

## Applying Coaching Strategies to Support Youth- and Family-Focused Extension Programming

### Abstract

In this article, we describe how a peer-coaching model has been applied to support community-based Extension programming through the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative. We describe the general approaches to coaching that have been used to help with CYFAR program implementation, evaluation, and sustainability efforts; we discuss strategies coaches use to maintain effective relationships with CYFAR stakeholders; and we review common characteristics of effective coaches. Finally, we discuss implications that coaching strategies might have for Extension programming in general and present future directions for research and practice related to peer coaching.

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Peer coaching has been defined as a professional relationship or set of relationships that promotes a wide variety of professional outcomes, such as improved leadership skills and high-quality implementation of programs. Although there seems to be a lack of consensus regarding the exact activities that comprise coaching, most agree that it includes some combination of mentoring, technical assistance, guidance, reflection, problem solving, and team building (Allen, 2013; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). The key difference between coaching and other forms of mentoring is that a successful coach builds relationships with stakeholders that are characterized by mutual respect and

empowerment. In essence, a successful coach builds relationships that are power-neutral and set the stage for stakeholders to have a "safe space" in which they can actively participate in knowledge building and skill building through experiential learning. Successful coaches help facilitate the learning process but stop short of managing or policing specific behaviors (Bluckert, 2005; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Kutilek & Earnest, 2001).

Most of the coaching literature is grounded in the fields of business and education, although a small but growing body of research has focused on the effects of coaching on the delivery of school- and community-based prevention and/or promotion programs that target youth and families (Becker, Bradshaw, Domitrovich, & Jalongo, 2013; Bluckert, 2005; Spoth & Greenberg, 2011; Wasylyshyn, 2003). Furthermore, over the past decade, several professionals in Cooperative Extension have called for an increased emphasis on coaching to help support Extension programming (Allen, 2013), and several have provided examples of how coaching activities have been incorporated into their Extension-related work (Franz & Weeks, 2008; Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Perkins et al., 2011).

The purpose of this article is to describe how coaching has been incorporated into current Extension programming as a part of the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative. CYFAR was created and funded in 1991 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (USDA-CSREES), with the goal of supporting community-based projects designed to promote healthy developmental outcomes among vulnerable children, youth, and families. Since its inception, CYFAR has funded more than 600 projects based in every state and territory of the United States (Marek, Byrne, Marczak, Betts, & Mancini, 1999). Throughout its history, CYFAR has provided technical assistance to local project staff, and it recently has shifted to a coaching strategy in which seven CYFAR coaches provide ongoing support to local project sites. In this article, we describe the types of coaching used in the CYFAR initiative, specific coaching techniques, and common characteristics of effective coaching practice. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of this approach not only for the CYFAR initiative but also for the broader Extension community.

## **Types of Coaching**

Denton and Hasbrouck (2009) provide a user-friendly overview of types of coaching on the basis of the work of the American Institutes of Research (2005). They specifically outline five distinct but related types of coaching that have become the foundation of our coaching work in CYFAR. In practice, CYFAR coaches use a combination of the approaches described below, depending on the unique needs of a project relevant to the programming stage the project is in.

### **Technical Coaching**

Technical coaching commonly focuses on proper implementation of school- or community-based interventions or curricula. Technical coaches often help with implementation support, and they help stakeholders monitor the degree to which interventions are implemented with fidelity to the original program model. In CYFAR, our coaches listen, observe, and provide feedback to local project staff and use their expertise to support program design, implementation, and feedback.

## **Problem-Solving Coaching**

Perhaps the most common form of coaching used in CYFAR, problem-solving coaching involves a cooperative approach to working with stakeholders (Stormont & Reinke, 2012; Wasylyshyn, 2003). CYFAR coaches emphasize the importance of cooperation and focus heavily on building supportive, collaborative relationships with multiple stakeholders involved in program development, implementation, and evaluation. Coaches take on the role of group facilitator, rather than "expert," and work with CYFAR stakeholders as a team to develop individualized plans that are tailored to the unique needs of individual CYFAR projects.

## **Reflective Practice Coaching**

Reflective practice coaching, also referred to as cognitive coaching, emphasizes the thinking behind various practices. With this approach, coaches act as facilitators who work with stakeholders to empower them to be thoughtful in their practices and to become aware of various factors that influence their work. In CYFAR, coaches apply reflective practice when they encourage stakeholders to engage in problem-solving exercises and ask probing questions that encourage stakeholders to think about their practices in innovative ways.

## **Team-Building Coaching**

As the name implies, team-building coaching involves creating a community of learners in which peers coach one another on best practices. With this approach, stakeholders coach and learn from one another and gain practical wisdom to help guide activities related to their programming. Stakeholders may observe one another, provide suggestions to one another, and problem solve together. To date, this approach has not been widely used in CYFAR in light of the geographical separation of individual CYFAR sites. However, during in-person professional development events, coaches encourage teamwork both within and across CYFAR projects. Furthermore, coaches have occasionally encouraged the use of email or conference calls to form connections across sites.

## **Reform Coaching**

While all forms of coaching encourage some level of change among stakeholders, encouraging change is the primary focus of reform coaching. As such, this type of coaching is typically reserved for situations in which broad-scale organizational change is either desired or required. Reform coaching typically involves multiple levels of stakeholders, as all involved in a particular project are encouraged to support a culture of reform and innovation. To date, CYFAR coaches have not promoted such organizational change, although this type of coaching may become more common as local CYFAR projects are increasingly encouraged to engage in evidence-based practices that represent a change from "business as usual."

## **Common Strategies Used by Coaches**

Despite the differences in types of coaching, a variety of common strategies are employed with each. In this section, we discuss those common coaching strategies.

## Conducting Needs Assessments

Across multiple fields of study, most agree that coaching should begin with some form of needs assessment (Becker et al., 2013; Mitchell, Florin, & Stevenson, 2002; Wasylyshyn, 2003). While the exact nature of assessment varies according to the nature of stakeholder needs, coaches typically should assess existing capacity and identify areas of strength and need and then tailor the types of coaching activities planned to the results of this assessment. For CYFAR projects, we have developed a standard set of questions that help guide the needs assessment process.

## Identifying Program Goals and Objectives

CYFAR coaches typically begin working with community groups at different points along the programming process. Some sites might be working on program development, whereas others are working on implementation, evaluation, or even sustainability. As such, it is important for the results from the above-mentioned needs assessment to be translated into general program goals and concrete objectives that can guide future work. Such goals and objectives vary widely across CYFAR sites and are tailored to individual needs. They are then adapted over time as local sites move from one stage of programming to another.

## Encouraging Innovation

Many professionals agree that an important part of coaching is encouraging change. For example, Mitchell et al. (2002) specifically suggested that prevention programming is most likely to succeed when multiple related organizations embrace innovation and are ready to change standard operating procedures in ways that maximize collaborative approaches to addressing complex problems. In CYFAR, we have encouraged local sites to be more open to evaluation and data usage. In some cases, such priorities require changes to institutional norms.

## Encouraging Links

CYFAR coaches actively promote connections among diverse groups of professionals who are doing similar work in a community. Such efforts help streamline services and ensure that limited resources are used efficiently. This activity forms a key component of team-building coaching, as described in a previous section of this article, and can be influenced by encouraging innovation, as described above.

## Supporting Program Implementation

Program implementation support has been the focus of many papers on coaching. The literature in the field of education has focused extensively on ways in which coaches can help teachers implement new teaching strategies, adopt behavioral support programs for students, and adapt to new curriculum standards (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009; Fox, Hemmeter, Snyder, Binder, & Clarke, 2011;

Stormont & Reinke, 2012). Similarly, prevention scientists have emphasized the importance of coaching as a mechanism for ensuring high levels of program fidelity and proper implementation of core components of specific interventions (Becker et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2002; Perkins et al., 2011; Spoth & Greenberg, 2011). To date, most CYFAR coaches have not been actively involved in program implementation support, although this situation may change as new sites place increased emphasis on using evidence-based strategies that require a high degree of implementation fidelity.

## **Supervising, Assessing, and Providing Feedback**

Most of the above-mentioned coaching activities are informed through a carefully crafted approach of supervising and assessing stakeholder activities and providing feedback designed to promote best practices (Fixsen et al., 2005). Supervision and assessment can take various forms. Within educational settings, coaches often directly observe teacher behaviors and provide direct feedback via personal meetings or written reports (American Institutes for Research, 2005; Fox et al., 2011; Stormont & Reinke, 2012). However, in CYFAR, assessments have more commonly included individual consultations, site visits, and informal discussions with relevant stakeholders (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Stormont & Reinke, 2012). Becker et al. (2013) stress the importance of tailoring feedback to meet the specific needs of individual stakeholders. For example, a practitioner who needs less support with program implementation would receive a different level of feedback than a practitioner who needs a higher level of support. Regardless of the type of feedback offered, it must be positive and empowering and must not undermine the relationships between the coach and various stakeholders.

## **Providing Emotional Support**

Fixsen et al. (2005) stress the importance of establishing supportive relationships among coaches and stakeholders. Such relationships become particularly valuable during times of stress or discomfort and have been heavily emphasized in CYFAR. When problems arise while planning, implementing, or evaluating an intervention, an emotionally supportive coach can help guide, encourage, and support a practitioner as he or she navigates a difficult situation (Fixsen et al., 2005, 2009).

## **Helping Plan for Evaluation and Sustainability**

To date, much of the literature on coaching has focused on how to support program development and implementation, with much less attention given to how coaches can support stakeholders through the evaluation process (American Institutes for Research, 2005; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Furthermore, virtually no attention has been given to how coaches can support stakeholders who are trying to sustain their efforts beyond their original grant cycles. However, supporting evaluation and sustainability efforts is an important task that CYFAR coaches need to address, especially for programs nearing the end of their CYFAR funding. In CYFAR, project personnel have access to a variety of tools, including [cyfnet.org](http://cyfnet.org), which is a website that includes resources designed to support program planning, implementation, and evaluation. The website also includes

links to measures commonly used to gather pretest, process, and posttest data across different CYFAR projects. Over the past decade, various efforts have been made to develop a set of common measures that can help assess the overall effects of the CYFAR initiative (Payne & McDonald, 2012, 2014, 2015). CYFAR coaches commonly draw from these resources as they work with stakeholders throughout all phases of their programming efforts.

## **Characteristics of Effective Coaches**

Depending on their unique situations, different coaches may decide to engage in different types of coaching, and their specific coaching strategies largely depend on the needs of their stakeholders. However, regardless of the specific strategies employed, a variety of key attributes characterize effective coaches. Here, we discuss several attributes of successful coaches that we stress in the CYFAR initiative.

### **Positive Attitude Toward Stakeholders**

Developing strong connections and rapport with stakeholders is a key ingredient to a productive coaching relationship (Byington, 2010; Wasylyshyn, 2003). CYFAR coaches approach all interactions with stakeholders in a positive and friendly manner. They are encouraging, supportive, sensitive, and patient (Fixsen et al., 2005), and they promote collaborative relationships that emphasize mutual respect and acknowledge the unique skills that all stakeholders contribute (Stormont & Reinke, 2012; Wasylyshyn, 2003).

### **High Professional Standards**

Coaches should always behave in a professional manner and uphold ethical standards. CYFAR coaches respect personal and professional boundaries, and they consider and respect any confidentiality issues that arise during the coaching process (Wasylyshyn, 2003).

### **Commitment to the Use of Clear and Sound Methodologies**

Coaches can help maintain their own credibility by using clear and sound methodologies. When in doubt, CYFAR coaches acknowledge the limits of their knowledge and seek help and/or guidance from CYFAR Professional Development and Technical Assistance, a leadership team that includes other coaches and applied research scientists (Bluckert, 2005; Wasylyshyn, 2003).

### **Predictability and Reliability**

As with any professional relationship, coaches must be predictable and reliable. Coaches should respect meeting times, follow through on work commitments, and notify stakeholders in advance of any delays or schedule changes (Bluckert, 2005).

### **Willingness to Trust and Empathize**

Coaches should respect all stakeholders by communicating a sense of trust and empathy. CYFAR

coaches consider stakeholders' unique situations, including both the resources and the constraints that influence their work. They acknowledge, accept, and consider input from all stakeholders and demonstrate that they respect and trust that input (Bluckert, 2005; Byington, 2010; de Vries, 2005).

## **Awareness of the Need to Balance Support and Challenge**

At times, coaches must challenge existing practices in a community. Coaches must find an appropriate balance between supporting current strategies and challenging those strategies as a way to promote positive change. When providing feedback that might be considered critical or negative, a coach should carefully consider the unique characteristics of the stakeholders. Some require a sensitive and tactful approach when receiving negative feedback. Others prefer a more direct, blunt approach. Such differences underscore the critical importance of developing positive relationships. By knowing their stakeholders and being aware of those stakeholders' typical needs, styles, and preferences, coaches can decide how best to deliver feedback, even when it is critical of existing practices (Bluckert, 2005).

## **Understanding of the Importance of Communication**

Effective communication is a key component of any human relationship. Open, clear, and honest communication between coach and stakeholder is an essential part of building the positive relationships required for successful peer coaching. CYFAR coaches schedule regular monthly telephone meetings, have periodic in-person meetings and site visits, and use other forms of electronic and verbal communication as necessary. These forms of communication help coaches remain aware of successes and failures so that they can anticipate and address small problems before they become unmanageable (American Institutes for Research, 2005).

## **Measuring Coaching Effectiveness**

Literature on how to measure coaching effectiveness has been limited. To date, most studies on the topic have examined the impact of coaching activities on the quality of program implementation. For example, Becker et al. (2013) examined the degree to which implementation of two popular prevention programs improved due to targeted and tailored coaching. The authors found small but significant links between coaching activities and improved program implementation. The authors also tracked the frequency of coaching activities with teachers needing more or less support over time. Results indicated that coaches successfully tailored their activities to the needs of individual teachers. In the field of education, researchers have focused on similar types of outcomes. For example, Fox et al. (2011) found significant links between coaching and quality of implementation of a classroom-based social competence program.

Few studies have specifically examined the degree to which coaching has specific, positive effects on stakeholders themselves. Wasylyshyn (2003) reports some self-report data on stakeholder perceptions of executive coaching in a business context. Results indicated generally positive perceptions of the effects of coaching on leadership skills, self-awareness, and behavior change. This study also examined perceptions of which attributes are desirable in a coach. Many of these,

such as professionalism, were reviewed earlier in this article.

In a study focused on Extension professionals, Kutilek and Earnest (2001) found that coaching helped improve self-reported skills in program planning and implementation among new Extension employees and helped employees develop an understanding of the workplace culture. Furthermore, researchers have found a variety of positive outcomes associated with the PROSPER project, a community-based prevention planning system supported by Cooperative Extension educators acting as peer coaches to provide proactive technical assistance and support to local prevention coalitions (Spoth & Greenberg, 2011). Evaluations of the project suggest that the PROSPER model is associated with improved prevention coalition functioning, increased program sustainability, improved program implementation quality, and positive behavioral outcomes for program participants (Greenberg et al., 2015; Perkins et al., 2011; Spoth & Greenberg, 2011).

In light of the limited research that has been conducted on coaching effectiveness, we are in the early phases of collecting both process and outcome data focused on CYFAR coaching activities. Specifically, we are currently collecting data that will help track coaching activities and identify strategies that seem to be working versus those that are not.

## Conclusions

The recent emergence of coaching as a strategy for supporting the development, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of local interventions seems to be a positive development. Indeed, a growing body of literature has provided evidence (albeit limited at this point) that a knowledgeable, supportive coach can help community stakeholders develop, implement, and sustain effective programs that support youth and families. Within the context of CYFAR, our primary goal has been to design and implement a strong network of coaching support for local project sites. Although the exact nature of the coaching activities has varied depending on the needs of particular stakeholders, the CYFAR coaches have drawn from the approaches, strategies, and characteristics outlined in this article.

We believe that the coaching strategies we have reviewed can provide a unique approach to technical assistance that extends beyond the family living and youth development program areas of Extension. Indeed, the strategies outlined in this article have been used in diverse settings, including classrooms, after-school programs, and a variety of community-based settings. In light of the general nature of these coaching concepts, we believe that they can be applied by Extension educators, specialists, and administrators across all program areas to facilitate strong, positive relationships with stakeholders. By implementing approaches and strategies outlined in this article, Extension personnel can help local stakeholders develop effective and sustainable efforts that improve the lives of our target audiences across the United States.

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