

Pulling Off Peer Coaching

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Hennepin County in Minneapolis, MN, is typical of many large metropolitan government organizations that initiate training throughout the year to improve workplace efficiencies and to spur professional development. With about 8,000 employees, the county's Human Resources training programs are varied, but they consistently rely on training to deliver hoped-for improvements.

Challenge

In 2001, the county began looking for ways to improve the effectiveness of the organization with greater enhancement of the professional development process for its employees. Nancy Anderson, learning and development consultant, human resources, for Hennepin County, met Authenticity Consulting principals, Carter and Teri McNamara, at an annual American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) event and liked their approach to training using peer coaching groups. Anderson asked Authenticity Consulting to design and evaluate an action learning-based, peer-driven program for her facilitators.

With peer coaching groups, Authenticity's trainers can train leaders, managers, or others from across an organization to organize, facilitate, and evaluate their groups—or group members can self-facilitate their groups, as well, and even do so over the phone. The peer coaching model can be customized to address a variety of issues or goals, for example: goal setting; effective ways to improve listening and speaking skills; leadership development; one-on-one mentoring; confidence-building; problem solving; and other self actualization methods that can change employee behaviors and alter the people dynamics within departments of any large or small organization.

Anderson wanted the Authenticity training initially to focus specifically on how peer coaching could help focus on positive ways to address and resolve issues.

"Often there is no venue or formalized setting to discuss issues that come up in large government organizations like ours," she explains. "For example, in a performance review, someone can be left hanging on how to address the issues presented during the review process. But afterwards there is no outlet to explore ways to improve; the peer groups readily provided that framework and gave people a place to discuss their issues."

Solution

The first group started May 2001 with 50 people who subsequently would form their own groups or circles. It was a hit. Evaluations often characterized peer coaching groups as "the best kind of training we've ever had," Anderson notes. She moved the program to the mid-management level and then into the advanced supervisors' level and the line staff, including Hennepin County's Leadership Academy and Management Institute in fall 2002. Peer coaching circles would start each autumn and end in spring, with each group focused on certain topics and whatever else group members wanted to pursue, including professional goals and/or personal issues.

Anderson attributes the program's success to the following core elements that underscore the peer coaching group model:

- In the circles, people are mixed with other people from areas outside their realm, which makes them feel safer and more trusting of their peers to share observations, experiences, and goals.
- Individuals develop a sense of ownership in their groups and often develop leadership traits as a result.
- The circles foster "a genuine sense of collegiality" among participants that was lacking before their participation.
- Groups have spawned more effective ways to do problem solving.
- The groups are an ideal setting to focus on action learning initiatives.
- Personal empowerment often is one major outcome of the groups.

Results

Now in its eighth year inside Hennepin County's HR training programs, the peer coaching group model "is among the top three or four successful programs we rely on" Anderson says. The McNamaras continue to fine tune the program through supportive actions such as one-on-one coaching when needed, and always are adding to their knowledge base.

The peer coaching groups have been so successful that Anderson did a presentation at local chapter of ASTD in May 2004 about the positive results of the groups (complete with statistics of the evaluations), and a colleague spoke at Carter's "Organizational Development Practitioner of the Year" award earlier that year.

"There are so many applications for peer coaching groups now inside our organization because it works at so many levels," Anderson adds. "We think it's a unique training and development program for a government organization. We have even seen some ad hoc groups spring up among the line staff, and often high performers will ask to start groups. That's how effective it's been here."



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