COACHING LEARNERS FOR KEY SKILLS
Why coaching matters

Coaching is an important tool for encouraging key skills development. It enables you to focus on the individual needs of each learner and help them make progress. All learners need coaching if they are to learn and improve. Learners must also practise and apply the key skills – rather than simply learn them – and this is where coaching is particularly valuable.

Coaching is used mainly in the work setting and near the job. It is also an important method for supporting learning and development in more formal settings. Similarly, you can coach learners during tutorials or reviews.

What is coaching?

Here are some definitions of coaching:

*Coaching is an approach to assisting others, usually less experienced, in acquiring new or additional skills and in improving their performance.*

_A Guide to Coaching – A Ready Reference (ANTA)_

*Coaching puts the emphasis on helping the learner to learn rather than on getting the teacher to teach. It involves guiding and encouraging people to achieve results by helping them to learn for themselves while doing the job. Real work is the vehicle for learning. Its ultimate target is to help individuals to release their own potential and improve their performance.*

_Delegation and Coaching, T. Atherton (1999)_

*Coaching is face-to-face leadership that pulls together people with diverse backgrounds, talents, experiences and interests, encourages them to step up to responsibility and continued achievement. Coaching is not about memorising techniques or devising the perfect game plan. It is also about really paying attention to people, really involving them.*

_In Search of Excellence, T. Peters and R. Waterman_

The role of the coach

Coaches can play different roles, depending on the organisation, the context or the needs of the learner. The following extract describes five roles a coach can play. It is taken from _A Guide to Coaching_, a chapter in an Australian publication entitled _Work-based learning – A Ready Reference_.

THE VARIED ROLES A COACH CAN PLAY

Coaches play a number of roles and each of these roles emphasise different outcomes.

The coach as tutor
Through a tutoring approach coaches help the learner by:

- Accelerating the learning pace by assisting the learner to think through processes
- Increasing technical competence in intensive one to one sessions
- Encouraging growth in expertise

This is the primary role coaches play and helps provide continuous learning for the learner.

The coach as trainer
The coach as a trainer facilitates learning by:

- Teaching by example (modelling)
- Focusing on a ‘hands on’ approach

The coach often gets involved in on-the-job training and demonstrates how to achieve a certain task.

The coach as counsellor
Counselling can be defined as a two way communication process which assists both the learner and the coach to gain a clear understanding of any problems involved through:

- Using persuasive argument
- Sharing insights into individuals
- Building on strengths and work on weaknesses
- Resolving conflict

Coaches using counselling methods assist the learners’ personal and professional development and promote self sufficiency.

A Ready Reference — A Guide to Coaching
The coach as performance manager

Coaches focusing on performance tend to place emphasis on:

- Clarifying goals and action plans
- Identifying strengths and limitations
- Helping to develop strategies to improve performance

The coach as performance manager is as much concerned with how the learner produces results as with how he/she gets on with people to achieve these results.

The coach as mentor

The coach as mentor would:

- Impart the organisation’s goals and values
- Focus on the development of political ‘sawy’
- Show an interest in the career development of the learner

An effective coach develops the flexibility to perform a variety of roles depending upon the learner’s needs and skill level.

LINKS BETWEEN COACHING AND MENTORING

A key distinction between a coach and a mentor is that a coach is someone to learn WITH while a mentor is someone to learn FROM. Coaches as tutors, counsellors and trainers are usually line managers or supervisors and are primarily concerned with the specific work tasks of the learners and in assisting them to get the job done.

The coach in a mentor role would still be responsible for helping the learner achieve specific goals and job tasks. The traditional mentor role, however, generally does not include coaching. Mentors are primarily concerned with the overall development of the learner and do not get involved in the daily job tasks of the learner, leaving that to the learner’s supervisor or manager. The coach is usually responsible for the outputs of the learner and rewards the learner accordingly through performance appraisal. The mentor stands apart from a direct line of authority acting as a sounding board and an adviser for learners to assist them in their professional and personal development.
**Activity**

Think of your own experience with learners. Pick two or three of the coaching roles from the extract and describe how you coached a particular learner to help them with their key skills development.

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**Learners are individuals**

Treating learners as individuals is the first step to becoming a good coach. This means developing good relationships with your learners. Ways to do this include:

- getting to know them, finding out their aspirations and goals, knowing what motivates them and, most importantly, gaining their trust
- encouraging two-way communication – getting the learner to ask you questions, and using active listening skills
- helping the learner to identify their own needs and set targets to meet them
- adapting your coaching style to the needs of each learner – finding out how they prefer to tackle things, for example, or giving them support in areas where they have difficulties.

**Understanding motivation**

Finding out what motivates people to learn is one of the coach’s main building blocks. While it’s virtually impossible to *make* anyone want to learn, effective coaches are good at building upon and maintaining motivation.

There are two factors that affect people’s motivation:

- **external motivators.** Positive external motivators are things like pay increases, promotion or qualifications. Negative ones could be the threat of redundancy or a potential pay cut.
- **intrinsic motivators.** These come from within the learner, and may include a strong personal desire to achieve or a keen interest in a particular area.
**Activity**

Think of a piece of learning that you have undertaken recently. What were the factors that motivated you to learn? Try to categorise them as external (positive and/or negative) or intrinsic.

**External factors that motivated me:**

**Internal factors that motivated me:**

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Carl Rogers (1974) and Abraham Maslow (1968) are key writers in the field of understanding inner urges and drives that contribute to an individual’s motivation to learn. To find out more about their theories, read the handout for this module, *Why and how people learn*.

**Overcoming barriers**

As part of getting to know your learners, it’s helpful to find out what might prevent them learning. You can’t always hurry this process. In learners’ minds, key skills learning may be linked to their performance in maths and English and they may see themselves as failures, for example if they didn’t gain good grades at GCSE.

Here’s how one learner represented her ‘motivation’ to learn key skills (with help from her coach).

**Positive factors**

- Love my job in hairdressing
- Get on well with my supervisor
- Looking forward to being treated like an adult

**Negative factors (barriers)**

- Hated school
- Useless at maths
- Don’t like ‘classroom’ learning

The positive factors tell you what motivates this learner to learn, and the negative ones give you clues as to what will turn them off.
You probably said you’d encourage key skills learning as part of her job, and avoid academic learning at all costs!

Understanding learning styles

As a coach, you’ll notice as you get to know them that your learners like to learn in different ways. Successful learners are versatile. In other words, they have a range of learning styles that they can apply to different learning tasks and circumstances. Your job is to adapt your coaching style to meet their needs.

As someone involved in training development, you may already be familiar with the Learning Styles Inventory, developed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1976). They identify four styles:

- **the activist** – who thrives on learning through challenges and new experiences
- **the reflector** – who tends to be cautious, standing back and observing experiences from different perspectives
- **the theorist** – who adapts and integrates observations into logically sound theories
- **the pragmatist** – who likes to try out new ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice.

Peter Honey stresses a number of points about using this inventory:

- a person’s learning style is not ‘fixed’; it is capable of change, and often does change in response to external influences
- the information about themselves that a person gains from the results should not be used to avoid particular types of learning, but should be a basis for developing a learning approach that results in a more balanced profile.

As a coach, you need to be careful not to reinforce the idea that people are only capable of learning in one particular way. This labels and pigeonholes people, and is the opposite of the message that Honey and Mumford intended.
**Deep and surface learning**

Research on learning styles has identified two main approaches to learning: deep learning and surface learning. Deep learning is an approach where the learner looks for understanding and meaning, and surface learning is where the learner simply memorises and reproduces what they learn.

Noel Entwhistle, a British researcher who has done much work on learning styles, compared the two approaches. He found the following differences between them.

A *deep approach* is characterised by:

• ‘comprehension’ learning – the learner looks for understanding and meaning, and uses questions and analogies to help gain understanding

• intrinsic motivation – the learner is interested in learning for its own sake

• openness – the learner is open to new ideas, and sees their learning as an opportunity to question values.

A *surface approach* is characterised by:

• ‘operation’ learning – the learner adopts a step-by-step approach, with an emphasis on finding and memorising facts

• extrinsic motivation – the learner sees learning simply as a way of gaining qualifications or promotion

• fear of failure – the learner tends to be anxious about learning and concerned that they may not do well.

**Some recent research**

A person’s preferred learning style is a complex issue. A recent piece of research by the University of Newcastle uncovered 71 models, and of the 13 models the researchers examined closely they found that most had serious weaknesses.

The other thing to remember is that most learning styles questionnaires are ‘self-reporting’. This means that they only record the learner’s own impressions of how they learn – not their actual behaviour. These impressions could be inaccurate, self-deluding or influenced by the answer the learner thinks they should give.

You will find the full research summary, *Learning styles for post-16 learners; What do we know?* in the library.

There is also a weblink to *Fashion victims*, an interesting article about the research in the Education Guardian weekly.
Your relationships with learners: self-check

Think of one your learners. Which of the following facts apply to you?
Tick the things you do as a matter of course – and be honest!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Tick here</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I know this learner’s particular needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what motivates the learner and build on this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have identified barriers to learning and found ways of overcoming them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learner does most of the talking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage the learner to ask questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how this learner prefers to tackle things and I adapt what I do accordingly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ideally, you would aim to answer yes in all cases. Where you have answered no, try to incorporate some of the suggestions into your planning and review sessions with learners, particularly if you are working with the key skill of improving own learning and performance.

Effective coaching

Good coaches have a range of skills, strategies and techniques to help learners improve their performance. Above all, effective coaching involves planning and structure.

Activity

Think of an occasion when you were coached in learning the basics of a task. Examples could be learning a new task at work, or a hobby or interest where you needed to learn a particular skill.

What did the coach do to enable you to learn – and to want to carry on learning?
You may have said that the coach:

• had a good one-to-one rapport with you
• knew the task or subject really well
• was good at putting it across
• showed you exactly what to do
• told you where you went wrong
• made you feel OK about any mistakes.

**Communication skills**

Coaching involves communication skills. These aren’t the same as teaching or training – although good presentation and instructional skills are important – but more of a two-way process. Not all learners are naturally good at communication, and a good rule of thumb is to think of a good coach as an active ‘encourager’.

This means:

• listening to what learners have to say and acting on it
• encouraging learners to ask questions
• using effective questioning techniques yourself, such as open questions when you want the learner to provide the information
• being aware of non-verbal communication
• giving feedback, and actively seeking feedback from your learner.

**Activity**

Try to observe a good communicator in action – preferably a colleague working with an individual learner. As you watch and listen, make a list of the things they do to encourage the learner. Here are a couple of suggestions to get you started:

There were lots of silences. This gave the learner a chance to think.

The person used relaxed body language (open posture, sat alongside the learner, etc.)

**Your observations:**
Giving feedback

One of the most important skills of an effective coach is the ability to give feedback on performance. Before they can improve, learners need to know exactly where they are and what they need to do next. In terms of key skills learning, this means that you must:

- **make sure your feedback is timely**: immediately you see the learner apply their key skills, or soon after they have handed you a piece of work, for example

- **say what they learner has done well**: ‘You’ve converted the fraction into a decimal correctly; well done.’

- **give constructive and specific feedback** on any mistakes or areas that could be improved. ‘These totals are wrong. You haven’t lined your figures up correctly. Try lining them up underneath the decimal point, like this.’

If your learner has a specific key skills need (for example, lacks confidence in presentation skills), you should provide the necessary help and resources to enable them to put things right. You can structure a coaching session based around their particular needs.

### Activity

The next time you give feedback to one of your learners, ask them to comment on your feedback skills, using the questions below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did the coach…</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>explain what went well?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give feedback on areas where performance needed to change or improve?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explain how to carry out these changes?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrange for any relevant help or support?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leave me feeling positive and motivated to carry on?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Top tips for improving performance

Good coaches do more than give positive and negative feedback. They make sure that their learners understand exactly what they need to do to improve their performance next time. Here are some top tips for ensuring that learners understand what they need to do.

• Use examples to illustrate concepts. Don’t talk ‘in the abstract’.

• Make sure that any examples you use are ones the learner can relate to (based on their work or occupation)

• When giving feedback on performance, ask specific questions to check that your learner has understood.

• Ask the learner what they think.

• Once they’ve put forward their ideas, offer further suggestions, ideas or examples if appropriate.

• Find another way or show them again – it might just be that you haven’t hit upon the best method – or the best day – from the learner’s point of view.

Effective coaching – self-assessment

Read through the following skills the coach needs. For each one, decide whether you:

• are confident that you do it well,

• do it but there’s room for improvement, or

• you need to develop the skill.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>I do this well</th>
<th>I do this, but there’s room for improvement</th>
<th>I need to develop this skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treating learners as individuals</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting learning targets</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning coaching sessions</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving feedback</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving performance</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using active listening</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using effective questioning tech.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You might like to talk through any development needs with your line manager or trainer.

The rest of this module will help you plan your coaching sessions.
Planning a coaching session

This section gives you a framework for planning your coaching sessions with learners. When planning, you need to:

• specify the session objectives and agree them with your learner(s)
• think about the context and identify appropriate opportunities
• break down the task and sequence the learning
• choose suitable methods
• check understanding and performance
• give feedback
• allow time for reflection
• agree further action.

Session objectives

It is important that both you and the learner know the purpose of any coaching session. This needs to be part of a wider, negotiated process where you and the learner have agreed overall what they are aiming for. Here are some examples.

‘To achieve the ICT key skill at level 1’ is a good example of an overall target, but is too wide for an individual or small group session.

Similarly, ‘To deliver a four-minute presentation’ is too broad for you or the learner to know exactly what it is you’ll be doing. You need to take account of the learner’s specific learning needs and turn this goal into a series of specific objectives for your sessions.

‘To identify the characteristics of an effective presentation’ or ‘To practise speaking aloud’ are smaller, more achievable session objectives.
COACHING LEARNERS FOR KEY SKILLS

Activity

Choose a learner whom you know well. What overall targets have been set for their key skills learning? What about individual learning objectives? Try to identify two or three specific objectives for this learner.

Overall targets:

Individual learning objectives:

The learning context

You will need to take account of the learning context when planning your coaching sessions. The main ones are:

• on the job: as part of tasks the learner does in their day-to-day work
• near the job: in a training room at their place of work, or taking them to one side and showing them what to do
• off the job: at college, or during a review.

Activity

Here are some situations commonly dealt with by the coach. What would you do in each situation? (Don’t be afraid to bite the bullet!) Write your ideas in the right-hand column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>What could you do…?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 On-job</td>
<td>The learner is on reception and is constantly interrupted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Near-job</td>
<td>The only place you can go is the back room during the learner’s lunch break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Off-job</td>
<td>Your key skills learners are all from different occupational areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are no ‘magic’ answers to this activity. Here are some suggestions:

1. The learner won’t be able to learn if they can’t give their full attention to the task in hand. You would need to negotiate some time away from the job with their employer, or identify and plan your sessions around quieter times.

2. Again, you would need to talk to the employer and negotiate a suitable time and place for key skills’ learning. If the employer is uncooperative, it may be that they don’t understand key skills and the benefits of learning them.

3. Consider taking an individual approach to learning, by setting work such as assignments and spending time with each learner over time. If it’s a huge group, though, learners won’t be motivated to learn and you would have to rethink the learning context.

**Identifying opportunities**

Making the most of the learning context involves identifying suitable opportunities for the learner to learn key skills. This is easier when you are coaching off the job because you can control what’s happening. Planning sessions on or near the job means you need a clear idea of what the opportunities are in the first place and when they are likely to occur: it’s vital that you know the job as well as the key skills.

‘*Our engineering apprentices only get one go at doing a presentation for real and that’s when we get groups of school leavers coming round the yard. We ask them to talk about what it’s like being an apprentice.*’

*Engineering supervisor*

**Activity**

Think of one of your learners, and list the possible opportunities that exist in their workplace to learn and apply one of the key skills.
## Structuring your coaching session

Once you’ve agreed objectives and thought about the learning context, you need to structure your session logically. This means:

- breaking down the task
- structuring the session using a series of manageable steps (put timings on these, based on the learner’s needs and the time available)
- building in checks for learning.

If you are structuring an on-job session, you will need to approach it from the task or job end of things. Do this by:

1. Choosing a suitable work-based task that lends itself to key skills learning, and identify the point at which the learner will need to use the key skill. (Make sure the learner knows you are taking this approach before you start, or you may undermine their confidence.)

2. Show or teach them the underpinning theory and how it applies to the job in hand. Check that they have understood.

3. Allow the learner to practise and apply what they have learnt using the task (or other examples you have prepared in advance).

Here’s an example:

### Individual session plan

**Name:** Hayley Jones, DTP Ltd., MA in Business and Admin.

**Objectives:**

- To identify the main headings used in report writing
- To structure a report by making notes under each heading
- To identify introductory sentences, phrases and formats to be used in the final write-up

**Task/context:** Writing up a report from the minutes of a team meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Go over the purpose of the session and link to H’s ILP</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Discuss the minutes and ask H to highlight the main points</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Introduce H to main headings used in report writing (using handout)</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ask H to group the main points under each heading</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Check understanding by going through H’s notes; add phrases/format</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Discuss ways of introducing each section – ask H for suggestions</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Give feedback; ask H to reflect</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Plan next session</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Choosing methods

There are many methods you can use during your coaching sessions. Here are some of the main ones and when to use them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Use this method…</th>
<th>For example…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction/demonstration</td>
<td>at the beginning – when you want to ‘show’ or ‘tell’ the learner something new</td>
<td>How to calculate ratios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How to use commas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What a spreadsheet is and how it works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the learner to do it</td>
<td>if the learner is confident and you want to see them in action to hone their performance</td>
<td>Analysing research findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(letting the learner explain to you)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting the learner make mistakes</td>
<td>the learner is getting stuck and you don’t know why, or is just keen to have a go!</td>
<td>Using formulae in a spreadsheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a mixture of methods, for example, demonstrating to begin with, then letting the learner take over.</td>
<td>for more complicated tasks, when the learner is ready to apply what they have learned</td>
<td>Giving a presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing a CV or a letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured tasks or assignments</td>
<td>when making the most of opportunities as they occur for ongoing tasks or learning (you can leave the learner to carry on, provided they are confident to do so)</td>
<td>For hard-to-cover key skills – this will depend on the occupational area</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Activity

Give an example of when you could use each method within your own key skills coaching sessions. (Try to pin this down to individual learners or small groups you currently teach.)

**Instruction/demonstration:**

**Letting the learner do it:**

**Letting the learner make mistakes:**

**Using a mixture of methods:**

**Structured tasks or assignments:**
Your answers will vary according to your individual learners’ needs. The important point is to plan in advance, to choose the method that best suits the learner and to make sure you break down the task into manageable stages first.

**Reviewing and improving**

It’s important to continue treating your learner as an individual at every coaching session. This means:

- letting the learner set the pace
- not overloading them with too much information
- allowing time for feedback and reflection
- planning and agreeing your next steps.

**Where next?**

Make sure you include time for reflection and planning, and agreeing where you go next at the end of each coaching session. This isn’t always as easy as it sounds, particularly if you are coaching in the workplace and there are time pressures. However, it is a vital part of improving learning and performance.

David Kolb’s experiential learning cycle is one of the most relevant to work-based learning. It is based on the idea that reflecting on experience helps people form abstract ideas, which they can test out and apply through further experience.

Read *The learning process* in the library for a fuller explanation.

**Activity**

The next time you conduct a coaching session, ask your learner to reflect on their performance using the prompts below:

What do you think went well?

What were the main learning points for you?

What do you want to do/learn next?
Summary

This module has explained the main principles and processes involved in coaching. You now have a framework for planning key skills coaching sessions with your learners.

References

A Guide to Coaching, a chapter in Work-based learning – A Ready Reference (ANTA)

Carl Rogers (1974) and Abraham Maslow (1968), Why and how people learn

Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1976), Learning Styles Inventory

Learning style for post-16 learners; What do we know? (Newcastle University)

David Kolb, The learning process