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Executive Briefings

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Developing Internal Networks of Self-Directed Learners Using Peer Coaching Groups

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When employees attend trainings, are the training materials actually used? Even in the worst recession in 70 years, would your company like coaching for all of its people, but feels it might be too expensive or a luxury that can be put off until the recovery?

Consider a proven solution: Peer coaching groups. They are a practical, low-cost tool to guarantee transfer of training and solve problems in the workplace – not while away at a seminar, but on the job. That’s how BlueCross BlueShield uses them.? The groups also quickly cultivate cross-collaborative networks in which members advance their careers, develop as leaders and learn about the company. That’s how Microsoft and BP use them.

Peer coaching groups usually include five to seven members who meet to coach each other. Meetings can be self externally facilitated, face-to-face or virtual. Each member gets equal time to address a current priority, whether a goal. Other members pose generative questions, useful advice or supportive challenges.

Questions help each member to clarify the priority, the member’s role in it, what the member can do about it and what can be learned. Each member leaves the meeting with a self-selected, relevant and realistic action to take before the next meeting. Members share support and accountability to keep taking those actions – or to change them for good reasons. Learning is reinforced through reflection on the actions, coaching others and being coached.

The groups start with a brief training about selecting priorities, being coached and coaching others. Members also establish an agenda and ground rules, including confidentiality. The training is followed by peer coaching group meetings, usually once a month. The series of meetings ends with one final closing meeting that is designed by the members. Quick, focused evaluations occur during and between meetings to ensure groups are always high quality and achieving the results desired by the company.

When a company begins a peer coaching program, it’s important to be very clear on the desired results. That usually means defining the goals and how often they should meet. Members work on a variety of current priorities, depending on the company’s application of the groups. The groups can be used to guarantee transfer of training by including the learners where each learner is coached to apply the materials from the training. In addition to applying materials from a training, a member might work to improve time and stress management or to achieve a goal in a career plan. Another common use is to spread a vision across a department or address a problem with an employee. A common use is to build internal networks for professional development by including members from different units in the company.

It’s not unusual for a company to expand use of the groups to several applications. For example, Microsoft started internal networking groups, called Learning Circles, around the world and now also uses them for transfer of training. BP uses internal networking groups worldwide as well and will soon be using them for team building.

The nature of how members coach each other, capture their learnings and evaluate their groups should match the needs of the organization and the schedule of the members. Based on past deployment of groups, it’s also important that the group member supports the member’s participation in the group.

Peer coaching groups are based on a multi-project form of the action learning process, but there are some key differences from traditional action learning, the coach is an external facilitator who guides the groups. Members pose statements and questions. Members work on “problems,” usually over several days. In peer coaching groups, each member is a co-facilitator.

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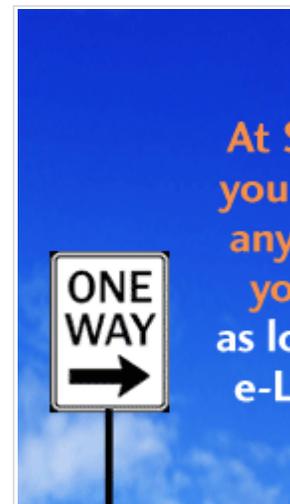
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There are numerous benefits to members of peer coaching groups. They gain a confidential network of peers t accountabilities, and the network can match their busy schedules. They get individualized attention to their n customized plans for learning and actions. They also develop very useful skills in reflection and inquiry – skills for continuous learning.

The benefits to organizations are many. Groups quickly spread low-cost, core coaching skills – such as skills in clarifying, supporting and problem solving. Groups can be customized according to the organization's needs, y trainings are applied, for problem solving, to cultivate viable networks or to provide support and accountabilit largest county in Minnesota uses peer coaching groups to help members get past symptoms of issues and readi causes. In another scenario, a network of convalescent homes "cascades" their groups: Each group member gc group, resulting in hundreds of employees taking useful actions to change the culture.

Used correctly, peer coaching groups can deliver everything from more effectively realizing strategic business individualized training and general human resources initiatives more meaningful and more enduring.

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