneficial improvements to the current coach trainings that are offered. Depending on resources available, several different options are available:

- **Option 1:** Hiring an external coach. This method is the costliest. External coaches can cost from \$10,000 to hundreds of thousands of dollars. While research supports that the return on investment is high, using external coaches for mid-level managers and supervisors may come at too high a cost for county agencies. Santa Clara County currently partners with RDA, which has several coaches on staff that can perform this function; however, due to the high cost the training may be limited to executive use.
- **Option 2:** Expand on currently offered coaching training. Santa Clara County has already taken some initial steps to implement coaching. Many of the current trainings are offered to specific groups, such as DFCS staff, with a focus on client coaching. However, a four-hour SSA course on Coaching for New Supervisors is offered and this training can be expanded to a longer, more

thorough training that includes managers. This method uses no additional funds, is included in our current staff development budget, and can be used to train managerial and supervisory staff (provided the current trainers have been trained by a certified coach).

- **Option 3:** Training the trainers. Infinite Excellence are the original developers of the Coach Approach training for Solano County and this group offers a train the trainers option. The training focuses on preparing current staff development employees to train large groups on the same training used by Solano. The current cost of this three-day training is \$2,600 per day and the training can accommodate up to 20 trainers.

Funding and organizing coaches and training for DEBS staff will be a large undertaking, but well worth the time and investment. Ideally DEBS should use a training option that teaches its leaders to coach like the Solano County model, rather than using outside external coaches. A coaching culture is more likely to develop with internal coaches, as more coaching training can be done and followed up on due to the lower cost. It is very important to the success of the coaching initiative that it is designed and implemented with SSA's organizational vision.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Tracey Lee for supporting my research for this case study and providing me with invaluable expertise and participant experience on Solano's Coach Approach training program. As a certified coach, Tracey spent a considerable amount of her time discussing and communicating with me the Coach Approach concepts and the preparation involved. Tracey's passion for coaching and her commitment to the training was evident throughout all

our discussions and communications. I would also like to thank Gene Harrison, the staff development supervisor for Solano County, for also sharing his passion on the subject as well as being the co-trainer for the actual training which I was able to attend. Thank you as well to Geri Huber, Director of Solano County's Human Services Department, for inviting BASSC case study participants for an introduction to their county and providing access to facilitators.

I would also like to thank Santa Clara County Social Services Agency leadership, Robert Menococi and Margareta Hozdic, for providing the time and resources that allowed me the support needed to research my case study. Lastly, I would like to give a special thanks to Irina Zhuraleva whose encouragement was essential in my attending BASSC.

### References

- Federation, I. C. (2016).
- Kilburg, R. R. (2007). *The wisdom of coaching: Essential papers in consulting psychology for a world of change*. Washington, DC US: American Psychological Association.
- Richard E. Boyatzis, M. L. (2006). *Developing Sustainable Leaders through Coaching and Compassion*. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 8–24.
- Rock, D. (2008). Driving organizational change with internal coaching programs: Part one. *Industrial and Commercial Training, Vol. 40 Issue: 1*, pp.10–18.
- Showers, B. J. (1996). The evolution of peer coaching. *Educational Leadership*, 12–16.
- Tim Theeboom, B. B. (2013). Does coaching work? A meta-analysis on the effects of coaching on individual level outcomes in an organizational context. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3–4.