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Enhancing Extension Employee Coaching: Navigating the Triangular Relationship

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Enhancing Extension Employee Coaching: Navigating the Triangular Relationship

Abstract

Coaching Cooperative Extension employees is not easy but provides invaluable results. All three parties in the triangular coaching relationship--the coachee, the coach, and the organization--develop and grow from the process, in turn improving and sustaining the organization. The coaching process helps employees get to know themselves better, be more conscious about their way of being in the world, and contribute more fully to the work around them. This article addresses the importance of coaching employees, characteristics of good coaching, coaching risks, and tips for successful coaching of Cooperative Extension employees.

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Life as an Extension employee can be overwhelming. Personal coaching helps employees successfully navigate Extension's complex environment (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001). Cooperative Extension hires new employees who benefit from occupational coaching. The success of this coaching relies on navigating the triangular relationship of the coach, coachee/employee, and organization. A coach balances the relationship among these three entities to positively influence the individual and the organization (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

A successful coach knows the difference between coaching, mentoring, and supervising. Coaching focuses on the individual and his or her context, with little advice or counsel given by the coach who may not be in the same occupation as the coachee. A mentor, on the other hand, holds the same occupation as the employee and treats the mentee as a friend who garners advice and counsel from the mentor with more experience in and perspective on the occupation. Finally, the supervisor focuses on the employee's fit within the organization. The needs of the organization are privileged over the employee in this relationship (Parsloe, 1992).

Why Coach Employees?

Peer and supervisory coaching became popular in the eighties in business and teacher effectiveness circles (Showers & Joyce, 1996). Cooperative Extension also joined this coaching bandwagon for mentoring new employees. Research since then shows coaching provides the following (LaBarre, 1994; Olivero, Bane, et al., 1997):

- Employee career development
- Increased job satisfaction and fit
- Increased productivity
- Improved employee retention

- Positive cultural assimilation
- Transfers training into practice
- Higher employee loyalty to the organization
- Improved educational programming/products
- Reduced employee time for training
- Improved ability to deal with change
- Lessens personal dilemmas that impact work
- Increased skills in program planning and implementation
- Better understanding of the Extension political and economic climate

Coaching, when done well, sustains Extension long term through strong employees and effective educational programs.

What Is Good Coaching?

Good coaching honors the individual and his or her needs within the mission of the organization. The coach is a generalist, teacher, advisor, listener, problem solver, strategist, brainstormer, capacity builder, encourager, giver of constructive feedback, and conversational partner. A good coach is also trustworthy, candid, unbiased, empathetic, and curious.

Successful coaches provide continuous support, are easy to access, and help employees set goals, determine vision, seek out and use feedback, find and apply professional development, solve problems, involve stakeholders in personal and program improvement, and evaluate results. In particular, a successful coach:

- Determines the coachee's current state, including values, personality, challenges, self limiting beliefs, and willingness to be coached and take action.
- Identifies and stays focused on the coachee's situation, not on others' actions.
- Brainstorms with the coachee actions, next steps, and consequences of actions or inaction.
- Establishes ways for the coachee to be accountable for change through clear objectives, timelines, and coaching follow up.

A good coach can situate work more meaningfully for employees by helping them build intellectual independence, reasoning and problem-solving capacity, and the ability to handle complex work environments. In turn, a good coach is open to personal feedback, constantly learning, and willing to change to be a better coach (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

What Challenges Do Coaches Face?

Coaching in the midst of a triangular relationship is difficult but fulfilling. A good coach is aware of and learns to avoid:

- Taking on unsolvable problems,
- Advocating for the coachee in opposition to the organization,
- Providing therapy,
- Failing to pay attention to social and political issues,
- Emotional outbursts requiring a professional response,
- Trying to change people, and
- Mentoring or supervising instead of coaching.

Coaches can avoid these challenges by placing responsibility for change on the coachee. Training in these issues and time with experienced coaches can also help new coaches avoid these challenges.

Tips for Successful Coaching

Research and practice reveal these tips for successful coaching:

- Establish clear and measurable goals.
- Conduct explicit conversations with specific expectations.
- Establish, follow, and evaluate an action plan.
- Realize that change takes time.
- Conduct face-to-face visits whenever possible.
- Be accessible by phone or e-mail for shorter sessions.
- Give constructive and specific feedback.
- Be encouraging and consistent.
- Use results of personality tests and/or job related competencies to set the stage.
- Prepare people in advance for coaching by setting ground rules and mutual expectations.
- Know Extension's work and culture.
- Set a time and location that focuses on the coachee.
- Determine what the coach and coachee can control as tools to solve problems.
- Seek feedback on coaching effectiveness, and adjust accordingly.
- Think before speaking--language is a powerful coaching tool.
- Ask open-ended questions to help coachees critically reflect on assumptions.

Above all, a coach has no personal agenda but rather focuses on the employee's performance.

In closing, coaching Cooperative Extension employees is not easy but provides invaluable results. All parties in the triangular coaching relationship--the coachee, the coach, and the organization--develop and grow from the process, in turn improving and sustaining the organization. The coaching process helps employees become self aware, be more conscious about their way of being in the world, and contribute more fully to the work around them.

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