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Trusted Friendships, Improved Performance And Organizational Success: The Case For Implementing Peer Coaching In The Workplace

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Janet Greco, PhD

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Trusted Friendships, Improved Performance And Organizational Success: The Case For Implementing Peer Coaching In The Workplace

Abstract
Peer coaching is a type of coaching under-represented and infrequently utilized within organizations, yet offers opportunity for organizations to improve employee wellness, build deeper connections between employees and develop stronger competencies in areas such as communication, collaboration and inclusion. This capstone seeks to reveal the myriad benefits and opportunities inherent to implementing a peer coaching program in the workplace, through a secondary research of available literature and proposal of a peer coaching framework that can be implemented with ease, at low cost and to maximum organizational benefit. Through the course of analysis of the literature, both the existing research as well as the gaps in the literature with regard to peer coaching are made visible, thus creating space for a conceptual peer coaching framework that focuses on trust and transparency along with key intersections of authenticity and psychological safety, suited for organizations of any size or type to implement.

Keywords
improved performance, organizational success, peer coaching

Comments
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TRUSTED FRIENDSHIPS, IMPROVED PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS:
THE CASE FOR IMPLEMENTING PEER COACHING IN THE WORKPLACE

By Victoria Kozhushchenko

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at the University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2020
TRUSTED FRIENDSHIPS, IMPROVED PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS:

THE CASE FOR IMPLEMENTING PEER COACHING IN THE WORKPLACE

Approved by:

Janet Greco, PhD., Advisor

Ilene C. Wasserman, PhD., Reader
ABSTRACT

Peer coaching is a type of coaching under-represented and infrequently utilized within organizations, yet offers opportunity for organizations to improve employee wellness, build deeper connections between employees and develop stronger competencies in areas such as communication, collaboration and inclusion. This capstone seeks to reveal the myriad benefits and opportunities inherent to implementing a peer coaching program in the workplace, through a secondary research of available literature and proposal of a peer coaching framework that can be implemented with ease, at low cost and to maximum organizational benefit. Through the course of analysis of the literature, both the existing research as well as the gaps in the literature with regard to peer coaching are made visible, thus creating space for a conceptual peer coaching framework that focuses on trust and transparency along with key intersections of authenticity and psychological safety, suited for organizations of any size or type to implement.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work on this capstone began during a period of relative calm and flexibility in my life, when I had hours of available time, multiple locations in which to research and write, and was easily able to keep up with all my other obligations. Then we turned the page on the calendar, entered 2020 and within a few short weeks, everything we knew to be normal and logical vanished. What did not disappear, however, was the ongoing support and encouragement to continue researching, writing and finding meaning from a wide variety of family and friends, colleagues and mentors. I consider myself incredibly fortunate and I must acknowledge with gratitude (though cannot mention by name) everyone who helped to make this work possible. This acknowledgment is lengthy, because the process was lengthy - 10 years from start to finish in this amazing Organizational Dynamics program at Penn.

To my family. First, Milla and Nina, who are the reason I take on as many commitments as I can - to make their world a better place, to ensure they can grow up and become strong, confident women, to show them what it means to have passion and dedication for something big and to power through, even in the tough times. They have tolerated my periods of frustration, anxiety and concern with good humor and shown me what true love, acceptance and support feels like in their drawings, words, notes, hugs and kisses. To my mother, Jackie - whose support, love, hours of babysitting, a desk to work at in a quiet house, and never-ending encouragement have so much to do with my success in this work and every other aspect of my life. And to Alex, the love of my life - who provides balance in our lives, always has my back and gave me just what I needed at the right moment - random flowers or a bottle of wine, a good laugh, temporary distraction with an exciting new tv show to watch, or words of encouragement.
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During periods of uncertainty, upset, confusion or lack of clarity, we seek and find meaning in the simple things. 2020 has most certainly been a strange and uncertain year and one that has challenged all of us in many ways. Working through this capstone was a major part of this year, and though not necessarily a “simple thing”, it allowed me to stay grounded, focused and with a goal in mind.
The simplicity came in having one consistent focus that brought clarity in the most important areas - I appreciate the opportunity this work and this year have afforded me to evaluate health, safety, equity, justice, love and life (my own and that of every other human being on this planet) through new and different lenses. My hope is that the work helps others.
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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you are a working parent with a newborn child. You have just spent eight weeks on leave, adapting to your new role at home while also dealing with what feels like less sleep and more responsibility than you have ever previously had in your life. It’s your second week back at work, and now that everyone has finished congratulating you and asking to look at pictures of your beautiful new daughter, you are trying to reacclimate to your role and your team. Your partner is still at home (also a working parent) but only for a few more weeks, and your primary concern is where you will seek childcare once you’re both back at work. You are sitting in a meeting for a project that started while you were on leave, and for which you are the main subject matter expert. Everyone is looking to you to provide input on the business analysis that was conducted over the prior month, and to determine how the project will be run based on the information gathered during user feedback sessions. You are keeping one eye on your phone because you know your daughter had her two-month checkup this morning and there are concerns about her weight, plus your spouse was going to be talking to a local daycare, and your mother-in-law is trying to confirm a flight to come and help out for a few weeks. In short, you’re stressed out, sleep-deprived, worried about the
potential success of this project and have a dozen things on your mind, half work-focused and half related to what’s going on at home.

As the meeting ends, your boss pulls you aside and asks if everything is ok. Prior to your leave, he was very supportive but as you’ve re-acclimated to work in the last two weeks, he has made some comments that indicate he may be less-than-pleased with the number of times you have left work early or come in late. You consider setting aside time to talk to him today but aren’t sure how to present your concerns and needs in a way that shows you are working hard to balance your responsibilities at work and at home. Normally you would go to Nicole (a close friend who works in your office) when something work-related was bothering you, but you suspect she would have a hard time relating to your current situation, as she has no children and is consumed with planning her wedding. “What I need”, you think to yourself, “is someone around here who relates to me, can help me think through what’s going on and isn’t going to judge me or make decisions about my career based on what I tell them.”

Much of what is required of us at work feels productivity related. We are asked to complete projects, attend meetings, accomplish tasks, meet financial or operational targets and solve problems. There is often a starting and ending point, a measurement in volume or level of work produced, and an annual performance review designed to capture objective and subjective feedback on the work accomplished. Data and analytics have become key drivers of organizational strategies and goal setting, with shareholder and
stakeholder value being measured by a variety of tangible components. However, the intangible aspects of work, the things that are harder to measure, can be overlooked because they may not be as visible to the organization and are therefore not seen as valuable compared to the more obvious productivity-related outcomes.

There has been marked improvement in identifying and valuing the less tangible outcomes during the last decade with companies taking an increased focus on such areas as employee engagement (through measurement of retention and turnover), employee wellbeing (through aggregated data points on employee health and wellness) and employee satisfaction (through feedback surveys and focus groups), but the degree to which these areas and their results are valued varies wildly across organizations and industries. The competitive landscape for businesses is fierce, and organizations continue to look for new ways to build market-share, engage new customers and attract the best talent. Once the talent is in place, employee retention becomes a necessity to allow the organization to thrive, grow and meet or exceed its targets, objectives and stakeholder expectations.

Productivity and engagement, as well as wellbeing and satisfaction, are important components of a successful and happy workforce, but I propose that there is a “third rail” that is being ignored. How, when and where employees can connect with each other on a relatable level is often not a primary area of focus for organizations but should be. From the first day of employment to the last, whether defined by the work, the project, the
company or the career, individuals are under immense pressure to meet multiple objectives, balance work and home, maintain focus and demonstrate positive outcomes. Add to that the current climate of uncertainty and anxiety brought on by a global pandemic as well as the dual dynamics of the existing political climate and the movement for social justice, and the challenge to manage a well-balanced synergy between the personal and professional requires interaction, connection, collaboration and trust. The need for frequent, ongoing and authentic relationship building to occur at work, in a way that goes beyond the typical development of surface-level friendships and connections with colleagues in meetings, becomes of paramount importance. Additionally, being able to talk about life, in the context of work, in a way that feels safe and authentic, can drive positive improvements to organizational culture and employee engagement.

When employees connect with each other on a deeper level, they become less lonely, more active (physically and mentally), and they develop insights into their own work by helping others (Caporale-Berkowitz & Friedman, 2018). The need for individuals to be able to do so in any circumstance or setting is one that grows over time as we are required to do more, work independently, live our lives electronically and virtually, balance work and home and define our achievements in new ways. When the relationships in place are strong and can weather all types of situations, it is likely these connections can occur more frequently.
One way to address this need is for organizations to invest in peer coaching: structured, sustainable relationship-building and feedback generation between individuals at similar levels: to drive new thinking, develop resilient workforces, achieve transformational outcomes, and perhaps most importantly, signal that employees’ lives and experiences both inside and outside of work are welcome for discussion, consideration and solutioning while at work.

Background and History

In 2009, when I first began studying Organizational Dynamics at Penn, I had a best friend at work (let’s call her Nicole) whom I would call or meet for lunch regularly. We held the same role, albeit in different parts of the organization, and had similar experiences in our career trajectory, worked for the same senior leader (at different times), and had parallels in how we chose to spend our time outside of work. We could talk about our shared experiences and challenge each other’s perspectives, ask questions to drive insights and suggest possibilities to problem solve and develop new ideas. We laughed about some of the crazy experiences we had as HR professionals, and we discussed ways to handle difficult situations that would result in sustainable outcomes. She encouraged my work and my academic pursuits, held me accountable to my goals and helped me think through situations that seemed unsolvable at first glance. Two and a half years later, I was married and six months pregnant and she had left the organization to
pursue a bigger role with more growth potential. Our friendship stayed strong, but our paths diverged in our related careers. When I returned to work three months after the birth of my daughter and struggled to determine how to juggle the new with the old, Nicole was whom I called to vent, but the conversation was awkward and ended rather quickly. Besides not being in the same office or organization, we could no longer fully understand each other’s experiences. Our ability to relate to each other had diminished and I had no-one else to provide a replacement for some must-needed questioning and insights. I was in need of someone on par with me, with shared experiences who could help me think through challenging situations and devise strong potential solutions. I remember feeling lonely, unfocused and uncertain about how to handle all the changes I had recently experienced and thought that perhaps I needed a coach (or a therapist). I had extensive familiarity with coaching, having been a coach myself within my organization for years, and knew that the benefits and opportunities that coaching provided: unbiased perspective, a listening mindset and a curiosity and willingness to ask good questions – were very much in line with my needs. What I did not realize at the time was that what I really needed (wanted?) was a peer coach.

**Purpose and Methodology of the Capstone**

The concept of peer support in the workplace is not new. Across any organization, employees frequently engage with each other to share stories, ask questions, gain feedback and vent their frustrations. Our need to connect
with others is a basic tenet of the human condition, and at work, that need often manifests with a desire to share experiences and find commonalities in the work we do. Conversations are struck up during coffee breaks, relationships are formed with co-workers on shared projects, and connections occur during meetings. If those encounters result in shared meaning, both individuals may find themselves giving and gaining feedback on issues and situations in the workplace, and much of the ensuing content may be considered peer support. Peer support is helpful, perhaps even necessary for workplace survival. Peer coaching, on the other hand, can do much more than just help us survive.

Peer coaching in the workplace is an under-researched and infrequently discussed topic and the literature available is highly diverse and unstructured. Where peer coaching is found, it is often within the context of education (for and by teachers or students) or healthcare (specifically nursing or physical therapy specialties) and focused on knowledge transfer. However, as one retired teacher and teacher development specialist told me recently, “I've never seen peer coaching mentioned outside of K-12 schools.” (D. Huff, personal communication, January 14, 2020). Within K-12 education, teachers use peer coaching as a way of testing curricula and validating teaching methods and focus on observation and reflection as a key mechanism to drive classroom best practices (Johnson et al., 2017).

Peer coaching was initially identified as a mechanism to reduce the isolation often felt by teachers in a classroom, and then expanded to assist in
bringing new teaching methods to educators who might not otherwise have opportunities to share knowledge or collaborate as they did not interact daily with other teachers within the classroom (Schwellnus & Carnahan, 2014). The K-12 education sector embraced peer coaching beginning in the mid 1980’s as classroom sizes swelled, school districts expanded and new types of teaching methods were introduced, adopted and became standard (Waddell & Dunn, 2005). In addition, the federal and state education performance measures and testing introduced or overhauled in the mid to late 1990’s and early 2000’s (e.g., No Child Left Behind and state-driven annual assessments such as the PSSA’s in Pennsylvania) pushed schools and teachers to train teachers faster and to more exacting standards, providing a robust and open environment for peer coaching to take hold.

Within healthcare, the nursing, physical therapy and medical technician fields utilize peer coaching to help reduce medical errors through processes whereby a highly qualified professional validates the skills and competencies of an individual doing the same job at the same time. The gap between theory and practice is incredibly wide for newly trained healthcare workers, and within the field, learning never ends as research, insights and treatment protocols morph and change frequently. Peer coaching has become an ideal way of driving skill enhancement, increasing performance and developing competency in healthcare as it allows two individuals within frequent proximity to each other and with relative equality with regard to role and level to “engage in an equal non-competitive relationship that involves observation of
the task, feedback to improve task performance and support in the implementation of changes" (Schwellnus & Carnahan, 2014, p. 39). As a source of knowledge, information on peer coaching in education and healthcare informs the work completed within this capstone but the specialized nature of peer coaching programs in those industries prevents an opportunity to apply such programs across all industries and sectors.

The intention of this capstone is to delve into the positive benefits and outcomes of peer coaching in a professional work environment, regardless of industry, sector or line of business (and inclusive of the education and healthcare sectors). I use the term "peer coaching" in a rather narrow sense, as seeking references on peer coaching in the workplace will reveal a wide variety of topics and discussions, including discourse and information on peer mentoring, advice and feedback sessions, or a general discussion around helping another person to learn. It is rare, at least in the case of the literature review done for the purposes of this capstone, to find peer coaching in the workplace discussed as a trained set of tasks, supported by a formal program and led by organizational leadership or professional coaches. In conducting a search for peer-reviewed and academic literature on peer coaching, references to peer coaching as a general field, with no reference or focus on a particular industry, were minimal, and limited to a set of articles and books by a common group of academics, including Richard Ladyshewsky, Polly Parker, Kathy Kram, Douglas Hall and Ilene Wasserman. What appears to be
unavailable, however, is any significant content on the formal delivery of peer coaching programs in the workplace as a mechanism to drive employee engagement, retention and employee wellbeing.

**Purpose**

The primary purpose of this capstone is to argue that peer coaching has valid and meaningful usage in the workplace. Doing so allows visibility into a number of areas: the depth (or lack thereof) of research and utilization of peer coaching in the general workplace (and specifically, in business environments), the breadth of the coaching space in current organizations, how peer coaching has evolved and is perceived, and the variety of methods and processes taught and utilized in coaching.

My secondary intention is to demonstrate that a formal peer coaching program, supported by leadership and facilitated through employee resource groups or Organizational Development and Human Resources functions, has enormous potential for both employees and organizations. It is my hope that this paper highlights the value of removing barriers to peer coaching due to industry or sector, and demonstrates that peer coaching, when well-constructed, thoughtfully developed and properly maintained, can drive a number of positive impacts within organizations. Through my capstone, I will suggest that peer coaching can be a valid and meaningful tool for investment by organizations in any industry and can drive positive outcomes that go beyond the standard measurements of employee performance and
productivity, in support of employee engagement, wellbeing and positive succession planning. The experiential, collaborative and transformative aspects of peer coaching create immense opportunity for organizations to support an employee’s diverse needs and experiences while at work, and I wish to expand the thinking within organizations in relation to organizational development and effectiveness, demonstrating the value and importance of relationship-building, knowledge sharing and bi-directional support as a key promoter to improve organizational health and employee wellbeing.

Finally, to further demonstrate the potential of peer coaching, I will propose a framework for a peer coaching program that can be implemented within organizations of any type or size. This framework, where trust and transparency are paramount and elements of divergent thinking and psychological safety are woven into a structured peer coaching process, delivers coaching that becomes richer, deeper, more sustainable and drives greater benefit to coach and coachee. Most coaching literature discusses the necessity of trust for a successful coaching relationship but does not delve into the broader concept of psychological safety. Similarly, a validated coaching process will include a structured set of approaches to help the coachee see a situation from multiple perspectives or consider the variety of potential solutions to a problem, and potential problems for a solution, a concept known as divergent thinking.
Methodology

In constructing a perspective on peer coaching and developing a coaching process, the methodology for this capstone involved secondary research focused on whether peer coaching can improve knowledge transfer, foster competency development, produce cost savings and drive employee engagement across any workplace, just as it has been proven to do within the education and healthcare sectors. The content within this paper is primarily based on an extensive literature review. This approach also included a review of the proposed peer coaching framework by experts in human resources and coaching, who provided meaningful feedback and insights related to their own work, education and experiences.

Capstone Outline

The path followed in this work on peer coaching is driven primarily by a literature review in Chapter One, designed to identify useful elements of peer coaching as well as gaps in the literature. The literature review is focused on a brief but clear definition of the general field of coaching and subsequently, a deeper definition of the specific field of peer coaching. It should be noted that in the literature, the concepts, models and application of "coaching" is well documented but "peer coaching" is not, so references to “coaching” will refer to all types of coaching.
Peer coaching in the two industries it is most frequently represented, education and healthcare, will be briefly reviewed for an understanding of how peer coaching has shown up in academic literature and the workplace to date. Chapter Two will focus on a discussion of what the literature offers with regard to the value of peer coaching in organizations; the ways in which peer coaching can occur (e.g., the processes typically followed in coaching) will then provide visibility, within the literature, to the structure of successful peer coaching programs. Analysis of the literature reviewed will address the following questions: where does peer coaching fall short in today’s workplace, what are the relationships between peer coaching and psychological safety, and what are the relationships between peer coaching and divergent thinking. Additionally, analysis will provide insight into the opportunities for supporting and developing peer coaching in all workplaces.

A brief review of the available literature on psychological safety and divergent thinking in Chapter Three will introduce these concepts such that they can then be understood as a necessary component of a sustainable and scalable peer coaching program for organizations.

Finally, and as previously mentioned, this capstone will propose a specific approach to peer coaching in Chapter Four, delivered as a structured peer coaching framework for the workplace. The literature review will drive the development of the peer coaching framework, as such analysis will allow me to identify both useful elements as well as gaps in the field of peer coaching. This approach will contain clear guidance on the development and
implementation of peer coaching programs at work and will provide a set of process steps that should be contained in any peer coaching program, as well as comprehensive review of the benefits of a coaching process that focuses on psychological safety and divergent thinking. The framework to be proposed is intended to be easily adopted by a leader or organization in any sector wishing to offer peer coaching to team members. The proposed peer coaching framework will indicate the benefit of peer coaching as a method for improving productivity, as well as a resource for driving employee engagement and supporting employee wellness.
CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Coaching

Various definitions of coaching exist throughout the literature and the global coaching community. Whether viewed as a formal and structured internal program for an organization, a paid private engagement or an informal interaction between two or more people (one being the ‘coach’ and the other the ‘coachee’), coaching is meant to be a helping relationship and a mechanism to deliver change (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). The coaching process is designed to provide help through a facilitated activity, discussion or intervention, with the explicit purpose of performance improvement, personal effectiveness, personal development and/or personal growth (Beattie et al., 2014). The coach’s role is to “unlock an individual’s potential to optimize their own creative problem-solving, development and learning” (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, p. 141). Coaching in organizations is typically seen as a guided, structured and monitored process, initiated to improve the participant’s desired level of performance in their current function and to prepare for future opportunities (Utrilla et al., 2015). Coaching is meant to be productive and results-oriented, to provide improvement to an individual’s skills, capabilities and competencies, and can also help to address performance problems. Simply put, coaching is, at its core, a conversational relationship between two
people where one or both benefit; at some point, the intent is that one person experiences positive change which can be attributed to the work done during the coaching relationship. Coaching is considered successful when it has the potential for positive and transformative outcomes (Mosteo, 2015). Finally, coaching is an opportunity for the individual as coachee, the individual as coach and (under certain circumstances) the organization to come together in unison towards common goals: self-awareness, self-improvement and positive impact through conversation and insight.

Framework of Peer Coaching

Peer coaching is a specific category and sub-type of coaching, just as team (or group) coaching, leadership coaching, manager coaching, and executive coaching are coaching categories also utilized within the workplace (Jones et al., 2016). Peer coaching can also be known as technical coaching, collegial coaching or challenge coaching in the education space or as action learning or (periodically) mentoring within healthcare and in other organizational contexts (Garmston, 1987). The roots of peer coaching lie in the concept of cooperative learning, when in 1899, John Dewey introduced the idea that learners benefit most from working together to learn new skills as opposed to working individually or in competition with each other (Ladyshewsky, 2006b).
The earliest identification of formal peer coaching appears to have developed within the healthcare industry. Born out of the understanding that within healthcare, working cooperatively within a team is a necessity for the modern healthcare practitioner, meta-analysis of more than 300 studies of cooperative, individual and competitive learning situations within the healthcare industry has demonstrated that “cooperative learning methods promote higher achievement than competitive approaches and individual approaches” (Ladyshewsky, 2006b, p. 5). A review of the academic literature indicates that a specific focus on peer coaching was also developed in K-12 education (supported by a 1980 proposal by Beverly Showers and Bruce Joyce for peer coaching as a core component of on-site development), where peer coaching was introduced as a way to leverage the work experience, teaching techniques and technical skills of more experienced educators to improve the capabilities of newer teachers (Joyce & Showers, 1980). It also became a valuable tool in the process to address the low rates of transfer from traditional teacher education methods to the classroom (Showers & Joyce, 1996). A tertiary and lesser, yet still frequently mentioned, locus of origin for peer coaching appears to be within graduate school degree programs, most specifically MBA programs, where cohorts and peer groups dominate, thus creating opportunity for peer coaching programs to develop and thrive (Ladyshewsky, 2006a; Stumpf, 2011).

Because of the diversity of industries and methods in which peer coaching has been introduced, developed and incorporated into learning and
development programming, defining peer coaching in a singular, globally accepted way is somewhat of a challenge; available definitions of peer coaching vary wildly as to what is included, excluded and how the terminology is used.

The secondary research approach used here indicates, due to the diversity of types of peer coaching in use and the ways in which it has been adapted across certain industries, a likelihood that a standard peer coaching framework and process for the workplace might be easily adopted across all types of organizations, given the common components of knowledge transfer, trust-building and discussion of shared experiences.

**Relationship between Peer Coaching and Mentorship**

A somewhat common finding in the literature is that the topic of 'peer coaching' is used interchangeably with the term 'peer mentoring', and searches on the topic of peer mentoring produce results indicating that peer coaching and mentoring have strong similarities. For the purposes of clarification and definition of peer coaching within this paper, it is necessary to unequivocally state that peer coaching and peer mentoring are not interchangeable, and 'mentoring' should not be used to define peer coaching at any level.

This equal exchange of terminology is concerning, as a mentor is clearly defined in the academic literature as an individual with a higher status or level, more experience or tenure and one who offers advice and counsel (Higgins & Kram, 2001), indicating a significant differentiation between
coaching and mentoring. Indeed, the word ‘mentor’ comes from the Greek, and is the name that Homer gave to an old and trusted friend of Odysseus, whom he entrusted with taking care of and advising his son, Telemachus (as well as his household) during Odysseus’s many years of fighting and travel away from home. Mentoring often appears in organizations as structured programs where relationships are offered and built between two individuals - one more tenured and one less experienced, at different levels and with the more seasoned individual regularly providing advice and encouragement to the lower-level employee. When coaching is taught to those building their coaching skills, advice-giving is discouraged and unsupported within structured models of coaching and the idea of a coach pontificating (and doing much of the talking) during a coaching session is counter to the core concepts within coaching of self-awareness, developing insight, questioning and listening. Indeed, as the following anonymous quote best suggests, “A coach has some great questions for your answers; a mentor has some great answers for your questions” (Unknown, 2018).

I would submit that ‘peer mentoring’ cannot exist as a valid type of mentoring as the term is oxymoronic – a person defined as a peer with a similar level of responsibility and/or experience cannot also be a mentor who has a higher status or more tenure and experience. Additionally, mentoring is a one-way helping dynamic while peer coaching provides both individuals the opportunity to help each other (creating mutuality) (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Interestingly, the formal, defined topic of peer mentorship can actually be
found in a number of peer-reviewed journal articles and books, including those by well-respected management, education and healthcare scholars such as Kathy Kram, Tammy Allen, Scott Bryant, and Monica Higgins, many of whom also research and write on the topic of coaching (Miller, 2011). Again, however, peer mentoring appears more frequently in literature related to healthcare, medicine and education than in business or management literature, and its use in business environments appears to be quite limited.

**Definition of Peer Coaching**

A simple and often-referenced definition of peer coaching comes from Polly Parker, Douglas Hall and Kathy Kram – “a dyadic relationship between two individuals of equal status that has as the primary purpose to support the personal and professional development of both parties” (Parker et al., 2012, p. 262). As indicated by Ladyshewsky in writing about peer coaching as a construct to improve cooperation and skill building, “[p]eer coaching relationships are first and foremost a social relationship [sic] that must be managed appropriately” (Ladyshewsky, 2006b, p. 8). Once a definition of the type of relationship has been established, the idea that peer coaching has a singular focus, style or intention becomes irrelevant, as the reasons for implementing peer coaching can vary widely, from professional development to personal growth, and from knowledge transfer to knowledge building.

The concept of starting with positive intent, being present, and responding to the needs of the other person is at the foundation of peer
coaching; there is also a clear continuum of skills and styles where peer coaching is conducted (Chidiac, 2013) as well as myriad uses for peer coaching. During peer coaching, the topics may be personal or professional; the coaching style will evolve as each person playing the coaching role gains more experience; and the intended outcomes can range from problem-solving to career planning to conflict resolution and much more. Whatever the focus, the primary purpose of a coaching engagement, regardless of the type of coaching, is, as Mihiotis and Argirou state, “to build the coachee’s awareness, self-belief and responsibility” (Mihiotis & Argirou, 2016, p. 453). The actual coaching session should predominantly focus on the coach listening to the coachee, asking a variety of questions and guiding the coachee towards insights that resolve the open and existing problems and issues at hand. A coaching session should reasonably end with the coachee feeling ready to take action, make a change and move forward, and should minimize any intent to dwell in the past or continue with unhelpful or adverse behavior (Mihiotis & Argirou, 2016).

**Characteristics of Peer Coaching**

Coaching as a general skill and process of helping contains specific attributes, including active listening, the use of open-ended questions, engagement with the subject matter and the consistent demonstration of trust and transparency (Ladyshewsky, 2009). The specific characteristics of peer coaching beyond this general definition include ensuring both members of the
dyad are of equal status; establishing and maintaining trust; maintaining a focus on a specific task, problem or decision; developing and maintaining a mutual desire to be helpful; defining a specific time frame for coaching to occur; serving as a "critical friend" to each other; and providing support for mutual sense making (Parker et al., 2008; Waddell & Dunn, 2005).

Of these characteristics, the first one, "ensuring both members of the dyad are of equal status" may appear to be the simplest item to accomplish, as it depends on the organization’s definitions of roles and levels, which are typically quite clear. However, it can be the trickiest to maintain, as the peer coaching relationship may come into question when one individual moves to a higher level or new role in the organization. Naturally, questions will arise such as whether the coaching relationship should continue (arguably, if one individual will become a direct or indirect report to the other as a result of the change, the peer coaching relationship will likely need to change or end), whether there are new boundaries placed on the types and topics of conversations within the dyad, and whether the value of the relationship is diminished due to the change. One or both members of the dyad may be hesitant to change or terminate the coaching relationship if the conversations and outcomes are consistently positive, fearing that the absence of the relationship might be detrimental to ongoing success.

After a confirmation of equal status, arguably the most important characteristic of the peer coaching relationship is mutual trust, which may exist on some level at the onset of the engagement but must have a strong
process in place to maintain it (or establish and then maintain it, if the relationship is new). Both equality and trust create conditions for a willingness to disclose personal experiences and concerns and candidly share perspective without fear of exposure or retaliation (Ladyshewsky, 2009). When both parties are receptive to appearing vulnerable in front of the other, willing to disclose and open to feedback, the trust building process occurs naturally (Alvey & Barclay, 2007).

Maintaining a focus on a specific task or problem and defining a specific timeframe for coaching to occur are relatively easy actions, as long as a clear contracting discussion occurs. Trust is also strengthened when contracting is completed (Cox, 2012). According to Gettman, Edinger and Wouters, contracting is “the collaborative determination of logistics, parameters and framework of the coaching engagement, including the inclusion of others, and the goals, roles and responsibilities of each party” (Gettman et al., 2019, p. 48). During contracting, a discussion is held to define and obtain agreement on the coaching process, discuss the desired outcomes and obtain commitments from both individuals to uphold the norms established. The contracting process also allows for visibility to any differences that may exist in the intent for coaching (e.g., one person strongly wishes to improve her coaching skills while the other simply wants opportunity for an equal exchange of ideas and feedback). Developing a contract (whether formal or informal) provides a set of expectations that can be revisited if any conflict arises within the dyad and allows for accountability to
the outcomes and commitments through the engagement (Stout-Rostron, 2014). In peer coaching, the contracting process should contain some element of reciprocity; each person needs to commit to developing an understanding of the other’s needs and clarify what they are willing and able to offer each other in the way of support (Holbeche, 1996).

The idea that peer coaching is rooted in a “mutual desire to be helpful” and creates opportunity for mutual sense-making is fundamental to a successful program. In a business environment, there are many opportunities for individuals to work together - on project teams, in functional groups and through cross-functional matrix-based activities. It is likely that continuous exposure to these experiences builds an individual’s understanding that working with others is a beneficial activity for self-development as well as achieving individual and organizational goals and objectives (Parker et al., 2008). This creates a natural opportunity to foster peer coaching relationships as long as both individuals identify and co-develop an interest in supporting each other’s growth and learning throughout the relationship. Additionally, where the dyad engages in analyzing and interpreting situations to understand them and determine their impact on each person and does so through an active desire to be helpful in resolving any open issue, the coaching will have positive outcomes.

The value and meaning of a peer coach as a “critical friend” supports a successful peer coaching relationship because it contains a concern by both parties for the welfare of the other, support and encouragement for the other’s
sake, and involves some degree of intimacy (Lee & Choi, 2013, p. 148). A friendship can form while engaging in a coaching dyad, or a coaching relationship can develop because a friendship already exists. In either case, the desire to help each other through care, interest and concern becomes important for success here (Parker et al., 2008).

Types of Peer Coaching Relationships

Peer coaching provides a unique opportunity for individuals to demonstrate and count on the strength of relationships within the workplace, but there are distinct types and levels of relationships that can develop as peer coaching occurs, as researched and confirmed by Kathy Kram and Lynn Isabella in a 1985 article in the Academy of Management Journal (Kram & Isabella, 1985). During a study conducted in the early 1980’s at a large manufacturing plant in North Carolina, Kram and Isabella observed that when peer coaching relationships were established and measured against a continuum, one or both individuals in the dyad could easily characterize the type of relationship based on several factors: the level of commitment by both people, the intensity of the relationship, the types of issues that were discussed and worked through, and the types of needs that were satisfied by the relationship. The range of experiences (the continuum) from low to high creates variability in and defines the potential for the sustainability and positive outcomes within the relationship. This allowed Kram and Isabella to

The first type of peer coaching relationship is known as an Information Peer, in which there is a low level of commitment, the relationship is primarily social in nature, and there is limited sharing of personal info. This type of relationship does not engender much trust-building but does give each individual an extra set of “eyes and ears” within the organization and can serve to provide information on organizational news, career opportunities and project opportunities (Kram & Isabella, 1985; McManus & Russell, 2007).

The next type of peer coaching relationship is a Collegial Peer. A Collegial Peer relationship is characterized by a moderate level of commitment and trust with more meaningful self-expression, a willingness to provide support for basic work and family issues and the delivery of direct and honest feedback (Kram & Isabella, 1985; McManus & Russell, 2007). A Collegial Peer may be available for support and conversation, but more often the discussions are planned, and the topics are not deeply explored or discussed.

The third type of relationship is a Special Peer, where there is high trust, frequent and authentic self-expression within the dyad, and a strong bond. A Special Peer coaching relationship provides frequent and high support for work or family issues, and the sharing of personal & professional issues, dilemmas and vulnerabilities. In this relationship, each person’s individuality and unique perspective can be shared and allows individuals to
feel comfortable revealing ambivalence, concern, frustration and
disappointment (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Special Peers are defined by the
willingness of the individual to respond quickly upon request, spend
significant time in deep discussion of a topic and focus on a wide range of
subjects (Kram & Isabella, 1985; McManus & Russell, 2007).

The development of an understanding that such types of peer
coeaching relationships are built on a continuum is inherently helpful to
scholars of peer coaching, in that it supports the belief that peer coaching
cannot simply be introduced within the workplace and immediately become a
useful tool to develop strong work relationships and drive employee
engagement. The conclusion drawn by this study is that peer coaching can
only be continuously valid and successful when peer coaching relationships
are given structure, allowed to develop over time and treated as living,
breathing systems that require nurturing and attention. What does not appear
to be understood is the degree to which these three types of relationships are
developed, nor how frequently the achievement of Special Peer relationships
are built within peer coaching in the workplace.

The study conducted by Kram and Isabella did note that the sample of
individuals who self-identified within a Special Peer relationship was small
(each individual who indicated they felt they had a Special Peer relationship
with another individual indicated they only had one to three such relationships
over the course of their work experience). However, this exciting research
demonstrates that the development and implementation of an organizational
peer coaching program where individuals can build deep, strong peer relationships over time creates the possibility of impacting employee satisfaction and wellbeing, as this is where individuals are able to safely work through the many dynamics that occur when balancing the challenging demands of work and personal lives simultaneously.

Peer coaching has also been incorporated into leadership development and executive education programs within organizations of all types and industries. A number of peer coaching programs in large organizations (primarily Fortune 500 companies) have been documented and analyzed, including at such well-known organizations as Whirlpool, Humana, TIAA and IBM, and organizations and institutions that study coaching and leadership development report more widespread use of peer coaching in the workplace over the last 20 years (Frodsham et al., 2007; Mann & Smith, 2015). In fact, in a global survey conducted in 2008 on the current trends and future possibilities for coaching, almost 50% of organizations surveyed in North America indicated they had some kind of peer coaching program in place (Tompson et al., 2008).

Value of Peer Coaching in Organizations

Coaching, when provided by external professional coaches, can be a costly investment, with the median cost of an hour of coaching at $500, rising to a high of $3,500 per hour, not including any opportunity costs associated
with lost work time while coaching sessions are being conducted (Mihiotis & Argirou, 2016). These costs are most often borne by the organization, and the significant financial and time-based investments often means that professional coaching is reserved for those at the top of the organization or those deemed as “high potential” individuals in terms of promotability and succession. It should be noted that some organizations do also use coaching to address performance issues but the general consensus of professionally trained coaches is that this type of coaching is not beneficial in the long-term, and is counter to the nature of coaching as a helping relationship where the individual gains self-awareness and insights (Jautz, 2018). Coaching to address performance issues is typically initiated by the organization (via a manager) because the organization has identified and classified the individual’s issues and concerns, not because the individual themself has developed self-awareness and chooses to engage in coaching to improve performance.

If not sponsored by the organization, the cost of external coaching is often prohibitive for an individual to undertake alone, resulting in a lack of coaching made available to those who really want it (let alone need it). It is most likely that peer coaching is provided more widely across an organization when there is clear return on investment. Where there is little to no research focused on the valuation of peer coaching, the value of general coaching programs and outcomes can be reasonably applied to peer coaching.
Unfortunately, the return on investment for all types of coaching, but particularly peer coaching, can be hard to measure, given that a number of the skills that coaching can help improve are considered “soft skills” and there are few validated ways to evaluate the financial investment made compared to the value received. When it is measured, the impact and value of coaching is more often measured by the development or improvement of competencies which drive (and increase) investment and business outcomes (Schlosser et al., 2006). However, a study completed at Manchester University in which a comprehensive financial analysis was completed did indicate that coaching had high return on investment – five to seven times the initial cost of coaching itself (McGovern & Barker, 2001). Additionally, when compared to the cost of employee turnover, which in one study was valued at approximately 5% of the annual operating budget (Waldman et al., 2004), the investment in a coaching program is likely to be significantly less than the cost of losing, backfilling and training employees in a perpetual cycle of poor retention (Boysen et al., 2018).

While the financial ROI of coaching is less readily available, coaching has extensive positive benefits on both the individual and organization, as validated through a number of studies conducted in recent years. Specific benefits noted for the individual (which can also directly benefit the organization) include heightened self-efficacy (a level of confidence in one’s ability to demonstrate positive behaviors, performance and outcomes), positive attitudes, improved performance in the workplace, well-being and
resilience (Grover & Furnham, 2018). These outcomes can be applied to peer coaching as well. In addition, reported positive effects of coaching include improved coping skills and goal-directed self-regulation.

Organizations that build and maintain a coaching culture also indicate improvements in change management and change acceptance, ability to more effectively handle business transformations and improvements in sales, productivity growth, profitability, return on assets and profit margin (Núñez-Cacho Utrilla et al., 2015). A 2005 study completed as a collaboration between the Center for Performance Excellence at Booz Allen Hamilton and MetrixGlobal indicated that coaching (particularly executive and peer coaching in this case) resulted in several enhancements in both work quality and culture, including improved teamwork (the coachees were better able to build and contribute to high-performing teams, developed better emotional intelligence and self-awareness, and had stronger relationships with peers), increased retention (access to coaching engendered a sense of commitment from the organization to the coachee’s development and growth), higher productivity (coachees developed strengths in communication and listening skills, enabling more efficient actions and behaviors), accelerated promotions (coaching resulted in a faster “time to market” for a coachee to prove readiness for the next level or role than anticipated prior to coaching) and increased client satisfaction (client surveys reviewed prior to coaching and post-coaching revealed scores and verbatims indicating that coaching was
potentially driving better client relationships and delivery on client expectations) (Parker-Wilkins, 2006).

The myriad positive impacts that coaching can have on an organization, particularly in flow-through to the bottom line, clearly have the potential to drive great value for the organization, through tangible measures such as client and employee retention, sales and revenue growth, employee engagement and positive financial results. Through the lens of research demonstrating the value of many types of coaching, we can extend that value to peer coaching.

The specific value of peer coaching within organizations shows up in three additional distinct ways – first, peer coaching is a relatively low-cost method of bringing coaching to large portions of an organization, providing individuals and teams with a toolset to handle simple to complex issues and situations prior to escalating through more formal mechanisms. Second, individuals who participate in peer coaching programs learn how to formulate a variety of possibilities and options as the coaching training teaches the coach to ask good questions and leave space for the coachee to consider a problem from multiple perspectives. Finally, peer coaching has the potential to positively impact organizational and individual performance in meaningful ways, delivering a useful set of tools and resources to a wider audience at lower cost than executive and leadership coaching programs (Boysen et al., 2018; Phillips, 2005). Additionally, peer coaching, through the development of strong trustworthy relationships and a focus on self-awareness and
developing insights, helps to address the general health and wellbeing of employees, providing employees with competencies and skills in the critical area of emotional intelligence (EI) (Chapman, 2005). EI, focused on an individual’s ability to successfully manage four key items, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management, can, when addressed and measured, positively impact employee performance, leadership success and customer satisfaction.

Peer Coaching as an Organizational Positive

As previously mentioned, peer coaching has been recognized as a valid and meaningful tool for evaluating and improving performance in the education (K-12) sector, as well as in healthcare (particularly, in clinical environments between healthcare providers, such as nurses or physicians). A number of peer-reviewed journal articles have been published in review and support of peer coaching within K-12 education; useful information from such education-focused content includes topics on peer coaching as beneficial to improved skill development, creation of strategies and greater retention of new competencies and skills. Comparatively, little appears to be available from the academic world or in peer-reviewed journals focused on peer coaching within business and industry. Interestingly, an increase in information on peer coaching in the workplace has been noted in the mainstream media between 2015 and 2020, including multiple recent articles

A review of the available literature indicates that the value of peer coaching has been studied in relation to such topics as training transfer and improved performance but without significant focus on employee engagement, organizational effectiveness, productivity or employee wellbeing (Martin, 2010). The majority of business-focused research on peer coaching in organizations has been conducted by a small group of academics and researchers from across the globe, including Polly Parker, Kathy Kram, Douglas Hall and Ilene Wasserman. Such work has predominantly focused on the role of peer coaching in staff and career development, how peer coaching impacts relational communication, the risks that peer coaching can generate when in use, and a number of other related topics (Parker et al., 2015). Little appears to have been explored as to whether peer coaching can provide similar value as has been measured through other types of coaching such as executive and leadership coaching.

Due to the nature of the relationship, peer coaching has been shown to work well in a variety of situations, including knowledge transfer, learning and training, and feedback exchange. There is no power structure and neither party is an authority or decision-maker, thus making the relationship non-threatening and collegial. It feels safer to confide in a peer coach than in a supervisor or manager, yet the similarities and parallels that the individuals in
the dyad maintain allow for barriers of organizational understanding and knowledge to be avoided (Ladyshewsky, 2017).

**Embedded Coaching Skills**

So how does peer coaching begin? Is it enough to just want to coach or be coached, or to desire to build a peer relationship for the benefit of helping oneself and another person? Can two individuals simply sit down and agree to coach each other? Perhaps, but research indicates this approach cannot generate a sustainable and successful peer coaching program. For peer coaching to truly be effective, the coaches need to be trained and coaching skills need to be well established within the organization. A group of studies conducted between 1993 and 1999, by Simon Veenman and Eddie Denessen, found that individuals who were provided coaching by those trained in coaching skills achieved significant positive effect in their own empowerment (identified as ‘autonomy’ in the studies), ability to take feedback and “business-like attitude” (the ability to actively maintain a professional demeanor and stay on task) (Veenman & Denessen, 2001). Additionally, for coaching skills to be properly developed and maintained, formal training is necessary for the transfer of those skills to occur effectively (Showers & Joyce, 1996). Developing and embedding coaching skills within the organization also engenders secondary benefits, including “more positive, humanistic and motivating communication styles” (Grant, 2010, p. 62),
improved problem-solving and more cooperative team dynamics (Grant, 2010).

Similarly, peer coaching on its own will not help an individual solve all issues but when used in conjunction with other resources, such as training, development opportunities, manager support and organizational engagement, coaching has been shown to stimulate learning and aid in navigating uncertainty. Peer coaching specifically has been identified as a useful “resource for career development, leadership development, psychosocial support and experiential learning” (Van Oosten & Kram, 2014, p. 296).

**Barriers to Successful Peer Coaching**

When considering the benefits and positive outcomes of peer coaching, it is equally important to be aware of the risk factors in peer coaching that can create barriers to a successful program. Such barriers can delay, derail or stop coaching before it even gets started, such that it is critical that the coach and coachee are mindful of where, when and how such barriers may appear, as well as take an active role in minimizing such barriers. Parker et al identify the risk factors in peer coaching through an ecological systems lens, in which dysfunctions can exist at the individual level, within the dyadic relationship and/or at the organizational level (Parker et al., 2012).

The risk factors can subsequently be broken down further by identifying various barriers to coaching. In a global study completed in 2013
and 2014, the most frequent barriers included a variety of items at the organizational, relational and individual level. These include a lack of management support, lack of clear development goals (and lack of agreement with the coach on the goals), lack of time, the prohibitive nature of cost or distance, emotions (that got in the way of effective coaching), defensiveness (on the part of the coachee), and an “inadequate” coach (Carter et al., 2017). While this study was not focused on peer coaching exclusively, it was conducted within business environments, and survey responses were solicited of individuals who had experienced, or were participating in executive/leadership coaching, leader-manager coaching and/or internal coaching, including peer coaching.

**Barriers at the Organizational Level**

*Organizational Context and Lack of Support by Leadership*

Five organizational factors that can negatively affect the success of a peer coaching program include a competitive culture that does not value personal development; an unwillingness on the part of the organization to adopt peer coaching practices; limited skill sets in reflection (self, relational or organizational) and designing action plans; inappropriate incentives and rewards; and mismatches in peer assignments for coaching dyads (Carter et al., 2017; Castillo-Ramsey, 2011; Grant, 2010).
Of these, the main barrier to any peer coaching program is the unwillingness or lack of awareness by leadership and management to support the program or adopt peer coaching practices. If the organization does not value teamwork or development of the whole person, there is unlikely to be management support and a manager’s employee(s) may not be granted approval to participate.

**Coaching Inadequacy: Lack of Coaching Skills**

Another primary issue creating potential barriers is related to the effectiveness of any training received by the peer coaches (Carter et al., 2017). Certainly, the lack of coach training would be problematic in a peer coaching relationship, as one or both individuals may not have developed the necessary skills or competencies in critical areas of coaching, including emotional intelligence, listening skills, questioning skills, how to build trust, and mechanisms for allowing insights to develop (without providing answers or advice). Even if such training has been provided, one or both individual’s relative competency in coaching may be insufficient to be an effective coach. Individuals who have not built the necessary skills to coach can easily fall into the trap of becoming “doctor” or “expert” quite quickly, which diminishes the potential of the relationship to be truly helpful (Schein, 2009). This barrier can be addressed through a comprehensive initial coaching training program, followed by regular refresher training, ongoing review of coaching practices, and practicing the skills at any opportunity, even outside the coaching engagement (Chan & Burgess, 2015). Research has shown that after
receiving coaching training, an initial adjustment period is experienced by the new coach, during which time the coaching skills continue to develop but frustrations can be experienced as those skills require regular practice in order to become habitual. Organizations can provide support to help coaches persevere and avoid discouragement, through mentoring from established coaching, support from HR or learning and development professionals or even professional coaching for the coach (Grant, 2010).

Barriers in the Relational System

Because coaching peers means that the individuals in the dyad should be on equal footing, there is immense opportunity for a strong mutually beneficial relationship; the skills that are developed and used by peer coaches are highly valued because each partner recognizes how he or she can use the skill as both coach and coachee. Similarly, both individuals can likely see equally how the skill or competency could be applied beyond the coaching relationship within the work setting, as they are on relatively equal terms with regard to organizational level. Challenges here can exist when the relational competence within peer coaching is compromised. Particularly, if the relationship is partially or wholly derived from organizational status structures (e.g., a manager-employee relationship, or one where a clear organizational distinction in levels renders one person in the dyad as an authority figure to the other), an imbalance in the relationship can exist from
the start because one or both individuals are unable to develop and maintain a strong relationship due to continuous concern about the difference in authority within the dyad (Parker et al., 2008, 2015). There can also be power differentials unrelated to job status, within the frame of differences in age, race or ethnicity, gender, technical expertise or experience (McManus & Russell, 2007).

*Competition and Power Dynamics Between Coaches*

Another barrier that can become an issue is competition. The nature of a peer coaching relationship is that the individuals in the dyad are at equivalent levels or close to each other in level within the organization. They may be in the same department, same role or report to the same person. They may hold the same or similar title (e.g., Director, Assistant Manager, Analyst). If one or both individuals perceive, at any point during the coaching relationship, that they are in competition for another role or other important organizational attributes such as resources, salary increases or rewards, recognition or visibility, it is possible that ill will or dissatisfaction may infiltrate the relationship, breaking down the positive nature of the coaching (Parker et al., 2015). There is also the possibility that purposeful introduction of competition (perceived or real), may occur. In this case, one individual would be exhibiting bad intentions within the coaching relationship, perhaps due to a relational belief that success within the organization is best achieved through a “survival of the fittest” mentality. As indicated in their work focused on relational learning in peer coaching structures, “a competitive environment
that leads to only one peer being able to achieve a certain reward would not be conducive to effective peer coaching” (Parker et al., 2015, p. 233).

It is also important to note that the dynamics of power and politics can play a role within a peer coaching relationship, specifically where one individual in the dyad has “‘fidelity’ to a valid principle [which] turns into compliance with a prescribed program” (Hargreaves & Skelton, 2012, p. 125). Organizations in which the distribution and dynamics of power are significantly important to employee promotability or access to information (or leaders) can mean that in the coaching relationship, one person has more leverage than the other for any number of reasons. If that individual overtly or covertly utilizes their knowledge about or commitment to a specific leader, principle or program, the peer coaching relationship could become unbalanced.

Methods to address the possibility of competition and power dynamics include acknowledgment by both parties up front that awareness of any such situation by either person will evoke discussion, and if necessary, third-party intervention. A key to preventing or managing any competition can be the simple development of two emotional intelligence-focused items - self-awareness and situational awareness. When the individual or the pair consistently and frequently reflect on the coaching process and analyze its impact, the ability to identify and countermand any perceived or real competition is enhanced by strong emotional intelligence skills (Ladyshewsky, 2006a). Additionally, a change in the coaching relationship or cessation of the
coaching engagement may be necessary. Obviously, if it becomes apparent that the issue results from a purposeful bad intention, the coaching engagement should be immediately ended.

Barriers at the Individual Level

Lack of Trust, Creating Issues of Vulnerability and Confidentiality

The importance of trust in the coaching relationship has been discussed extensively already. The establishment of either cognitive or affective trust at the outset of the peer coaching relationship is rooted in either prior knowledge of the individual as trustworthy in various ways or experiences and observations in which one person sees the other operating in a trustworthy manner. However, research has shown that over time, trust builds in a spiral and if continued actions and behaviors reinforcing the individual’s trustworthiness are not exhibited, there can be a decline in trust. Additionally, any lack of confidentiality as well as lack of trust can lead to a defined reluctance on one person’s part to share information or perspectives (Cox, 2012).

Emotions, Defensiveness and an “Inadequate” Coach

For both individuals in the dyad, the relationship is built and strengthened over time. This is supported by the ecological systems perspective, indicating that people develop through “increasingly complex reciprocal interactions within a system” over time (Parker et al., 2012, p. 364).
The same can be said for a peer coaching relationship; as the dyad spends time together, in conversation and through shared space, each person is exposed to the other's personality, opinions, values, competency levels and mindset. As the relationship develops, the level of comfort in sharing personal and confidential information increases, and each person becomes more exposed as he or she reveals new details about him/herself (Kram & Isabella, 1985). At any given point in time, one or more of those details may be perceived by the peer in the dyad as anathema, objectionable or offensive to the other, immediately causing the cessation of that individual's ability to coach effectively. Recovery from such a situation may be achieved by the affected individual independently, or may not; either way, the peer coaching relationship may be damaged in some way, with the potential for negative long-term impact. The mechanism for minimizing or avoiding such a situation is primarily through awareness of such a potential scenario by both individuals at the beginning of the coaching relationship. This can be accomplished during the contracting stage, in which a necessary discussion of confidentiality and trust-building occurs. Additionally, during coaching training, coaches can be trained to understand the likeliness and nature of such circumstances, and to use certain skills in emotional intelligence, such as self-awareness, situational awareness, empathy, self-regulation and social skills, to manage through such situations effectively and continue to coach successfully.
Finally, if the individuals in the coaching relationship do not understand or acknowledge the necessity of role-switching with some degree of frequency, peer coaching can be ineffective. Specifically, peer coaching is, by design, meant to create opportunities for both parties to give and receive coaching. A lack of competence in this area, manifested through an individual's position to primarily or only operate as coach or coachee, or through such actions as only posing superficial questions, inadequate attention to the other party, failure to show empathy, or inability to provide helpful feedback, can result in low engagement and unmet expectations (Parker et al., 2012). This can again be resolved through training and awareness of the role of the coach.

**A Standard Coaching Process Model**

Because peer coaching competencies should be in place for any individual to participate in a peer coaching program, prospective coaches should not only complete coach training but become familiar with standard coaching models, to gain basic understanding of what good coaching looks like and how to effectively coach others. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is one of three global professional coaching associations, and the organization that issues three globally recognized and verified coaching credentials (Associate, Professional and Master Coach). The ICF has set the standard for how coaching should occur in any situation, regardless of who is doing the coaching. As such, a coaching model that has
the potential for positive, effective outcomes should be divided into four clusters, focusing on 1) setting a good foundation for coaching to occur, 2) co-creating the relationship, 3) communicating effectively and 4) facilitating learning and results (Carter et al., 2017; The Gold Standard in Coaching | ICF - Core Competencies, 1999). Coaches are trained to manage within these guidelines during each coaching session and may then supplement their efforts with the use of additional tools and techniques such as goal setting, mindfulness, feedback mechanisms and other activity types that aim to achieve the coaching goals at play. Coaching process models are intended for the coach to effectively guide the coachee from where they are at the beginning of the coaching engagement to where they want to be at the end of the coaching work.

**Setting a Good Foundation**

Setting a good foundation first requires the work of contracting, which focuses on the development of an agreement between coach and coachee as to how they will work together. This includes norms for the conversations that will occur, discussion of confidentiality and acknowledgement by the coach that there are boundaries a coach should not cross (e.g., playing the role of psychotherapist or counselor). In addition, the foundation of coaching includes an understanding between the coach and the coachee that there is a coaching match such that if dynamics change during the engagement, either party may request to modify or end the relationship (The Gold Standard in
Coaching | ICF - Core Competencies, 1999). In a peer coaching relationship, contracting must focus on these elements with an acknowledgement that role-switching (from coach to coachee and back again) may need to be formally managed until the dyad has built up enough competency together to role-switch effortlessly and without conscious thought.

Co-Creating the Relationship

The second component is for the coach and coachee to co-develop the relationship, which will continue to be built upon throughout the coaching engagement. This is particularly important in peer coaching, as both individuals need to feel they have equal status and power in the relationship for peer coaching to succeed (Parker et al., 2008). The focus of this component, and the basis on which the coaching relationship will be successful, is the development of trust between individuals.

There are various ways in which trust is established, and each type is defined as either cognitive (evidence based) or affective (emotion based) (Cox, 2012). Trust established on a cognitive basis includes knowledge or awareness by one party of the other party’s ability to be effective in the established role, such as proof of education or certification and demonstration of problem-solving ability. Trust established on an affective basis includes the development of an emotional attachment, or some kind of action that creates an emotional attachment, such as the exchange of personal information or the giving and receiving of items of value (e.g., a valuable piece of knowledge
or information) (Alvey & Barclay, 2007). It would also include regular
demonstrations of benevolence on the part of the coach, through expressions
of empathy and non-judgmental behavior, delivery on promises or
commitments and expressions of honesty. Peer coaching is heavily reliant on
trust established affectively, while evidence-based trust (cognitively
established) is important but may become more valuable as the relationship
develops and grows (Markovic et al., 2014).

**Communicating Effectively**

Effective communication in a peer coaching relationship focuses on
two key areas - first, the coach must ask good questions - e.g., questions that
are designed to elicit thoughtfulness, that are open-ended and that have
meaning in relation to the topic of discussion; and second, the coach must
employ active listening skills. It may seem to be overstating the obvious to
say that communication is critical for effective coaching to occur, but the
clarification between ‘communication’ and ‘effective communication’ is the
important differentiating factor. Within that distinction is the necessity of a
question and response approach that allows the coachee to feel heard and
able to adequately and completely express herself; one that uses questions
focused on understanding the how and what of any situation.

An opportunity to ensure communication is effective within a peer
coaching relationship comes from use of a model known as the Coordinated
Management of Meaning (CMM), in which the members of the dyad share
stories and experiences, thereby increasing awareness, strengthening the quality of interactions and continuously developing shared meaning (Parker et al., 2015). Relating to one another through tone, pace, style and mood of the message content allows for the ongoing development of trust, compassion and accountability. The natural process of building a narrative when making sense of an experience or situation results in the development of a singular perspective. Having the peer coach available to interpret the meaning of the scenario and offer an alternate perspective can allow the coachee to formulate a variety of possible outcomes while also further strengthening the quality of the relationship and building meaning in increasingly complex ways.

Facilitating Learning and Results

The learning and results that are derived from a peer coaching interaction can show up in a variety of ways, including action taken to improve a situation, improvement in individual performance, reflection on views, attitudes and behaviors or changes in behavior in a personal or professional situation (Matsuo, 2018).

In reviewing the literature for this capstone, it became evident that there are numerous coaching process models published that could be relied upon to develop a peer coaching program. Even normalizing by removing process models that do not uphold the four core coaching competencies only narrows down this number slightly, leaving any consumer of coaching
practices, be it organization, coach or coachee, highly confused as to which model is best to follow or uphold.
CHAPTER THREE:
ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The opportunity for enhancing the deployment of peer coaching within the workplace lies in the lack of consistent and comprehensive guidelines for development of peer coaching programs within a business setting. There is also a significant lack of academic literature related to peer coaching. The education and healthcare sectors lend themselves to a set of program structures that have been well defined and there is much in the way of actionable research available. Both sectors are highly formalized, regulated at federal or state levels, dependent on specific types of education and certifications and require practitioners to continuously demonstrate ongoing proficiency and aptitude. A review of the available literature where the term “peer coaching” is applied, either as a stand-alone term or in conjunction with other words or phrases, returns results that continuously focus on the healthcare and K-12 education sectors. At any given point in time, a search of the Franklin database reveals approximately 12,000 results where the search term “peer coaching” is used. Filtering to return results solely focused on ‘business’ provides approximately 900 results, approximately 7.5% of the available literature (Search Results for “Peer Coaching” - Franklin: Articles+, 2020).
Few business environments maintain as much rigor as the healthcare or education sectors, therefore allowing for significant flexibility and a multitude of approaches to developing and delivering peer coaching programs across industries. Having so few standards and requirements means that it becomes challenging for researchers, academics and development professionals to define and maintain a set of standards in the business sector for peer coaching programs. As such, the primary critique of the available literature on peer coaching in business environments is that there is precious little of it.

**Methodology**

A review was conducted to identify the range and depth of available literature regarding peer coaching in the workplace, and specifically in business environments. The key objectives of the review were as follows:

- Determine who is conducting research in peer coaching
  - Identify how the research is being defined (Methodology of studies)
- Review where the literature is being published (Journal articles)
- Confirm what findings have been shown to date
- Understand the key components of peer-coaching
- Determine what gaps exist in the literature
This effort was conducted using the framework of a scoping review, a validated approach to summarizing what is currently known about a specific topic. Scoping reviews are useful when investigating both established and emerging fields of study, but are often used when the depth or type of research available is lacking or insufficiently established, which works well for a capstone focused on peer coaching in the workplace (Colquhoun et al., 2014). The findings from this work are reflected in both Chapter Two and Chapter Three of this capstone.

**Search Strategy**

The approach to conducting the literature review focused on a nine-month process of identifying and sourcing journal articles, books and book chapters from 2000 and beyond. Various databases and search engines were used, including University of Pennsylvania’s Franklin online database and Google Scholar, as well as a cursory search of available popular business-related media outlets (including such sources as the Harvard Business Review, INSEAD and Forbes) to determine where peer coaching is seen in the common lexicon. A specific focus was placed on searching for articles within the International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring, the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, Human Resource Development Review and the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. Key researchers in the field of peer coaching were investigated to review the body of their work, including Kathy Kram, Richard Ladyshefsky and Polly Parker.
The research focused primarily on specific topics, phrases and keywords, including but not limited to coaching; peer coaching; peer mentoring; reciprocal coaching; team coaching; coaching models; divergent thinking; psychological safety and leadership development.

Gaps in the Literature

The most significant challenge with a literature analysis on the topic of peer coaching is the limited amount of research that has been conducted and documented. In general, the topic of coaching has been researched extensively, and organizational coaching has been an area of focus with comprehensive and extensive research, analysis and publication. Over the last 15 years, coaching itself has moved from a service predominantly provided by a variety of self-styled, certified and trained 'experts' to a legitimate profession with defined competencies, educational standards and metrics-based outcomes, resulting in a wider interest in the general area; additionally, sub-categories of coaching, including peer coaching, are beginning to gain more attention and focus in recent years. Additionally, formal structured coaching study is available through certificate and degree programs at accredited colleges and universities as well as organizations accredited by the ICF, Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) and European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).
Where there is a deep dive into the types of coaching occurring within organizations, the focus typically appears in executive coaching and managerial coaching, but very infrequently is there a mention of peer coaching (Beattie et al., 2014). There has simply not been significant research on this topic, perhaps because peer coaching does not typically receive the same visibility as executive or leadership coaching within the business world, resulting in fewer formal peer coaching programs delivered in the workplace and therefore not enough data readily available for academic review. Where peer coaching is available as an academic topic, the literature is heavily skewed towards the healthcare and K-12 education industries, given that these industries have supported peer coaching as a valid method of employee development for over 30 years. Interestingly, when reviewing journal articles and other peer-reviewed sources on the topic of peer coaching in a business environment or the general workplace, references can be found to prior work on peer coaching, but the underlying citation frequently reflects the healthcare or K-12 education industries, with no mention of the impact of peer coaching outside of these industries.

Peer coaching suffers from a lack of clear understanding across businesses and organizations with regard to a standard, holistic framework and empirical base of knowledge (Hamlin et al., 2008) and there is inconsistent agreement amongst scholars as to the definitions, goals, processes and outcomes of peer coaching. In a seminal journal article on the topic of peer coaching, published in 2017, Hagen, Bialek and Petersen share
the results of their data reduction process in which an extensive review of the available literature indicates significant differences amongst scholars in their positions regarding the program structure, purpose and goals of peer coaching, outcomes of peer coaching, relational contexts and functions of peer coaching relationships and peer coaching processes and mechanisms (Hagen et al., 2017). They identify three areas within the literature that indicate confusion, lack of agreement and lack of research on the topic of peer coaching. These include the nature of equality versus disparity of knowledge between the participants, whether peer coaching focuses on personal or professional outcomes (or both), and whether peer coaching is defined solely by a dyadic relationship or one in which there could be multiple participants. Both as a result of lack of general coaching standards and less interest in the specific nature of the sub-topic, peer coaching has received even less attention, creating a gap in the literature that remains hard to fill in the absence of empirical data and scholarly agreement.

Where Peer Coaching Falls Short

Peer coaching has a multitude of benefits, as has already been outlined. The literature demonstrates that disadvantages exist as well, which must not be discounted when considering the implementation of a peer coaching program. First and foremost, as a number of researchers, academics and experts in the coaching field point out, coaching is grounded in trust and authenticity. For peer coaches, trust is paramount, as each
individual in the dyad must feel their confidences will not be broken, their personal and professional stories will remain confidential and they will receive realistic and truthful feedback on the situations being discussed. If the organizational culture does not support trust and authenticity amongst its employees, no such trust is likely to be built in a peer coaching dyad. Therefore, peer coaching can be unsuccessful if it is put into place arbitrarily and without a clear understanding of the need for trust within the relationship. Additionally, a culture that values individual contributions over team outcomes, or one where feedback is not valued or encouraged will likely not effectively support peer coaching, as the process and intent of coaching is rooted in a team-based dynamic where the giving and receiving of feedback is necessary.

Secondarily, peer coaching can create awkward situations for one or both individuals if a topic or conversation diverges from previously agreed-upon norms or deviates into areas where conflict arises between the peers; in the workplace, this may then create an unwelcome relationship dynamic which must be addressed should the individuals need to work together in the future. A discussion that focuses on an individual that both coach and coachee know can create such a challenge, as can an organizational decision or piece of news that impacts one or both people and has implications for organizational politics or structure changes. Similarly, any conversation that devolves into gossip or rumor will not be productive for coaching. It is important that peer coaches are trained to ensure that in the early stages
(contracting) of a peer coaching relationship, the dyad agrees upon any topics that are off-limits for discussion or could be sensitive and creates a “safe word” or some kind of signal that can be used when one individual becomes uncomfortable with the conversation and wishes to cease the discussion or address it in relation to the power dynamic or knowledge gain that it may create.

Peer coaching can sometimes devolve into advice-giving or guidance which may be mis-directed, incorrect or inappropriate. When one individual becomes passionate about a topic or has significant knowledge, it can be difficult to keep from providing solutions or offering specific advice. This is problematic as not only is the action of providing solutions counter to the principles of coaching, but it can lead one person to make decisions based on such advice that may be inappropriate or less than ideal, resulting in negative organizational or individual outcomes, or adverse management oversight or discipline. In a peer coaching dynamic, such advice may also result in one person in the dyad taking action without full context. Peer coaching is not a substitute for a strong relationship between an employee and his or her manager, although the trust and level of comfort that can be created between two individuals in a peer coaching relationship may occasionally create a false sense that consistent and frequent discussion of issues and concerns between manager and employee is unnecessary. It is important that the organization reinforce the intention for peer coaching to be supplemental to any relationship between a manager and his/her employees and that during
coach training, participants are encouraged to identify the differences between a coaching relationship and a manager-employee relationship.

Peer coaching can, under certain circumstances, create blind spots for one or both individuals in the dyad. If there are similarities in style or approach (e.g., leadership style or problem-solving approach), the coach may not be able to identify gaps or issues exhibited by the coachee. Additionally, if both individuals experience the same situation, or have similar circumstances or relationships, it may result in a lack of insight or understanding as to why, how or where an issue may arise and how best to resolve it. Organizational politics and power dynamics can play a role in developing or maintaining these blind spots; where one individual may have strong allegiance to a leader who maintains a high degree of organizational influence, that loyalty may lead to an inability to acknowledge, understand or discuss challenges derived from that leader or their area of responsibility (Hargreaves & Skelton, 2012). The difference in perspective or belief on a particular topic (which is literally the definition of politics - the assumption of diverse and not common interests) can also create blind spots as that diversity in perspective may belie an inability to evaluate the issue without bias (Hartley, 2016).

Finally, a peer coaching program that is launched within the workplace and intended to operate across the entire organization cannot be successful if it is not properly messaged, its purpose and intended outcomes are not shared and it does not have the backing of executive leadership. For an
organization to succeed in coaching, the sponsor(s) must first gain agreement from leadership that such a program will drive value for the organization in some way. It must also invest in the training of coaches, spend time communicating why and how peer coaching is important to the organization, and ensure there is ample opportunity for a diverse group of employees to participate. An absence of one or more of these crucial activities at the beginning of a peer coaching program will create challenges for ongoing success of a program. Additionally, an organization that does not provide opportunity and space for feedback on the initial experiences of a peer coaching program, as well as continuously review the successes and outcomes of coaching engagements, will not be able to sustain a program over time.
CHAPTER FOUR:
NECESSARY COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL PEER COACHING PROGRAM

Any coaching engagement requires some kind of structure in order for it to be beneficial to the coachee and effectively led by the coach. To this end, Chapter One outlined the importance of contracting, a focus on developing the relationship, effective communication and the facilitation of learning and results. To further ensure the success of a structured peer coaching program or relationship, two necessary components that should be developed and maintained are a strong degree of trust between the participating coaching duo, as well as ongoing transparency, which is delivered through the development of perspective in relation to the topic or issue being discussed.

Trust building is paramount in a coaching dyad. In order for the coaching relationship to work, vulnerability and openness must be present. Vulnerability and openness allow individuals to feel comfortable in asking questions as well as disclosing information about themselves to their coaching partner. Such items are the hallmarks of what is known as psychological safety, beliefs that are taken for granted regarding how others will respond when someone reveals a vulnerability or exposes information about themselves that indicates potential weakness or lack of knowledge or competency (A. Edmondson, 1999). There is a direct relationship between trust and psychological safety, as “they both describe psychological states
involving perceptions of risk and vulnerability and making choices to minimize negative consequences” (A. C. Edmondson, 2004, p. 243). While much of the available literature related to psychological safety references its existence and benefit within groups, there is strong evidence that the development of a psychologically safe environment between two individuals can drive better outcomes for the individuals and the organizations (Kramer & Cook, 2004). Therefore, a peer coaching relationship that maintains strong psychological safety is one that derives benefit for both members of the coaching dyad through risk-taking, authentic conversation and a desire to seek outcomes that positively impact both individuals.

Second, the ability to develop a thoughtful, robust perspective on a topic or issue is the hallmark of an effective decision-maker. The importance of making decisions based on both intuition and rationality is paramount to positive, effective long-term outcomes. For example, in a crisis situation, or when short on time or information, the decision made or action taken can have short and/or long-term negative impact, resulting in potential damage to an individual’s reputation, promotability or future opportunities if that decision was not thoughtfully and thoroughly considered. Therefore, being able to develop an understanding through perspective, as opposed to based on a singular viewpoint, creates the ability to make better decisions and achieve stronger outcomes. Divergent thinking is one method of developing perspective that can be incorporated into peer coaching. When divergent thinking is introduced into the coaching relationship, it can bring a level of
transparency to the coaching, through an open mind to alternate viewpoints and the back and forth of debate on those viewpoints, which engenders meaningful and robust dialogue.

**Psychological Safety and Successful Peer Coaching**

Psychological safety encourages a shared belief among peers that the environment they are in remains safe for interpersonal risk taking (Cheng et al., 2017) and facilitates open dialogue, allowing for authentic conversation that results in true insights and the potential for meaningful outcomes (De Stobbeleir et al., 2020). A psychologically safe environment is one where everyone within that environment feels highly valued and truly comfortable at all times (A. C. Edmondson, 2004) or in an individual case, where the perception of lower levels of ego and image risk exists (De Stobbeleir et al., 2020). A necessary component of a psychologically safe environment is confidentiality, in which both members of the dyad agree to maintain it, and both know confidentiality has been maintained at all times. The entire purpose of an established peer coaching program is to provide a safe and comfortable environment for two individuals of relatively equal status to share their ideas, thoughts and intended actions such that each person can gain insight and ability to move forward in a positive way.

One of the key benefits of a peer relationship in coaching is that the equal status of both individuals can reduce any power dynamics and creates general parity of experience and opportunity. This circumstance can help to
build trust more quickly and define a strong bond between the two individuals in the peer coaching relationship, as there is a recognition of some common experience. When psychological safety exists, each person is confident that the revelation of any personal information, knowledge or level of relative competency will not result in being shamed, or feeling embarrassed, criticized or hurt. The peer coaching relationship therefore can achieve sustained authenticity and transparency, going beyond basic levels of trust-building and information-sharing to develop deeper and richer insights and more meaningful ideas for action.

A focus on psychological safety in a peer coaching relationship offers an opportunity to accelerate the trust-building in the dyad and reduce the fear of negative judgment, ultimately creating an environment in which the learning, insights and growth between the coaching partners has the fullest potential. Individuals who know they have an outlet inside the organization for discussion of their issues and needs without the fear of embarrassment or reprisal can go back to their jobs feeling unburdened, thereby allowing better focus, higher productivity and stronger engagement. Additionally, higher levels of perceived psychological safety in the workplace seem to create a greater sense of freedom at work, and research has shown that where employees experience a positive emotional climate, they "perceive their company to be both more supportive of their needs and more considerate of their personal importance. Hence, they develop stronger emotional bonds to the organization" (Clercq & Rius, 2007, p. 474). Finally, when both members
of the dyad feel safe in talking about difficult issues and feel comfortable expressing ideas and thoughts, the purposes of peer coaching are being achieved: relationship-building, knowledge sharing and bi-directional support as a key mechanism to organizational health and employee wellbeing.

**Divergent Thinking and Successful Peer Coaching**

A second necessary component to great peer coaching outcomes is the incorporation of divergent thinking into the coaching work. Assuming there is epistemic motivation in play (an individual’s willingness to seek out information in a desire to develop a thorough understanding of a situation [Amit & Sagiv, 2013]), the coachee needs to take in environmental information (such as the thoughts and behaviors of others), analyze it effectively and subsequently use it to his or her benefit. Additionally, an ongoing focus on looking backwards to see how things have always been done cannot have as positive an impact on personal and professional growth as a forward-looking approach based on adapting to how things are likely to develop in the future. A good coaching relationship is one where the coach is able to help the coachee seek out this environmental information, identify alternate points of view and perspectives from their own and develop multiple possible scenarios and options for a solution, thereby expanding the coachee’s understanding of how an issue or situation may have impact beyond her own experience and into the future. One such opportunity is created in peer coaching through the use of divergent thinking, a method of
analysis whereby many possible solutions to a situation are considered through the generation of creative ideas. Indeed, divergent thinking “often leads to originality and originality is the central feature of creativity” (Runco & Acar, 2012, p. 1). There is also a benefit to the use of creativity within coaching - applying new thinking to a concern or issue. As such, coaching has been identified as a platform ‘for facilitating individual, organizational and social change” and the direct relationship between the potential for change and creativity is strong (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012).

Therefore, a second opportunity for successful peer coaching is the integration of a focused and rigorous evaluation of a situation or issue using a specific thinking process that relies on creativity, development of multiple perspectives and challenging of deep-rooted assumptions and beliefs. There are a number of methods available to surface multiple perspectives within a coaching situation, including devil’s advocacy (taking the opposite viewpoint in an argument or discussion to find the weak points in a position), integrative thinking (combining divergent and convergent thinking) and divergent thinking, all of which can be used effectively to help the coachee uncover alternate points of view that can help develop insight. The benefit of divergent thinking is implicit as a part of this paper, as divergent thinking ability has been uncovered as crucial for successful creative problem solving, whether in the context of uncovering the root of a problem, identifying a reasonable solution or in implementing a solution (Beuk & Basadur, 2016), and as such, is a key component of effective peer coaching.
The use of divergent thinking as a creativity-based thought process supports the exploration of many possible solutions to help solve a problem, moving outward and away from a singular focus or solution, and allows the coachee to build further awareness and understanding (Dryden, 2017). One way to engender divergent thinking is to tap into the insights that are available through the opposable mind - the inherent ability we have as human beings to hold two conflicting ideas simultaneously and derive benefit from such tension (R. Martin, 2007). A coach who focuses on asking good questions can facilitate the discovery of a multitude of individual answers, as opposed to a single answer to an issue or concern and help the coachee take advantage of the opposable mind. When the coachee approaches a situation through divergent thinking, they are able to explore and see patterns from a broad perspective, allowing them to make connections that might otherwise be missed. Divergent thinking also allows for development of many alternatives to a single decision, reducing the opportunity for mistakes or missteps.

One of the key benefits to divergent thinking within a peer coaching framework is that the coach can help the coachee challenge underlying assumptions, as the peer coach is often well positioned to understand the dynamics of the individual's level of influence, organizational relationships and workplace experiences. Particularly within larger organizations, the experiences of a group of people at similar levels (e.g., Director or Associate Vice President level) can have commonality, as the hierarchy is well established and has norms and practices embedded within it that do not differ
too much from one person to another. Additionally, individuals at similar levels are often sorted into cohort groups that have common experiences, such as participation in a structured leadership development program. Where this commonality of experience exists, the individuals in a peer coaching dyad are able to accelerate or decrease the amount of time required to provide context in an organizational situation or issue, allowing for a greater focus on solutioning through a divergent thinking process.
CHAPTER FIVE:  
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PEER COACHING

Introduction

As demonstrated earlier in this paper, peer coaching has numerous positive benefits to both individuals and organizations. Introducing a structured peer coaching program in the workplace takes effort but can reap numerous benefits with relatively little cost and within a reasonable length of time. In fact, a 2013 study by the IES Research Network of 100 coaches from eight employers over a one-year period found that overall well-being scores increased by those coached, and the coachees pointed to feeling more effective and useful and able to think more clearly (Hicks et al., 2013).

This section will outline the structure of a proposed peer coaching program I have designed, using a defined framework, as well as suggestions as to where, how and when to implement such a program. It reinforces the value of including previously discussed components of coaching, including contracting, development of a strong relationship between coach and coachee, effective communication, psychological safety and divergent thinking, and roots these components in two key drivers of coaching success - trust and transparency. This framework incorporates the elements I believe to be most essential to effective coaching and eliminates others; it is based
upon personal opinion and ideas rooted in secondary research and experience but is not intended to incorporate every detail of the process or activities related to a coaching engagement. When implementing a peer coaching program within an organization, the use of this framework as a guide for program development and a tool for peer coach training will allow organizations to ensure comprehensive and thoughtful structure and delivery of a program that contains validated components. The framework is intended to facilitate the learning, development and performance of coaches as well as support the implementation of a standard, repeatable, scalable program for the organization. It is a conceptual understanding and is not intended to be a step-by-step manual for implementation; however, all aspects of this proposal rely on references cited earlier throughout this paper. It is ultimately a tool to be used by the organization to guide actions related to the peer coaching program, erect boundaries around the delivery of the program and facilitate evaluation and improvements for effective peer coaching.

The Ideal State

The opportunity for any for-profit organization in relation to its people is always about how to get more: enhanced productivity, better efficiency, increased outputs, all of which can and should lead to better bottom-line financial results. The same opportunity exists in the non-profit sector, though the “bottom line” in a non-profit is the ability to achieve its intended impact as
a mission-driven organization in a more expansive, more meaningful or more
efficient manner. The implementation of an organizational peer coaching
framework can positively impact bottom line results in any workplace through
employee wellness, deep peer relationships (for purposes of collaboration,
information sharing and peer support), employee self-awareness and strong
business acumen. In an ideal situation, organizational leadership commits to
putting a defined and supported peer coaching program in place, develops a
structure in which peer coaches are identified through manager nomination
and individual volunteerism, provides formal and robust peer coaching
training and utilizes the proposed framework outlined below to educate
coaches and stakeholders, manage the program and measure its success.
Peer Coaching through Shared Growth

Just as science has proven that nature has to find balance in order for continued creation and growth, peer coaching requires a balance between trust and transparency to deliver successful outcomes for both coach and coachee. This focus on balance, as well as on intersection and equity in coaching participation is fundamental in peer coaching because the strength of the relationship is rooted in the similarity of the organizational levels and shared experiences by each participant. For the participants to gain the most
value, the fluid movement back and forth amongst the activities resting within each circle helps to drive meaning, understanding and continuous positive outcomes, regardless of topic or issue being addressed.

Trust, defined as the reliance on and confidence in another person, is critical to the peer coaching relationship. Without trust in the relationship, there is limited opportunity for open dialogue or potential for growth and change. Transparency, defined as the clarity and ease with which something is understood alongside openness and clear communication, is necessary for clear analysis and true perception of the situation at hand, allowing for co-created meaning and the development of ideas and insights for solutions.

The peer coaching framework consists of a set of interlocking circles where the actions and behaviors related to trust and transparency operate and intersect with one another fluidly and frequently, resulting in shared and common authenticity (through continuous authentic dialogue) and strong psychological safety by both members of the coaching dyad - two deep-rooted indicators of organizational and individual success. Therefore, every activity throughout the engagement (and within each coaching session) is embedded within the definition and experience of either trust or transparency, creating balance and equity within the coaching relationship. These two key concepts promote higher quality peer coaching interactions by creating a tight bond between the participants and reinforcing the value of candor and open dialogue. Simultaneously, as trust grows and transparency expands, both members of the coaching dyad develop additional perspectives regarding
their own experiences that result in greater self-awareness, stronger relational competency and improved solutioning. At a most fundamental level, trust cannot exist without transparency and vice versa. When both factors exist simultaneously, the ability of the engagement to create meaningful outcomes for the individual as both coach and coachee concurrently is enabled through an experience that feels both very real and deeply safe.

Figure 2. Key Concepts Within the Peer Coaching Framework

The fundamental concepts of trust and transparency in this framework each rely on six key activities for ongoing success. Within the scope of trust, the coach must:

- Engage with empathy
- Continuously share his or her experiences
Listen well

Within the scope of transparency, the coach must:

- Be continuously curious
- Facilitate the creation of perspectives (for the coachee)
- Explore options

The shared environment must be created in such a way that both individuals are comfortable enough to be transparent and candid and enjoy the experience of the peer coaching work, thereby demonstrating ongoing commitment to and interest in the conversation. The energy and attentiveness necessary to do this is developed and maintained through a thoughtful and comprehensive contracting process at the beginning of the engagement, use of active listening skills and good questioning skills in each conversation, and constant encouragement of the other by each individual throughout the discussions. Additionally, the coach and coachee must work in tandem on goal definition, adopt divergent thinking mindsets, continuously ideate to develop creative solutions and maintain a focus based in reality.

The Importance of Trust

Listen Well

One of the most critical components of great coaching is the coach’s ability to be an excellent listener. This requires strong active listening skills,
the ability to “hear between the lines” and a belief by the coachee that she is being heard and understood by her coach. This is even more important in peer coaching, as the strength of experience and outcomes rests on both members of the dyad being able to deliver and maintain high quality coaching at all times. Therefore, during peer coaching training and while participating in coaching, individuals must build their active listening skills, through awareness and understanding of the key aspects of active listening, repeated practice, and demonstrated competency, which can be achieved using validated assessment and evaluation processes. There are myriad active listening training exercises and programs available in the marketplace; the organization or individual building the training is encouraged to seek out validated comprehensive programs through internal or external experts in interpersonal communication.

Similarly, the importance of asking good questions, and understanding what “good questioning” looks like, is paramount to listening well and developing trust with the coaching partner. Within coaching, it is commonly understood that a significant part of a coaching session is dedicated to asking questions “in order to, among other things, gather assessment information, clarify points, reveal core values, establish goals, develop action plans, [and] pinpoint and tackle blocks to change” (Neenan, 2009, p. 249). Peer coaches must learn the art of a good question, which requires understanding of the types of questions (open vs close-ended), the impact of a question type (for example, the difference in response that is generated by a ‘Why’ question
versus a ‘How’ question), and the intention of a question (to elicit further understanding, to create a moment of reflection or to identify an action or solution).

**Share Experiences**

In peer coaching, each person takes turns discussing the experiences she is having that are top of mind, either in a single coaching session or by agreeing to focus on one person in the dyad during one session and the other person in the next session. This equal exchange of stories creates relevance for both individuals by allowing the dyad to find commonality while using the experience of oral debriefing as a way to make meaning for the coach and the coachee. The structure and timing of this aspect of coaching can be left up to the dyad to decide how to handle but during coaching training, participants can practice equitable “turn-taking” and experience sharing through use of a timed task, as well as a checklist to ensure that each person is able to express a complete experience. A checklist can follow the arc of a storyline, including the introduction, ramp up to the conflict or heart of the issue, the climax of the issue and the resolution.

**Engage with Empathy**

For the peer coaching engagement to render positive and impactful outcomes, each member of the dyad must be able to relate to the other and demonstrate interest in, concern for and understanding of the other’s perspective. Therefore, the ability of the coach to experience and convey
empathy becomes of paramount importance as the trust and connections between the coaching partners increase and each person shares personal experiences, feelings and opinions. The partners will only be able to truly connect and draw out insights from each other when each person can mirror or sense what the other is feeling, identify with and understand those feelings and then express that understanding in a way that encourages continuous discussion and examination of the underlying concerns. Introducing and exploring the concepts of empathy and relational awareness as they exist within the framework of emotional intelligence is an important component of coach development. In the process of developing peer coaching skills, coaches can improve their ability to experience and demonstrate empathy through a number of mechanisms such as the reading or viewing of stories in which characters have intense experiences, or by setting up role-playing exercises where participants are asked to “walk in another person’s shoes”. Debriefing these activities through discussion of the emotions they generated during the exercise can help to develop stronger empathy for others.

The Value of Transparency

Transparency relies on openness, accountability and ongoing communication. When the coaching pair agrees to focus on creating perspectives and exploring options throughout the engagement while also remaining actively curious, transparency is continuously experienced and enhanced. Transparency, and the beneficial outcomes that come as a result
of shared openness, accountability and communication, is accomplished by defining and setting goals, working with a divergent thinking mindset, pursuing continuous ideation and maintaining a focus embedded in reality.

**Be Curious**

Just as having exceptional listening skills is one key to great coaching, remaining curious and interested in what the coachee is expressing and experiencing is also vital to success in peer coaching. Being curious allows the coach to go deeper into a topic, experience or circumstance that is the focus of the coaching, allowing for greater insight by the coachee and more opportunities for good questions from the coach. One key way in which curiosity is both expressed and positively experienced is through the art of the question. The “hypothetical processes of imagination that have an inherent tendency to turn into processes of self-reflection” (Koller, 2004, p. 664) are a vital component of uncovering insights, and the curiosity expressed by the coach through asking good questions drives that self-reflection. Asking the right question at the right time creates the possibility that there is an alternative approach to an issue, allowing the individual to build capacity in solving not just the problem in front of her but future issues as well - a great example of what “the art of the question” and deep curiosity can accomplish within a coaching relationship. While curiosity cannot necessarily be taught, it can be encouraged and nurtured by helping coaches identify the topic areas they are interested in or passionate about and then allowing them to practice
asking a series of continuously more focused questions on the topic to learn more.

*Create Perspectives*

The idea of creating perspectives is that the coach is present to help the coachee see points of view that the coachee might otherwise miss. When talking about perspectives in a peer coaching relationship, it is important to acknowledge that both the coach and the coachee can bring perspectives to the coaching session, but that the perspectives of the coachee are what must remain the focus in order to allow the coachee to develop insights and improve outcomes. One exercise designed to help participants become comfortable in consistently seeing other points of view is to show participants a picture or scene with two to three characters and ask the participants to first identify the initial perspective they have for each character and then brainstorm as many alternate perspectives as possible. This allows participants to develop flexibility in switching points of view as well as build understanding of all the different ways a scenario could be interpreted. Additionally, training coaches to ask open-ended questions allows the coach to draw out underlying interests and needs, creating opportunity to inquire as to an individual’s motivation for particular behaviors or actions. This approach naturally reveals alternate points of view.
Explore Options

The third aspect of transparency is focused on helping the coachee identify and develop potential options in a situation. Exploring options drives transparency by allowing open discussion of the different ways in which an issue can be resolved and creates insight for the coachee on which is the best approach to take for optimal results. The focus on considering options to resolve an issue or question is best achieved when the coach is able to use a divergent-thinking mindset with the coachee, whether through specific devil’s advocacy or red teaming activities (introducing the counterargument to a perspective or disputing the collective wisdom), or by directly exploring the multiple perspectives or approaches to a situation (for example, by asking the coachee to identify three or four alternate ways of thinking about the situation). Divergent thinking mindsets, if not naturally embedded within the coachee’s behaviors, can be developed through activities and experiences in which the individual is forced to come up with more than one way to solve a problem or understand an issue.

Additional Necessary Elements of a Successful Peer Coaching Program

The framework outlined focuses heavily on the necessity of six core activities to build and maintain trust and transparency. However, no peer coaching program can be effective or complete without a few core elements
embedded within it to ensure stability, responsible management and productive outcomes.

Once an individual or organization has confirmed intent to implement a peer coaching program, and coaches have been identified and confirmed, it will be necessary to hold coaching orientation or training for the selected coaches, to develop competency in basic coaching concepts and ensure clarity in how coaching sessions and engagements should occur.

As each coaching engagement begins, coach and coachee should hold a contracting session to establish norms within the relationship and define boundaries and commitments within the dyad, including the length of a typical coaching session, how to ensure confidentiality and what structure a session should take to ensure both individuals get adequate amounts of “air time” to be coach and coachee. Additionally, while a peer coaching engagement may remain open-ended, it may be helpful to establish an expected period of engagement (e.g., three months) and then conduct a “stop/continue” review of the engagement to determine if both members of the dyad wish to continue the relationship as peer coaches.

When, Where and How to Implement a Peer Coaching Program

The framework proposed above is designed to be flexible and fluid in its use throughout any workplace. Whether a decision is made by organizational leadership to implement a wide-reaching peer coaching program within the organization, or by an individual manager to set up a small
group of peer coaches across her team, there is ample room within the framework to be as complex and structured as desired (or not).

A peer coaching program can be initiated once a few factors have been evaluated and decided. First, the program sponsor needs to confirm there is interest and willingness in support of a program, identifying a group of individuals willing to explore the idea of becoming peer coaches, and obtaining backing by any group or leader that may need to be involved in the development, implementation or management of the program. Following the confirmation of advocacy and support, the sponsor will need to determine how peer coaches will be identified and selected, how coaches will be trained or their skills will be validated, and how the program will be run. Program sponsors may choose to run the program as an employee resource group, as a component of an employee development program, or as an informal activity in which organizational messaging tools are used to share information and communicate with participants but there is no structured management of the components of the program.

The keys to a successful peer coaching program within the workplace are that willing and interested participants can continuously demonstrate good coaching skills, there are enough coaches and coachees available to support the program, and the program remains active through sustainable practices, including ongoing coach training, effective coach matching and continued advocacy and communications regarding the program.
CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSION

Trust. Transparency. Mutuality. Reciprocity. These four words define, in simple terms, the reasons for, benefits of and purpose found in a peer coaching program within the workplace. In 2008, a survey led by the Chartered Institute of Learning and Development indicated that half of the employers surveyed predicted the responsibility for coaching would fall to line managers over the following few years but only 8% of respondents had structured coaching programs in place (Coaching & Buying Coaching Services, 2008). The simple benefit of peer coaching lies in the lower cost and easier implementation of a peer coaching program than other types of coaching that may be offered, thus allowing organizations to address the need for coaching without having to leave such responsibility exclusively up to managers or engage in costly external coaches or comprehensive programs requiring significant infrastructure and resources to maintain. The more significant benefit lies in the dual positive impacts on employee wellness and organizational health that can be achieved by putting such a program in place.

If organizations and individuals are able to embrace the value and benefit of peer coaching through all levels and not just at the top of the organization, there can be little doubt that fostering the relationship building, development of key skills in communication and analytical thinking, and ability to take on multiple perspectives could benefit the organization in myriad
ways. At an individual level, developing peer coaching skills enhances a participant’s capacity to help others and manage teams and direct reports inside the organizations (Chan & Burgess, 2015). Additionally, peer coaching has, by design of the structure and lack of a power relationship, the ability to significantly impact both participants in the relationship in terms of positive outcomes. One key reason for this is that the power of peer coaching lies with the coaches, in their ability to build trust, co-create a strong relationship and continuously ideate within a safe and authentic environment. Indeed, those who have participated in peer coaching programs validate the existence of such strength, indicating their individual satisfaction with peer coaching in the workplace is directly related to strong mutual respect, positive emotional experiences and a highly professional environment (Parker et al., 2008).

The primary intention in this capstone was to answer key questions in relation to peer coaching; where and why does peer coaching fall short in today’s workplace. A secondary purpose for including the proposed framework for a peer coaching program was intended to demonstrate how the necessary foundational elements of coaching, along with in-depth inclusion of the concepts of psychological safety and divergent thinking, could present organizations and individuals with a formula for implementing peer coaching within the workplace with relative ease.

Peer coaching is not a perfect solution to improving employee wellness and driving organizational outcomes, nor is it the only mechanism an organization should use to support employee development. However, the lack
of formal peer coaching programs as well as the limited scope and access to most types of peer coaching in the workplace do indicate that organizations are missing an opportunity to offer employees a meaningful, effective and thorough way to address personal and professional concerns, solve tricky issues and develop coaching skills - all of which are key competencies for success in any workforce. Simply put, peer coaching falls short in organizations because peer coaching is not being offered in organizations. Where it exists, it does so because like a weed in a sidewalk, a single seed has taken root between the cracks and with the addition of sunlight and water, it has fought its way to the surface and exists in a small way, without much notice or care. The possibility of success with a peer coaching program is most likely when such a program is implemented in a simple manner, without significant infrastructure, multiple components or dozens of rules. The framework outlined in this paper is intended to allow an organization or manager to take such an approach, and it is hoped that with some enthusiasm, a spark of energy and a few willing participants, a simple peer coaching program can be launched, sustained and allowed to achieve its aim - personal and professional support for and by a group of like-minded individuals with equality of role, level or experience.

Trust. Transparency. Mutuality. Reciprocity. These are the indicators of success in a good peer coaching program. They also define the characteristics of a true friend. After all, in any organization or time period, but
especially due to the turbulence and uncertainty of workplace experiences in 2020, having a trusted friend can bring nothing but good to us all.
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Bibliography of Methods

To implement a peer coaching program, the below sources of information may be helpful.

**International Federation of Coaching - research and articles related to Building a Coaching Culture**: [https://coachfederation.org/research/building-a-coaching-culture](https://coachfederation.org/research/building-a-coaching-culture)

**Four Ways to Kickstart a Coaching Culture**: [https://www.i4cp.com/infographics/4-ways-to-kickstart-a-coaching-culture](https://www.i4cp.com/infographics/4-ways-to-kickstart-a-coaching-culture)
How to Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program:  
https://www.amazon.com/Plan-Implement-Peer-Coaching-Program/dp/0871201844

Peer Coaching Activities (ways in which peer coaching can be used):  
https://www.digitalhrtech.com/peer-coaching/

Powerful Coaching Questions:  
Sample Powerful Questions

Alternatives
- What are the possibilities?
- If you had your choice, what would you do?
- What are possible solutions?
- What if you do and what if you don’t?

Appraisal
- What do you make of it all?
- What do you think? (is best?)
- How does it look to you?
- How do you feel about it?

Background
- What led up to ________?
- What have you tried so far?
- What do you make of it all?

Clarification
- What do you mean?
- What does it look/sound/feel like?
- What seems to confuse you?

Description
- What was it like?
- What happened?
- Then what?