

# Coaching Competency

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*WARNING: Coaching by itself is NOT sufficient for bringing about effective and sustainable benefits for children, families, adults, and others impacted by human service programs. To accomplish the desired outcomes, all of the implementation drivers need to be in place and functioning in an integrated and compensatory manner. Readers interested in developing effective coaching systems and sustainable benefits should visit the web site [www.nirn.fpg.unc.edu](http://www.nirn.fpg.unc.edu) and pay special attention to the Brief “Designing Projects based on Implementation Science and Practice” and the Brief “Implementation Drivers Best Practices Tool for Developing Competent Coaches.”*

In most human service programs, when a “supervisor” interacts with a “practitioner” the interactions can be divided into two broad categories:

- 1) Supervision: Information about administrivia – paperwork, hours of work, funding, meeting schedules, and all the other usual stuff related to the content and nature of the interactions between the practitioners and the human service organization that employs them.
- 2) Coaching: Information about the intervention – what it is; when, where, why, and how to do it; and anything else related to the content and nature of the interactions between the practitioner and the intended beneficiaries of the intervention.

These two functions can be carried out by one person who very consciously moves between the supervision and coaching roles. Because we value outcomes, no more than 20% of the time should be spent on “supervision” while 80% or more should be devoted to “coaching” practitioners how to do the intervention, better and better over time.

Given the complexity of the coaching role, coaches are carefully selected, trained, coached, and evaluated in the context of a human service organization that supports the role and functions of coaching (see the “implementation drivers”).

“Coaching competency” has two primary functions as viewed through an implementation lens: 1) the purpose of coaching is to help develop the competencies of practitioners (“coaching for competence”) and 2) to accomplish this, coaches must be competent in the areas outlined below (they are “competent coaches”). The following review of context, content, and competence related to coaching functions is designed to describe some of the core features of coaching for competence and competent coaching and the expected outcomes.

## **Context**

The innovation is **WHAT** we intend to do to benefit children, families, adults, or others. Innovations are specific and vary depending on what we are trying to accomplish. Coaching skills are general (best practices re: **HOW** coaching is done) and are pretty much the same no matter **WHAT** they are coaching to accomplish. Coaches do need to know the innovation very well. Innovation fluency refers to the coach's knowledge, skills, and abilities related to an intervention or practice (innovation) that is well-defined and functionally operationalized. This defines **WHAT** the coach is helping the practitioner learn to do effectively. In our estimation, the knowledge, skills, and abilities related to **HOW** coaching is accomplished is about 80% of good coaching and the remaining 20% is about innovation fluency related to **WHAT** the intervention is, but neither one is useful without the other. Thus, 80% of what coaches do (the **HOW** of coaching) gets better and better as they work with one practitioner after another regarding one evidence-based practice or other innovation after another.

- ❖ Context for coaching is defined as the organizational features and capacity for supporting coaching. Coaching must be valued by the organization/system and the administrators in that system. Coaching is deemed to have value to an organization/system to the extent that there is:
  - a. A position description for a coach (by whatever title)
  - b. Dedicated FTE based on functional ratios of coaches to practitioners
  - c. Administrative support for coaching and for integrating coaching and the other implementation drivers
  - d. Salary scale commensurate with the knowledge, skills, abilities and responsibilities of coaches
  - e. Career path to develop as a coach (e.g. from practitioner to trainer to coach) and as a supervisor of a cadre of coaches (e.g. Master Coach)

## **Content**

- ❖ The “content” here does not refer to the innovation but to the Core Features of a Coaching Service Delivery Plan and Structure and to **HOW** the coach helps the practitioner build competence and confidence
  - a. Coach to Practitioner ratio needs to be aligned with the frequency of coaching needed in order for practitioner to become competent routinely (ratios that range from 1:4 and 1:8 are common in many effective programs)
    - i. As an organization grows, competent coaches need to be added to maintain the ratio. Ratio strain leads to declining benefits.
  - b. There is a written Coaching Purpose Statement that includes:
    - i. Helping practitioners rapidly acquire and effectively use core knowledge, skills, and abilities related to an innovation

- ii. Helping practitioners learn core elements, concepts, rationales **and** the associated skills and abilities related to each element and concept. This conceptual approach provides specific feedback about the skillful use of the innovation and about areas to improve. And importantly this conceptual feedback also helps practitioners learn to skillfully “reflect” on their practice, share knowledge, and observe other practitioners’ in order to learn functional variations on skills associated with core concepts.
- c. Frequency of coaching encounters reflect the development of the practitioner over time (e.g. more frequent coaching in the first few weeks and months, less frequent as performance standards are approximated or met). And, while the style of coaching may shift to more reflective approaches and become less frequent, coaching never ends so frequency is never zero.
- d. Duration of coaching encounters needs to be matched to the range of activities expected of the practitioner (e.g. short observations of transition times in a pre-school setting; longer observations of a small-group reading session for students struggling with literacy; more behavior rehearsal time for skills that have more significant impact on the lives of others). In general the duration of coaching in the first few weeks and months is apt to be longer in order to capture the full range of skills and abilities under development. Later stages of coaching may be more targeted as performance criteria are approximated or met.
- e. Intensity of coaching is defined (e.g. the frequency and duration of observations are varied to provide more assistance when needed, for example, right after training, when unusual events occur, or after decrements in performance)
- f. The type and timing of feedback is specified (e.g. verbal feedback is provided within 24 hours of any direct observation; written feedback is provided at least once a month)

❖ Reporting

- a. The content of coaching sessions generally is considered to be confidential and is NOT a part of decisions affecting employment or general administrative supervision (e.g. attendance at meetings, following policies and procedures) NOR is it routinely reported to others.
- b. Coaches make it clear that if illegal, immoral, or unethical incidents are detected as part of direct observations or other coaching activities the coach will:
  - i. Help the practitioner make a self-report of the incident to the principal or other proper authority, or
  - ii. Will make such a report after discussing it with the practitioner.

## Competence

### ❖ Coaching knowledge, skills, and abilities

- a. Formal and craft knowledge of the innovation (if you don't know what "it" is it will be very difficult to help others do "it" competently!). Craft knowledge consists of the nuances of using the intervention in daily practice.
- b. Relationship development (e.g. personal – professional relationship; 10:1 ratio of positive to constructive feedback; constructive feedback is corrective information that also provides a workable alternative and method to improve)
- c. Observing and describing behavior (non-judgmental; accurate depictions of specific aspects of performance)
- d. Adult conceptual feedback (skill labels and core innovation concepts accompanied by detailed descriptions of a few observed examples)
- e. Behavior rehearsal to criterion (set up practice; work through a practice "scene;" constructive feedback on performance during practice)
- f. Pacing (rapid progress without overwhelming the practitioner or others)
- g. Coach as Systems Interventionist (do it, find it, create it). The purpose of coaching is to develop practitioners who are able to be effective with children, families, and others.
  - i. ANY impediment to achieving practitioner effectiveness is within the purview of a coach. For example, lack of practitioner skill, lack of administrative support, lack of system support, and so on may be impediments to achieving desirable outcomes and, therefore, will be taken on by a coach. This may involve feedback at the administrative and systems level as well as at the practitioner level.
  - ii. No one coach can know everything. For those things the coach knows, they will "do it" themselves. For other impediments, the coach will seek out others and "find it" to overcome the impediment. Sometimes no solution exists so the coach will convene a team to "create it." A coaching community of practice or learning collaborative where competent coaches can share their learning can be a significant boost to coaching competence.

## Outcomes

### ❖ Practitioner performance is the main outcome of coaching from an implementation perspective.

- a. The percent of practitioners that meet performance standards (sometimes referred to as "fidelity" with respect to certain innovations) and the time required for practitioners to meet those standards are major outcomes for individual coaches. A higher percentage is better and a shorter time frame is better.

- b. It is assumed that evaluations have been done to establish a strong relationship (a correlation of 0.80, for example) between the performance standards and eventual (e.g. 1 – 2 years from now) outcomes for children, families, adults, and communities. The strength of this relationship allows the future (eventual outcomes) to be brought into the present (meeting performance standards).
- ❖ Improving Practitioner Selection and Training through Coaching Data and Records: Coaching records and data (this is another reason why it is important to have regular written feedback reports to practitioners) provide feedback regarding the quality and content of practitioner selection and training.
    - a. A review of feedback records for (say) the last 20 practitioners across multiple coaches may reveal common deficits in knowledge, skills, and abilities of practitioners requiring significant coaching time and attention. Analyses of these “thematic problem areas” should lead to revised methods/criteria for selection and for skill-based training. In this way, more practitioners in the future may be able to reach performance criteria sooner with less coaching effort and greater benefits will accrue more quickly for children, families, adults, communities, and society.
  - ❖ Using data to improve coaching competence:
    - a. 360-degree feedback
      - i. At least twice a year, practitioners provide ratings and comments on the coaching they have received (e.g. timely, helpful, clarity of communication, concern, prompt verbal feedback, quality and timeliness of written feedback). This feedback (average ratings by question and comments) is summarized across all practitioners for a given coach.
        - 1. The feedback is used to develop a coaching plan for the coach.
      - ii. When there are multiple coaches, this feedback from practitioners also is analyzed for “thematic problem areas” that are being experienced by multiple coaches.
        - 1. The detection of these common coaching challenges allows for a thoughtful review and revisions related to the selection, training, coaching, and evaluation processes for developing competent coaches.
    - b. Practitioner Performance Data and Outcome Data Analyses
      - i. As noted above, the percent of practitioners who achieve specified levels of performance (e.g. competence) within expected timeframes (e.g. six months, a year) can be a useful indicator of how effective the coaching process is in supporting practitioner competence.
        - 1. Performance measures that are highly correlated with positive outcomes have more validity than those that are ‘best guesses’ based on theory, literature, and personal experience.

2. Do not confuse high quality practitioner performance with the measures of practitioner performance. High quality practitioner performance is the nuanced uses of the innovation to maximize outcomes and is the target of quality coaching. The measures of practitioner performance only provide useful indicators of high quality practitioner performance. The measures of practitioner performance should not become the “target” of coaching. Learning to sensitively and skillfully meet the needs of children, families, and adults by using a specified and effective set of practices or an evidence-based program is the target of coaching.
  3. If the measures of practitioner performance do not align well with the practitioner performances that produce good results, change the measure. The strong association between standards for practitioner performance and longer-term outcomes for the intended beneficiaries should be re-tested every few years.
- ii. Finally, outcome measures that can be aggregated by practitioner and summed by coach are important data to consider in evaluating the quality of the coaching model and the usefulness of the specified coaching skills. This is everyone’s bottom line. While it may be true that coaches cannot be held accountable for all the activity that goes on in their absence, effective coaches behave as though it is true. When everyone (e.g. coaches, administrators, policy makers) feels 100% accountable for making a real difference in outcomes, children, families, adults, and communities benefit.