

Coaching: A Tool for Extension Professionals

Abstract

Coaching as an approach to improving people's lives is based on a positive relationship and the philosophy that the learner is responsible for their own change. In a coach approach, the educator serves as a coach; a person to help the client succeed by "challenging and supporting a person or a team to develop ways of thinking, ways of being and ways of learning" (Berg & Karlsen, 2007). This article suggests the need for extension education to embrace the philosophy and practice of coaching as an approach to meeting the educational needs of the clients served.

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Introduction

The field of coaching is growing, and the demand for professional coaching is increasing dramatically (Grant, 2011). The concept of coaching is not new to Extension; coaching has been documented as a way to promote professional development with Extension employees (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Franz & Weeks, 2008), and Extension professionals have conducted one-on-one coaching, specifically with business clients (Cheah, 2012). Although all the elements exist to bridge these two constructs, there is a gap in the use of coaching with Extension educators. This article aims to describe the elements and process of coaching as an alternative approach to educational delivery in Extension education.

Extension and Coaching

Extension is the national leader for educating the public and creating impact. True to the mission, Extension educators know how to create a better future through research, education, and the extension of knowledge. Put it another way, Extension is about reaching out to solve public needs through the application of knowledge. Historically, Extension has adapted to changing times and has embraced new learning and teaching technologies.

Extension learners are changing; fewer learners are electing to attend traditional face-to-face educational programs. As the base clientele of Extension changes, so must the approaches used to educate consumers. Learners are now getting their information in a variety of places and through a

variety of sources, and they have very different expectations than learners from previous generations. Research on generational learning differences suggests that younger generations prefer collaboration, connection, and social change (Pinder-Grover & Groscurth, 2009). Today's learners want "self-regulated learning," a process that allows the learner to receive feedback about how they are doing and encourages the learner to demonstrate understanding as part of the learning process (Glenn, 2010). In essence, learners of today want a coaching approach to education.

The International Coach Federation (n.d.) defines coaching this way:

Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.

The emerging field of coaching is showing promising indicators of effectiveness, and this article suggests coaching is an appropriate and needed approach to Extension education. Although there are a variety of coaching processes, the essence of coaching comes down to the relationship between a learner and instructor that includes asking important questions (Berg & Karlsen, 2007). In traditional pedagogical education, there is an expert-learner model that suggests that the expert has the content information to share with the learner (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Although Adult Learning Theory suggests that educators need to take into consideration the needs and existing skills of the client, a pedagogical approach is still all too common in Extension education. Learners want more; they want to be recognized for their knowledge and experiences, and be accountable for incorporating information into behavioral changes.

Why Incorporate a Coach Approach to Extension Education

The philosophy of coaching fits well with philosophy of Extension; both focus on improving lives and helping people succeed. Like Extension, the coach approach uses the principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1978) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) with focus on helping people succeed not only in their current situation, but also in the future (Berg & Karlsen, 2007). Coaching is an effective approach to goal attainment, especially when used as a philosophical approach (Wilson, 2011). Put another way, people perform better and do better when others are encouraging them and challenging them to be their best (Thompson, 2012). There is growing evidence that coaching fosters new knowledge and behavior changes (Grant & Zackon, 2004).

Like most organizations, Extension already has coaching practices in place (see Allen, 2012; Cheah, 2012; Franz & Weeks, 2008; Kutilek & Earnest, 2001). However, there is a lack of clarity around the term "coaching" and therefore a lack of an organized recognition and use of coaching as an approach to education. Often, concepts such as mentoring, consulting, and therapy are interchanged or confused with coaching (Williams & Menendez, 2007). Unlike mentoring, therapy, and consulting, the coach approach to education is about forming relationships and allowing the learner to direct the learning process. This is a pretty dramatic change from the traditional expert/learner model. In this model, the instructor must be enthusiastic and intentional about student success (Barkley, 2011).

This approach tends to motivate learners and, as such, has higher success and retention rates (Grant

& Zackon, 2004). With a unified understanding of coaching constructs, it is easier to see how to incorporate coaching as an approach to Extension education.

How to Incorporate Coaching in Extension Education

Goals of coaching may differ from individual, but the overarching purpose of coaching is to help a client discover, clarify, and design a path to success. In coaching, the client defines success. The learner is seen as an expert in his or her life, and the coach is the helper trained to listen, observe, and ask powerful questions to help the client achieve success as he or she defines it.

The field of coaching is organized around a variety of coaching roles for specific audiences, such as executive coach, life coach, career coach, organizational coach, health coach, and family life coach. Although coaching roles tend to be specific to the target audience, the tenets of coaching are common across coaching models. Although there are some nuances to these steps depending on the model, the most common elements of coaching include (see Palmer, 2008; International Coach Federation, 2011):

- Problem identification

- Goals clarification

- Exploring options

- Action steps

- Observing results and evaluation

Using this theoretical andragogy, Extension educators can switch from an expert-learner model to a student-focused model. A student focused approach embraces the idea that educators follow the passions and desires of the students and allow room in their educational approach to let the student guide some or much of the learning process.

This model could easily be included in Extension programs. First, the coach (or the educator or agent) can approach the educational program with the philosophical attitude that the learner has much to contribute to the process, thus viewing the relationship as a partnership. Next, the educator can build a rapport with the client at the beginning of the educational process, all while working with the client to develop a vision of what success looks like. Rather than telling clients what they need to know, the educator could recognize that clients likely has some, if not all of the knowledge they need. Often clients just needs a plan and encouragement for implementing that knowledge. This process can be achieved by using powerful questions. Simply asking learners important questions such as "what will it take for you to make that change" and then truly listening and reflecting on their answers can be the very process needed for clients to make a change. Finally, accountability is achieved through action steps. Again, these steps are identified by learners; it is the educator's role to continue to ask power questions and offer input (when it is wanted), but up to learners to create the action steps. Educators can repeat this process as needed while clients goes through an Extension program.

Put into practice, Extension educators could use coaching in any approach they use to educate and support their target audience. An example of using coaching in Extension can be found in the National 4-H Council implementation of the Health Rocks grant. The technical support of this grant is conducted with a coach-approach, which includes all of the elements of coaching listed above. The coaches establish routine check in calls and then work with grantees to identify issues, clarify goals, explore options, execute action steps, and evaluate the process. The coaches also use facets of coaching such as powerful questions and equality in partnership. The result is a relationship where the coach focuses on the client's needs and together they try to make improvements to the program.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the field of coaching has experienced a rapid growth (Grant, 2011), and more and more learners are expecting to have an active role in their educational process (Barkley, 2010). Coaching is an approach that is needed in Extension. Extension professionals are already using coaching as an approach to Extension education to some degree, but in order to remain viable and meet the changing needs of clients, Extension professionals need to further use coaching in their educational andragogy. By using the coach approach, learners are likely to feel much more connected to the learning process and are likely to exhibit behavior changes. The philosophies of Extension and coaching fit hand in hand, and the impact of incorporating coaching strategies will likely yield great success.

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