

EDUCATOR → MENTOR → COACH

From Educator to Mentor to Coach: A Novel Approach

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Introduction: Across careers and workspaces, there is a need for individuals' enhancement of communications skills. This need is not exclusively for those in management positions but useful at any level. One source for developing both listening and questioning skills is found in coaching courses, taught by International Coaching Federation (ICF) or equivalent credentialed instructors. The pilot study funded by the National Science Foundation and described below is based on the supposition that acquiring a specific subset of coaching skills would serve to enhance the performance of well-established educator and mentor roles.

Background: In 2019, the author was approached to serve as a mentor to two college teams enrolled in a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to strengthen grant proposals submitted for the annual review and funding cycle. The requirement for the selection of this cadre of mentors was that they had to have served as principal investigator(s) on a funded NSF grant and had knowledge of the NSF grant submission process. Additionally, all mentors had backgrounds in cybersecurity or information technology (IT).

Participants: To be considered for the grant-writing training, college teams representing cybersecurity or IT faculty were required to submit an application that included institutional approval. From the applicant pool, twelve college teams were selected. Following the selection, the mentors were assigned one or two college teams, consisting of two or more faculty and one grant writer.

Over the next five months, mentors spent up to 35 hours with their respective teams on the initial idea development for the grant, a three-day virtual workshop, and the final review of the grant application prior to the October, 2020 submission deadline. In this pilot year of the grant-writing project, 11 of the 12 college teams submitted a project proposal to NSF.

Outcome: In early 2021, funding notices (and rejection letters) from NSF were sent out. Of the 11 college teams mentored by the mentor-cohort, eight—or 73%— received funding. One college that waited a full year to file their grant also received a funding notice in 2022, pushing these acceptance figures even higher. With that excellent

“What an eye opener and enriching experience! It was extremely helpful to us to understand the difference in mentoring and coaching and to learn what is and isn't good coaching – not to mention how hard it is to get it right!

-- Elaine Craft

PI, Mentor-Connect

Florence Darlington Technical College

success rate (national average is 55%), NSF suggested that the grant-writing management team submit a new proposal for funding in the 2021-24 cycle. Clearly, mentoring was shown to have a positive effect on producing quality grant proposals. The research question then became what other interventions could also increase the quality of these submissions. About the same time, Dr. Belón became aware of efforts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC to provide a 1-day training course in coaching skills to UNC faculty and permanent staff.

(<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/coach-approach-training/>.) Their research showed positive behavioral effects accruing to attendees from both in-person and virtual classes in coaching skills.

For the next grant submission cycle, Dr. Belón was recruited to serve as a Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI) of the new FORtifying Cybersecurity and Computing Education through ATE grants (FORCCE-ATE) proposal, specifically to handle the mentor-cohort training. When the new grant proposal was being crafted, Dr. Belón floated the idea to add training in coaching skills to the mentor training. Because of her personal involvement with ICF-certified coach training, she felt strongly that coaching skills were needed by the mentors, not only in the idea development phase of grant creation but throughout the entire proposal process. Her hypothesis was that mentoring, augmented by coaching skills, would enhance creativity, team focus and buy-in, and increase the overall impact of the mentor-coach intervention. It would also increase the number of successfully funded grant proposals to the NSF ATE program solicitation.

Dr. Belón's suggestion was accepted, resulting in the development of a six-hour coaching skills course. The addition of the "Fundamentals of Coaching" course plus additional 4.5 hours of practicum (i.e., triads) remains a differentiator between this project and other similar grant-writing projects. FORCCE-ATE was funded, and delivery of the enhanced grant-writing project began in mid-October, 2021.

Course Rollout: Prior to the first course delivery, the content, which focused on deep listening skills and powerful question creation, was reviewed by ICF-certified coaches.

Course content included the following:

- Discussion of ethics in coaching
- Coverage of different coaching methods used internationally
- Differentiation among the roles of counseling, mentoring, consulting and coaching
- Audio clips from coaching sessions
- Video content by internationally recognized coaches
- Exercises focused on session content
- Discussion on the importance of action steps taken by clients
- Live application of coaching knowledge in the form of triads (i.e., practicum)

The workbook, audio files, presentation slide deck, and all supporting materials were ported to the CANVAS online platform, so that students would have 24x7 access.

The next step prior to delivery was to recruit ICF-certified coaches to direct the triads. Like other skill practice environments, triads are intentional venues where the roles of coach, client, and observer are assigned to the students. In this case, triads were limited to 20-minute coaching sessions, with an additional 5-10 minutes of recap and evaluation by the participants. Between December and February, 2022, the new mentor-cohort, plus three “observers” from another NSF-funded project, took part in the inaugural delivery of the course and triads. By obtaining this subset of coaching skills, these mentors are now referred to as “mentor-coaches”.

Skills Application: In mid-April of 2022, the mentor-coaches received their college team assignment and began their journey that will last until the October 2022 NSF ATE grant submission deadline. During that time, as part of the grant’s plan, each mentor-coach was given the opportunity to request two half-hour private coaching sessions, staffed by the credentialed coaches. This supports the stance of ICF that all coaches should also have their own coach.

Results: The impact of providing the seasoned mentors with coaching skills will not be fully known until the February-May 2023 timeframe when NSF grant award letters will be sent out. However, the mentor-coaches have already responded to the project evaluator’s first survey, assessing the coaching skills training and triads. After the scheduled June 2022 grant workshop, with both mentors and mentee teams in attendance, additional survey and one-on-one interview data was gathered by the project’s external evaluator.

One outcome of the first course delivery is that both the sequence and content of the *Fundamentals of Coaching* workbook will undergo modifications prior to the 2022-23 delivery. The modifications will smooth out the flow and add additional content that increases the depth of coverage on the topic of establishing the client’s agreement at the beginning of both a coaching series and a single session.

Formal Evaluation: At the conclusion of the training and triads, the FORCCE-ATE evaluator sent out an anonymous survey to all participants. Questions covered the training, triads, course website, and their observations on the effectiveness of the training. The responses gave high marks to the practicum (triads), reported gains in deep listening, and the ability to construct powerful questions. On a more granular level, 75% of the respondents felt that their ability to evaluate an individual’s statements and behaviors had been increased. In term of the biggest “take-aways”, statements included the following:

“Coaching is well-suited for use during ideation (i.e., idea creation)”

“The value of using coaching skills became clear”

“Most useful in the learning was how to optimize the client’s experience by asking powerful questions”

When asked about the ways in which they envision applying their newly acquired coaching skills, answers revolved around the power of listening and asking open-ended questions. Examples:

“I loved the idea of not “fixing” the client’s issues but rather questioning to help them find solutions.”

“I hope to have improved interactions with peers and students.”

Summary: While we wait for quantitative evidence on the effectiveness of providing educator-mentors with coaching skills, this observation stands out:

Teaching basic coaching skills of listening and asking thought-provoking questions *empowers* the recipient of the coaching skills to confidently use these skills at the appropriate times in their career and work environment. In turn, their coaching drives their clients to examine, synthesize, hypothesize, and validate their current understandings, while moving towards their expressed goals.

Self-reflections by the nine mentor-coaches consistently stated that adding coaching skills to their arsenal of tools expanded and enhanced their communication skills in both their professional and private lives.

Recommendation: While the data on providing coaching skills to participants in this narrowly focused project will not be completed for three years, expanding this research to provide essential coaching skills training to larger groups of educators would seem a logical next step. At a minimum, additional research focused on providing the core coaching skills to educators will be essential to expanding the availability of current research on this topic.