

How to undertake an effective coaching session

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How to be an effective coach as a nurse leader

Rationale

Applying the principles of coaching as a nurse leader has been seen to be beneficial for all staff (Richardson et al 2023). Nurse managers are encouraged to adopt their leadership style towards a more developmental, transformational approach to encourage confidence building in teams through sharing their knowledge and experience (Downey 2015). The principals of coaching can be relevant to a variety of conversations such as appraisals, professional nurse advocacy, within education and learning, in addition to more formal coaching relationships. There are many coaching courses available to NHS employees, in addition to qualified coaches and resources available to help you develop your coaching role. Here are a few current resources you might find useful: ([NHS England » Looking after you: free confidential coaching and support for the primary care workforce](#); [Coaching and Mentoring – Leadership Academy](#)); However, the practice of coaching individuals and teams can sometimes be mis-understood, which may compromise team relationships if not planned and implemented effectively. It is important to source supervision from your own identified coach to encourage self-awareness, improvement, and reflection.

The term coaching has been used interchangeably with mentoring in that both approaches are used to facilitate a process of supportive improvement or change. It is not a directive approach but requires the coach to have a 'curious' perspective

- Effective coaching can be instrumental in empowering staff and teams to develop and own their goals.
- Coaching can help to build a trusting and meaningful relationship to facilitate improvement.
- Coaching is not an authoritarian process but encourages non-judgmental collaborative challenge.
- Active listening, encouraging critical reflection, and asking 'curious' questions form the basis of an effective coaching conversation.

Reflective activity

'How to' articles can help to update your practice and ensure it remains evidence based. Apply this article to your practice.

Drawing on the information in this article, how might you improve your practice when implementing a coaching conversation or activity

How you could use this information to educate your colleagues on the appropriate technique and evidence base relating to coaching others.

Preparation

There are many coaching models and approaches that can help structure sessions and activities. Many of these are drawn from business and psychology literature so it is important to draw on the approach that best fits the specific use. One of the most used models in nursing literature is the GROW model (figure 1), however there are many other approaches freely available on the worldwide web that you might choose to use depending on the situation and your preference. Tools are only a guide to develop your own style of coaching. Each section of the model can be used in the coachees development process and does not have to happen in one session.

Goal	Agree a measureable outcome or output
Reality	Describe the current situation of focus, what is the reality as viewed by the coachee.
Options	Draw out all possible and preferred options.
Way forward	Discuss possible limitations/ implications. Comit to actions and next steps. Identify support/resources.

Figure 1: GROW model

Whichever approach is used, effective planning is essential. The nature of coaching requires all parties to enter the relationship as a learning process for improvement. Coaching should build on foundations of trust, respect, and accepting personal responsibility to benefit from the activity. It is important the coach feels confident in their role and can speak truthfully as part of a collaborative relationship. Personal limitations must be accepted, and knowing when to enlist the help of other colleagues should be acknowledged. It is useful to check your organisational/HR policy if contractual elements between the coach and coachee are needed.

Agreeing outcomes of the coaching session

- Agreeing parameters of the coaching relationship

It is likely you will be coaching someone known to you, a member of your immediate team, or a colleague. Setting boundaries and assuring confidentiality at the outset is advised. To prepare effectively for coaching conversations, agree and schedule timed meetings which are suitable to all parties and establish the timeline of the coaching relationship. Coaching conversations should be held in a private space, and if conducted via video conferencing methods, ensure adequate wifi is available. Discuss the importance of honest self-reflection to move forward in the process. Agree discussion mechanisms and recording of progress against goals and actions. Self-reflection learning logs are useful ways of recording discussions and face to face meetings encouraged to facilitate non-verbal cues that could affect the meaningfulness of the coaching conversation.

- Setting realistic goals

These can relate specifically to the individual, or how the individual goals relate to the team or organisations/system goals and should be developed within a culture of positivity. Observing behaviours and situations is a powerful way of seeing a set of circumstances and how these are affected. Agree the focus of the coaching relating to a specific area rather than a generalised theme.

- Discussing perceptions

A coaching relationship should be meaningful and develop as a collaborative learning experience. Exploring expectations and concerns at the outset can encourage honesty and frankness in how coaching can be viewed as beneficial to a situation. Your status as a leader or manager can potentially be perceived as a barrier, so this is important to discuss in terms of confidentiality expectations and organisational boundaries.

- Personal responsibility

Coaching is not concerned with giving answers or telling someone what to do. Ensuring all parties are open to the prospect of changing behaviours and are committed to being pro-active in their learning will influence the success of the coaching relationship and subsequent activities. Discussing and negotiating the responsibilities of both coach and coachee can help to understand the reasons and benefits of the coaching approach. This includes a conversation of owning the identified actions by the coachee, with a lack of action influencing whether goals are achieved.

Procedure

Coaching conversations

- ❖ The premise of all coaching conversations is encouraging reflective practice and ensuring focused questions to generate forward actions. Being 'present' with no disruptions may be hard to achieve, but protected time encourages active listening and an opportunity to unpick elements of behaviour. The Kings Fund (2024) suggests that coaching gives both parties the space to question, learn and consider together what could be different. This is drawn from Schein (2013) who suggests a 'humble enquiry' approach is utilised to ask questions, as opposed to 'telling'.
- ❖ It is acknowledged in the coaching literature that the most effective method for behaviour change is where an individual identifies the change themselves. It is important as a coach to embed a positive approach, acknowledging that everyone has the capacity to adapt behaviours.

- ❖ An agenda for these discussions can help prepare for the conversation to centre discussions and avoid generalisation.

- ❖ Focus on open questions which encourage critical reflection, giving time for contemplation.

- ❖ Plan to ask 'curious questions'. Curious is defined as wanting to know or learn something. Embedding curiosity in a coaching relationship facilitates a respectful, dynamic approach which should not be threatening or pressured. Many coaching texts offer various types of questions that can be utilised for specific situations. Examples of curious questions you could ask within the GROW model are below:

GOAL

What would you like to identify as the goal? How will you know when you have achieved this goal? How will you know that the situation is resolved?

How does this goal fit with your overall aim? How does it fit with the Team/organisation objectives?

What is your timeframe? Is this a short term or long-term goal?

How important do you think this is for you/the team/the organisation on a scale of 1 – 10

REALITY

What is happening now (what, who, when, and how often)? What do you see the effect or result of this is? Why do you think this situation/topic/behaviour is important right now?

Who do you think owns this situation?

How have you taken steps toward this goal?

How do you see this goal affecting or conflicting with any other objectives?

OPTIONS

What else do you think you could do? What would help this change?

What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of each option?

How do you think you could do things differently to achieve this goal?

What do you see as the obstacles for this change and how could you overcome these?

What are the implications of doing nothing?

WAY FORWARD

What will you do now? When? What is the timeframe?

Imagine this has been resolved, what does that look like to you?

When will you review/evaluate this and how? How will you keep motivated?

What are the limitations and how can these be addressed?

What support will you need to access and how can this be sourced.

❖ Active listening will help you to understand the situation, develop probing questions, clarify meaning, recognise emotions, reflect and summarise, and value silence. Establishing a coaching relationship may not be successful if you are unable to listen actively due to feeling tired, not scheduling a suitable time, external distractions, feel pressured to solve the situation or problem, feel out of your depth, have prejudgments of the person or situation.

❖ Subsequent reframing can be used to help see the situation differently to consider new options. As a coach, you can offer an alternative frame or lens to challenge the coachee's reality. For example, you could say 'let us look at this another way' and unpick beliefs and assumptions. Convert the features of the frame to rearrange the meaning:

A problem is an opportunity

A weakness is a strength

Unkindness as lack of understanding

An impossibility as a future possibility

Implementing actions

- ❖ Action planning may consist of short and/or long-term goals but should be realistic and achievable, adhering to SMART approaches (Specific, Measurable, Appropriate, Realistic, Timely)
- ❖ Small steps in taking each action should be positively framed. Consider the impact and benefit, asking how it will affect the individual.
- ❖ Adequate time should be planned for this stage to ensure actions are carefully considered, solution focused, and meaningful to the individual. As a coach, you should encourage the individual to make their own commitments to actions and identify their own steps to achieve the agreed action.
- ❖ Continue to validate their commitment in a positive way. This can re-iterate the value of the coaching session/activity. Reflecting on the learning that has occurred and asking for feedback on your approach will also benefit you as a leader and coach for future sessions.
- ❖ Coaching relationships should be time limited to maintain the focus of goals and facilitate time to reflect on the process.
- ❖ Regular review discussions to support the achievement of short-term actions should be maintained, although other sources of support may need to be established to maintain long term goals such as referring to other organisational networks/colleagues/external partners.

Evidence base

Coaching as a concept is relatively new to nursing, having been established for many years across business and psychology sectors. There are multiple coaching texts from these areas whose principals have been adopted to develop approaches for nursing and healthcare professions. Richardson et al (2023) provides an integrative literature review considering the advantages of coaching in nursing. Their review suggests coaching benefits the development of managers and leaders in their role, particularly when transitioning into this role. It also supports reflective communication when supporting staff improvements to encourage self-awareness and self-development. The review also suggests that coaching approaches can help to increase confidence and resilience. However, this is always dependent on how the coaching process is implemented.

Ali et al (2021) highlighted that those nurse managers who engaged in effective coaching with their staff, also benefited from the learning experience which enhanced theirs and their colleague's communication and helped to realise goal attainment. A concurrent theme of nursing coaching literature suggests that effective coaching can increase confidence and critical thinking, leading to improved performance both at an individual and organisational level (Bradey and Moore 2019, Le Compt and McClelland 2017).

Despite the overwhelming evidence base relating to the positive impact of coaching in nursing, not everyone will be receptive to engage in coaching conversations (Cummings et al 2018). This may be due to a previous negative experience or not understanding the purpose of coaching. Therefore, it is essential that a full explanation of the process is understood, and the coach appreciates and implements the principals of coaching as described above. If coaching is not practised within a trusting relationship, it is unlikely to generate impact (Richardson et al 2023). Kowalski (2019) re-iterates that coaching conversations should not be authoritarian but collaborative in nature, while also holding to account what the coachee plans to do in a non-judgmental way. In addition, an RCT conducted by Rafferty et al (2023) suggests that coaches themselves need ongoing support following education and training to ensure their communication outcomes are realised. This approach was seen to generate superior outcomes compared to those who did not receive follow-up support.

Applying polarity management principles has also been seen to enhance coaching behaviours in nurse leaders (Sorour et al 2023). Polarity management is concerned with viewing situations on a continuum, rather than a problem that can be solved. These situations are usually ongoing or recurring, unavoidable and may not have a right or wrong solution. In applying polarity management principles, nurse leaders will view the positive and negative of all sides, i.e two forces that are opposite each other, for example staff cost restrictions and needing new staff, responsibility to control and facilitating empowerment.

Parsons (2023) suggests coaching principles can also apply in everyday interactions with colleagues, including informal conversations. Despite barriers identified as lack of time and support to embed a coaching culture within the organisation, the study evidenced leaders and managers who applied coaching principles saw improvements in their own self-worth, confidence, and satisfaction, resulting in positive relationship building.

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