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Laurie Bedford

Faculty Specialist, Academic Initiatives and Center Support Center for Faculty Excellence Walden University, laurie.bedford@gmail.com

Melissa McDowell

Walden University, melissa.mcdowell@waldenu.edu

Lyda DiTommaso Downs

Walden University, lyda.downs@waldenu.edu

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Enhancing Faculty Performance Through Coaching: Targeted, Individualized Support

Melissa McDowell, Laurie Bedford*, and Lyda DiTommaso Downs
Walden University, USA

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Abstract: Coaching in higher education is a relatively new field; although, it has been taking place in educational institutions for some time, even if it was not labeled as such. This essay describes the faculty development philosophies of a US-based higher education institution with a strong culture of supporting faculty and promoting social change. A coaching model was implemented as a means for professional development. It was designed to be facilitated through a peer relationship and it offers problem-focused, contextualized opportunities for faculty to collaborate, thus making the experience and outcome more meaningful. The coaching model is individualized, confidential, non-evaluative, and incorporates three pathways to support the professional development needs of faculty: self- assigned, a request from college leadership as a means to support faculty in an identified area of need, or the New Faculty Orientation (NFO) instructor may recommend a faculty member for coaching as a way to further engage in topics not discussed in-depth in NFO.

Keywords: Faculty development, faculty coaching, faculty support

Introduction

The faculty body is an integral part of higher education institutions (Guglielmo et al., 2010). Students spend the majority of their academic career interacting with faculty members and the relationships developed through those interactions have a direct impact on student success (Mundy, Kupczynski, Ellis, & Salgado, 2012). Faculty members who have the most developed pedagogical skills and are immersed in the needs of the students are best situated to guide students towards their learning goals (Cook-Sather, 2011; Hyers, Syphan, Cochran, & Brown, 2012).

* Corresponding author (melissa.mcdowell@waldenu.edu)

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Faculty teaching in the online environment are diverse in their perspective and approach (Cariaga-Lo, Worthy Dawkins, Enger, Schotter & Spence, 2010.). The resulting practices can range from highly effective to quite ineffective. Isolation and few opportunities to network may limit discourse and sharing of best practices that can organically occur in face-to-face settings (Bonura, Bissell, & Liljegren, 2012). Online organizations that understand this diversity in faculty preparedness and challenges in sharing ideas also understand their role in supporting faculty. To ensure that faculty are equipped with the most effective pedagogy and learning tools, ongoing faculty development is essential (Guglielmo et al., 2010; McKee & Tew, 2013). At the same time, according to Herman (2012), providing faculty training for online faculty remains a challenge for universities, especially as time and resources for competing activities become scarce (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Developing structured, standardized training to meet the needs of all faculty members may be an elusive task. Therefore, considering a range of faculty development opportunities that includes targeted, individualized support designed to meet the needs of diverse faculty members may be a viable solution for organizations committed to faculty success (Hyers et al., 2012).

Background

Coaching is a relatively new process in professional development; however, coaching has deep theoretical roots that have been around for over a century and are observed in the works of Alfred Adler and Carl Jung. Coaching provides a collaborative, less intimidating approach to improving performance than other development options; effective coaching can guide faculty members from below average performance to above average performance. Not only does coaching provide a collaborative partnership, according to Passmore and Rehman (2012), coaching provides an enhanced relationship, thus encouraging the participants to learn information at a faster pace. Coaching allows individuals to identify their goals and have a voice in their own learning through reflection and feedback—practices which are all critical to change (McLeod & Steinert, 2009; Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Schoniker, 2011). An effective coaching relationship requires trust, confidentiality and that individuals make themselves vulnerable (Cox, 2012). It also provides for the opportunity for assistance without judgment (Koch, 2008).

There is very little research regarding faculty coaching at the university level (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2013). To date, much of the coaching literature focuses on work with elementary teachers in the area of literacy (for example, Stover et al., 2011). According to Brown (2013) and Chingos (2013), funding for education is at an all-time low in the United States. Therefore, coaching may be considered an optional luxury by a few who attest that it would take significant funding to bring schools up to simply an adequate level for operation (Boone, 2009). Still, more academic institutions are starting to consider faculty coaching an important element in professional development (Knight, 2012).

Coaching in some form has been occurring in many educational institutions but has not been until recently that it has been labeled as coaching (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2013). Previously, it was referred to using other titles such as instructional mentoring, faculty mentoring, or even instructional facilitating. Huston and Weaver (2008) suggested that a coaching model for faculty members in higher education includes opportunities for faculty members to self-identify issues,

review materials or practices in question, and have a conversation between the faculty member and coach to share concerns and potential solutions. These considerations are also embedded in a framework offered by Koch (2008) that includes assessment, challenge, support, and empowerment.

Through their research in applied behavioral science, Payne and Dozier (2013) suggested that when there is positive reinforcement, the outcomes tend to be more constructive than when negative reinforcement methods are used. Therefore, coaching, like any other professional development activity, should be considered a positive, proactive activity for faculty members to enhance current skills and develop new approaches. Conversely, coaching should never be used as a punitive activity designed to monitor faculty members who have been identified as low performing.

Coaching is oftentimes viewed as being a process to induct new faculty members into the organization. However, coaching can be used as a professional development activity for all faculty members, including mid-career and senior faculty members who need more specialized developmental opportunities (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Since coaching is personalized, facilitated learning (Koch, 2008), it can be an innovative alternative to a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development (Stover et al., 2011). The benefits of a coaching program include increased morale, high-quality collaborations, and an emphasis on proven pedagogical practices (Huston & Weaver, 2008).

Coaching should not be confused with counseling because the training, approach, and outcomes are not the same. Coaching does not include working with individuals on mental health issues; in the context of faculty coaching it is strictly directed at pedagogical skills in the classroom. The one similarity coaching does have with counseling is confidentiality. Typically, when individuals engage in the coaching process the items disclosed remain confidential. If coaching results must be disclosed to a third party, Greenfield and Hengen (2004) recommended stating the specific parameters surrounding confidentiality at the onset of the coaching relationship to avoid misunderstanding.

Similarly, mentoring and coaching are sometimes used interchangeably. However, they are quite different professional development processes. Coaching involves reflection, discussion and follow-up that reflects learning outcomes with a focus on students (Stover et al., 2011). Conversely, mentors enter into ongoing relationships that extend beyond the individual experience (Stowers & Barker, 2010). Therefore, coaching provides focused faculty members support and just-in-time resolution to pedagogical issues in the classroom.

Walden University's Faculty Development Philosophies

Walden University has a strong culture of supporting faculty and promoting social change. In 2013, Walden also embraced the philosophy of creating a healthy organization, a practice proposed by Lencioni (2012) in his book, *The Advantage*. Lencioni proposed that a healthy organization encompasses the four disciplines model and states them as: (a) build a cohesive leadership team, (b) create clarity, (c) over communicate clarity, and (d), reinforce clarity (p. 15-16). A healthy organization at Walden University consists of faculty members who are engaged and active in the classroom, creating a substantial experience for their students and colleagues. In order to be completely healthy, according to Lencioni, individuals need to be in

tune with their inner self and skills associated with their profession. All four areas of Lencioni's disciplines model at each stage can be influenced and positively enhanced through individualized support as it increases self-efficacy that can in turn provide higher performance and greater job satisfaction (Leonard-Cross 2010).

Instructors enter faculty positions with varying experiences and circumstances (Cariagallo et al., 2010.). These experiences may or may not include teaching in an online setting. According to Mulig and Rhame (2012), "[t]eaching online is much different than teaching face-to-face" (p. 102). Different does not necessarily mean difficult. Still, Walden University embraces the need to provide a faculty development support structure to meet the diverse needs of faculty. Newly hired faculty come to Walden falling into one or more of the following categories:

- They are new to the academy of distance education with no online teaching experience.
- They are highly qualified, have extensive experience teaching face-to-face in higher education, but have never taught an online course.
- They have taught online but are accustomed an unstructured course development system that allows individual faculty members to design course material as they see fit.
- They have taught hybrid courses where some of the course content is delivered online, and some are offered face-to-face.
- They have experience teaching both at the university level and teaching online.

In addition to meeting the needs of instructors with any of these unique attributes, all new faculty members must be inducted into Walden University's institution acumen. The latter is included in an extensive four-week New Faculty Orientation (NFO), of which successful completion is required before interacting with students. However, addressing all faculty needs cannot be fully accomplished in the NFO as its goal is more focused on familiarizing new faculty with institutional expectations. Topics such as engagement, course discussion, and even time management are referenced in the NFO, but because of time constraints, cannot be covered in-depth. Filling in these gaps, coaching can play a crucial role in faculty professional development and support. According to Lencioni (2012), healthy organizations recognize that their employees want to be successful. One, of the ways to help faculty be successful within a healthy organization is to provide access to individualized support that provides opportunities for reflection and personal growth (Cook-Sather, 2011). Having a supportive process in place for faculty to electively reach out for consultation is the foundation of the Walden coaching model.

Walden University's Coaching Model

Structure and Support

Since 2009, the Center for Faculty Excellence has supported the university by providing teaching and learning opportunities for faculty and by engaging the faculty and academic leadership through: (1) the design and delivery of professional development and training opportunities; (2) the collaborative review, development, and implementation of academic policy; (3) the collection and distribution of faculty performance information, to support quality assurance in the online classroom; (4) advocacy on behalf of the faculty; (5) communication to the faculty; and (6) community building and networking opportunities for the faculty.

Walden's Center for Faculty Excellence employs three Faculty Specialists who support the five colleges and centers and promote enhanced pedagogical performance in the classroom.

This team provides consulting services on a broad range of pedagogical issues including faculty development aligned with key performance and assessment data. The faculty specialists also serve as the coaches at Walden University. In addition to the three faculty specialists, Walden's Center for Faculty Excellence is supported by two instructional designers, two data analysts and a special projects administrator. The Center for Faculty Excellence is led by a manager who reports directly to the chief academic officer.

The Center for Faculty Excellence team provides most faculty development opportunities at Walden University. The team strives to respond to faculty professional development needs that are timely and relevant to organizational expectations as described by Bonura, Bissell, and Liljegren (2012). As a result, professional development opportunities have evolved to vary in content and delivery. Current offerings include instructor-led new faculty orientation, self-paced modules, live webinars, facilitated group discussions, face-to-face workshops, and one-on-one coaching.

The faculty coaching program at Walden University was implemented in 2011. Walden's coaching model has been designed to be facilitated through a peer relationship as described by Huston and Weaver (2008). It offers problem-focused, contextualized opportunities for faculty to collaborate, thus making the experience and outcome more meaningful. Faculty Specialists at Walden University are considered faculty members and are lateral colleagues with other faculty across the university. Faculty specialists also have experience and expertise in the classroom—both online and the traditional face-to-face setting—and possess a proven track record of reliable and consistent performance. This experience, combined with their role in the university, situates the faculty specialist as peer who can project empathy, provide expert advice, and maintain confidentiality within the coaching setting.

Over the past three years, the coaching process and resulting outcomes have evolved and grown. Initially, coaching was a tangential offering with which many faculty and supervisors were unfamiliar. Coaching is currently a process that academic leadership has recognized and promoted amongst faculty as a primary avenue for professional development within the University. While coaching is sometimes viewed as potential offering for new faculty; veteran faculty are embraced as appropriate coaching participants as well. To date, Walden's faculty specialists have held 446 one-on-one coaching sessions, supporting 277 unique faculty members. In the first year, 2011, 101 coaching sessions were held supporting 65 unique faculty members and have been consistent over time. As of November of 2014, 111 coaching sessions were provided, serving 61 unique faculty members.

Coaching as Professional Development

Walden University understands the importance of providing ongoing professional development to support faculty. Cariago-Lo et al. (2010) described the effective organization as one that is innovative in creating opportunities to support both new and experienced faculty. Furthermore, mature institutions such as Walden University, in their readiness to support faculty, understand that this development should be aligned to the internal and psychological motivation of individual faculty members (Cox, 2012; Koch, 2008). Walden University's coaching model provides this level of opportunity for faculty at all stages of career development as well as with differing interpersonal needs. The coaching process is a supportive practice, geared towards helping faculty improve on various pedagogical issues in the online classroom (Denton &

Hasbrouck, 2009; Stover et al., 2011). As described by Taie (2011), coaching is “the art and practice of inspiring, energizing, and facilitating the performance, learning and development of the coachee” (p. 34).

The Walden coaching model is individualized, confidential, non-evaluative, and incorporates three pathways to support the professional development needs of faculty. The first option is self-assigned, wherein the instructor requests a coaching session via the Center for Faculty Excellence. This is the most common way faculty members engage in coaching and provides for the most self-directed approach to professional development. The second option is a request from college leadership as a means to support faculty in an identified area of need. It should be noted that this referral is not based on poor-performance; rather it is a supportive measure on the part of supervisors to assist faculty in reaching their own improvement goals. Finally, the New Faculty Orientation instructor may recommend a faculty member for coaching as a way to further engage in topics not discussed in-depth in NFO. In the latter scenario, coaching is suggested based on the faculty member’s engagement in the NFO with no obligation on the faculty member’s part. These three options provide an accessible pathway to faculty coaching as professional development as a conduit to a healthy organization as suggested by Lencioni (2012).

During the coaching meeting, the faculty specialist works with the instructor to provide a solution based strategy to the topic provided by the instructor. Meetings take place via telephone or video conference and are typically an hour in length. The one-on-one coaching begins with a faculty member sharing the area of concern. As the coaching is a peer supported process, the faculty specialist listens to the issues and formulates a plan to help the faculty member arrive at a solution best suited to his or her individual style. In addition to drawing on the experience of both parties, the faculty specialist also refers to a coaching toolkit. The toolkit hosts various online teaching resources collected by the faculty specialist team. These support tools are organized by popular coaching topics and are used to guide the conversation with the coachee. If required, a screen sharing program is used to demonstrate steps or information related to the topic being discussed. Upon the completion of the session, faculty receive a follow up email with an outline of topics covered, links to corresponding self-paced modules, and to related articles where applicable. Faculty may register for additional sessions as needed.

Conclusion

Institutions are increasingly challenged to find innovative and efficient ways to support diverse new and seasoned faculty (Cariago-Lo et al., 2010). As time and resources become scarce and faculty needs become diverse; organizations need to identify creative sources to support faculty in meeting instructional expectations (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Coaching can be an effective way to fill the gap in meeting individual faculty needs (Stover et al., 2011). However, the organization needs to have a culture that supports coaching (Cox, 2012; Koch, 2008). This should include access to professional development opportunities that provide timely and relevant support for instructional concerns (Bonura et al., 2012). An academic institution is only as strong as its faculty members and investing in faculty development that includes coaching may help maintain the strength of the institution, thus providing an enhanced experience for the students.

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