

An Assessment of Professional Coaching as a Method for Accelerating the Development of Forensic Science Talent

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The occupational culture of forensic science places a high premium on attendance at conferences, symposia, and seminars for developing knowledge and talent among forensic science employees, and it should. The opportunity to immerse one's self in a learning environment, where direct engagement with a national or international contingent of peers and mentors can be enjoyed, is critical for professional growth in intellectually intensive fields of endeavor. But as valuable as this kind of learning can be, it does not necessarily facilitate the introspective self-scrutiny that is needed to *accelerate* one's development, nor does it hold attendees accountable for their learning and application of new knowledge in the workplace. This is precisely what coaching does.

Program Proposal and Initiation

Following the 2016 annual meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences in Las Vegas, Nevada, a meeting of the Western Crime Laboratory Directors was held during which a pilot program was proposed. Laboratory directors could nominate forensic scientists, either managerial or nonmanagerial, to receive personalized coaching over the course of one year at no cost. A total of five nominees would be selected. To be considered, each nominee would meet the following criteria:

1. Currently employed in a forensic science laboratory
2. Generally regarded as a high-performer with strong leadership skills or leadership potential
3. No disciplinary action taken against the nominee within the previous 12 months

Within approximately one month, multiple nominees were submitted. Five individuals were selected to become the coaching clients, based upon information provided by the laboratory directors and the desire to diversify the client profile in this project. The clients, who are coauthors of this paper, were given the opportunity to preserve their anonymity. Instead, they elected to make their identities known, and therefore advocate more openly for the use of coaching in developing forensic science talent.

Program Methodology

As it was originally proposed, each client participated in one 45-minute private coaching session per month for four consecutive months. The sessions were held by telephone. After the fourth session, each client participated in one 45-minute session every two

months, for a total of eight sessions over twelve months. At the end of the program, each candidate compiled a total of approximately 360 minutes (6 hours) of professional coaching.

The Coach

The coach in this study (John Collins) was trained in 2012 by Dr. Jeff Auerbach at the College of Executive Coaching, which advocates the use of several contemporary methods aimed at building client effectiveness through expanded self-awareness and situational clarity. Among the most powerful of these methods is *appreciative inquiry* in which a coach examines past achievements produced by clients to help identify the personal strengths and attributes that have proven to bring the client success in the past. Other forms of inquiry and thought-partnering are used to help clients better understand the circumstances and opportunities that exist in their current environments.

Between sessions, clients were given simple assignments to complete that were relevant to the topics discussed. Online videos and articles were common resources that clients were asked to review prior to the next session. In other instances, clients were asked to keep notes about their progress, and to be prepared to discuss how they applied new ways of thinking to their daily work lives.

Accelerants of Performance

An *accelerant of performance* is a strategic but authentic change to personal or professional behaviors that produces tangible improvements for clients. Admittedly, use of the term *accelerant* in a forensic science context usually has a different meaning. But in this context, the coaching process helps clients identify the most applicable accelerants of performance, and they are held accountable by their coach for applying their emerging insights to their normal routines.

The five clients selected for this study all work in similar environments in the same profession. And, not surprisingly, they shared some similar desires for sustained improvement in certain aspects of their professional lives. All are highly respected, accomplished professionals with strong track records of success. Coaching presented them with an opportunity to elevate this performance to a level that would create new opportunities for career fulfillment. Either individually or collectively, the clients identified areas in which they sought to not only create improvements, but

to have those improvements eventually come naturally to them. The following were themes raised by one or more of the clients, which became points of intense focus during the coaching sessions:

Reducing perfectionist tendencies that limit performance and weaken the quality of interpersonal relationships.

Overcoming the desire to control people and processes, learning to trust members of the team.

Empathizing with upper managers more readily and without feelings of bitterness when decisions or actions don't make sense.

Becoming more approachable and recognizing the importance of being trusted.

Learning how to coach and influence others in the workplace without dictating or dominating conversations.

Transitioning from one role to another without clinging to past responsibilities or levers of control.

Engaging in conflict with greater skill and less anxiety so that disagreements result in constructive accord.

Discussion

It is worth reiterating that the coaching clients in this pilot program are successful, accomplished forensic laboratory professionals with strong track-records of performance. Most admitted to some initial ambivalence about the prospect of being coached. After all, they did not seek it out. Rather, they were nominated by superior laboratory administrators and agreed to participate. They were hopeful that the sessions would be a good use of their time, but they were not enthusiastic at first. None of the clients had any previous experience with professional coaching. But within the first few sessions, each client became fully engaged and began recognizing the value of what they were learning. More importantly, they began experiencing success in applying lessons learned to their daily routines.

At the end of the program, the clients were asked if they felt it was beneficial to have a coach with experience in the same profession. This was an important question to ask because it is never necessary that coaches have the same backgrounds or similar areas of expertise as their clients. Yet there was unanimous agreement that

having a coach with a forensic laboratory background was beneficial to them. The primary reason for this sentiment was that many of the issues discussed during the coaching sessions dealt with challenges, issues, and opportunities that are common to the experience of working in the forensic laboratory sciences.

In Their Own Words

Upon completion of the coaching sessions, the coach and clients participated in a conference call that lasted approximately one hour. During this call, the clients and coach discussed the program, its strengths, and its weaknesses. The clients agreed that coaching is an effective way to accelerate the development of talent among forensic laboratory employees, and they provided suggestions for how coaching could best be administered on a larger scale. The clients also agreed to write a brief summary about their experiences and how coaching helped to accelerate their own professional growth. The clients and their comments are provided below in alphabetical order:

Chad Grundy - Utah Department of Public Safety

In 2016, I embarked on a journey but really had no idea where it would take me. I did not know what to expect or what the outcomes would really mean. My laboratory director invited me to be coached by a professional coach who had an extensive background in forensic science. I was told that I was invited to participate in program because I am passionate about what I do, I am a leader in our organization, and I always strive to improve myself.

I was introduced to John Collins as my "career coach" in early 2016. The very best reward from having John as my career coach is that he has helped me learn more about myself by having to answer questions for myself about myself. He introduced me to resources that made me think as a person, as a manager, and as a leader. The resources given were sometimes articles to read or books to look at. But, most importantly, I valued having a coach who did not belong to my organization, who could listen to my concerns, give me ideas, help me see more potential, and offer ways to improve myself and our laboratory.

I really learned that it takes time and practice to become a great leader. I have learned that there are definite qualities in individuals that good leaders should have, but there are many resources and coaching tips that can also help groom you to become a great leader. I truly appreciated the opportunity I had to read articles, or a portion of a book that helped me in my daily responsibilities. Speaking with a career coach takes you out of your daily routine and gives you the opportunity to look at what is going on from a bigger picture. That is where and when you can see areas to improve.

Khushboo Narechania - Las Vegas Metro Police Dept.

For me, the coaching process was about learning how to implement behavioral modifications in order to genuinely improve my leadership skills, relationships, and ability to influence. I wasn't completely aware of this at the beginning of the process, but as the coaching sessions evolved, I began to understand more about myself and about what I wanted to gain from the experience in relation to my professional life.

A questionnaire at the beginning of the coaching experience helped to tailor the sessions to each individual. The one-on-one coaching (as opposed to group coaching) method of the program was crucial to its success to ensure that each session was focused on, and geared towards, each individual's goals. John did a fantastic job of listening to verbal outpourings, then re-phrasing them so that the exact same situation was presented from a different perspective in order to uncover new approaches for confronting each challenge.

The construct of many forensic laboratories is such that there is very limited room for advancement. With each field within a laboratory being so unique with its own set of prerequisites, lateral moves to different areas of expertise can be difficult. In addition, each discipline may be led by one supervisor, who then reports to one laboratory director. The coaching program, however, provides a sense of empowerment, and shows that you can have influence from anywhere in an organization and in a field that may initially seem to have limited room for upward movement.

Rylene Nowlin - Idaho State Police, Meridian Laboratory

When first approached about participating in leadership coaching I was very skeptical. I wondered how this would be different from attending a leadership training seminar or conference. I was also apprehensive about sharing specific details about myself and my current challenges with a stranger. In the end, I decided to put aside my skepticism and fears and try coaching. This turned out to be one of the best decisions I have ever made.

I cannot detail all of the benefits of personalized leadership coaching in such an abbreviated format but I would like to highlight one that, for me, made an enormous impact. Through coaching I was able to learn how to get out of my own way. Because of the individualized nature of the coaching sessions I was able to realize the obstacles I was putting in my own path, both personally and professionally. These were things I did not nor would I have ever realized I was doing. This is not something I could have gleaned at a conference or seminar, because it required my coach asking me very specific questions and building upon the answers to those questions. While I still cannot control the external forces that surround laboratory management and everyday life, I can control how I navigate each situation with more confidence and self-control. Thanks to my coach, I have been able to remove several roadblocks of my own creation out of my path forward. Leadership coaching was an amazing experience and I would recommend it to anyone.

Ben Swanholm - Phoenix Police Department Crime Lab

When I was initially approached about having a coach to improve my professional skills, I was a little hesitant. After reflecting on the opportunity, I thought that, although it may be uncomfortable and would require me to share some of my vulnerabilities and areas where I was self-conscious, it would be worth it. As a former collegiate athlete, I was used to having coaches help me make improvements, but that was in the physical arena. I hadn't really thought about how a coach could help me improve my professional skills or "soft" skills to make me more successful as an employee, peer, and leader.

Through coaching, I figured out that the biggest limitation to the growth of my professional skills was me. Having an individual that was outside my laboratory who I could speak to frankly allowed me to hear myself more clearly as well as understand the challenges I was facing. This understanding gave me better awareness of different perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes that were holding me back. By seeing different perspectives, understanding the different beliefs, and learning about others attitudes, I was able to see some of the blind spots that had been hindering my progress. Once I was able to identify my limitations, we were able to make a plan of action that included ways to keep myself accountable to that plan.

Coaching was a valuable experience for me. I feel like I have made great strides in my interpersonal relationships, decision-making, and communication. If you want to grow and improve, and are willing to trust someone to support you, I highly recommend having a coach.

Alanna Williams - Albuquerque Police Department

Professional coaching, such as what I experienced in this program, is something that is not historically available nor readily offered to forensic science lab professionals in government agencies. I now believe that what coaching offers could positively enhance how crime labs operate and function if it were to be offered to specific personnel as an investment in the overall well-being and prosperity of the lab. Since John, my coach, has experience working in a crime lab, as a laboratory director, he had insight and fundamental knowledge of the difficulties that crime labs face as government agencies and was able to help me identify honest, achievable solutions.

Coaching taught me how to influence a situation or conversation through inquiry, or asking a series of questions. It also helped me to be aware of phrasing questions in such a way that will not cause others to be defensive; for instance, not using selfish language like I or me when voicing concerns

John pushed me to find opportunities to put myself in a better position to reach my own professional goals. He would give me new goals at the end of each session to work on before our next session and then we would discuss what worked or didn't work. And he would offer an honest but

helpful assessment of what could be refined to improve a difficult situation. He also taught me that anytime you are faced with a problem to always look at it as an opportunity and that "gentle pressure applied relentlessly" can be a good approach in influencing a situation.

John always offered an illustration for a point he was trying to make which would allow me to have a better understanding of how a technique is used. John is also very organized in his thoughts and makes the most use of time in each session.

Reflections on Coaching in Forensic Science

During a post-project conversation, Khushboo Narechania shared a sentiment that is important for readers and future clients to understand about coaching. As she noted, "the value you get from coaching depends on how honest you are with yourself." This is perhaps the single-most important factor, not only in being a client, but in being a coach. At the heart of coaching is the effort to help clients become more self-aware. Good coaches help clients painlessly examine their thinking patterns and ways of doing business. Through improved self-awareness, as the clients explained in their own words, life becomes easier both inside and outside of the workplace. In this regard, coaching accelerates professional growth and maturity much faster than traditional training, where the comforts of anonymity prevent one from being fully motivated.

Moreover, coaching is not a form of therapy, and should not be misconstrued as an alternative to therapy. Therapy is a process that allows individuals who are coping with dysfunction to achieve some semblance of normalcy in one or more areas of their lives. Coaching, on the other hand, helps functional, accomplished individuals become even better. In sports, for example, the greatest athletes in the world rely on coaches to help them identify opportunities to improve, formulate new strategies for achieving success, and prevent or correct the inevitable bad habits that reduce the quality of performance. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported in December 2000, "Coaching is for winners who want more out of life."

Leading is for Everyone

For most coaches who specialize in building leadership skills, the most rewarding moments come when clients realize that managers do not have a monopoly on leadership. Any employee in any organization can influence other people in a positive way, but only if they have skills that are sufficiently refined to function optimally in their current environments. Yet the longer one works in a particular environment, the harder it can be to recognize the opportunities and threats that lie

before them. This is, perhaps, why clients come to value coaching even when they experience some initial hesitation. They appreciate the opportunity to "wake up" or to see their own situations through fresh eyes. This results in strong feelings of empowerment and freedom that can quickly evolve into greater professional performance and success.

Conclusion

The pilot program conducted in partnership with the Western Crime Laboratory Directors was successful, with each coaching client reporting tangible professional growth over a short period of time that produced equally tangible benefits. The clients reported the following:

- That 45 minute sessions were entirely adequate, with some sessions possibly requiring up to an hour, but not more. Sessions less than 45 minutes were not recommended.
- One session per month was deemed beneficial as it gave the clients time to practice new skills and thinking patterns between sessions, at which time they could discuss their experiences with their coach.
- The clients recommended not holding fast to a particular mode of communication such as telephone, in-person, or video conferencing. If in-person coaching is not possible, utilizing either telephone or video conferencing or both should be allowed with flexibility being permitted based on the input of both the client and coach.
- That it was beneficial having a coach with experience in forensic science, but that in some cases it may not be necessary.

Coaching is a method for supporting the personal and professional growth of clients. When done properly and with the full engagement of a motivated client, coaching accelerates the development of skills faster than what would occur with the normal passage of time.

It is not a coincidence that this program was undertaken at a time when forensic science and its workforce find themselves the subjects of great scrutiny and demands for improved ways of doing business. Traditional training, although important, does not provide the customization and privacy that are necessary to maximize professional growth over a short period of time. Coaching, however, does. Through coaching, individuals can not only achieve remarkable increases in their overall effectiveness, but can sustain it for the remainder of their careers if they are willing to put forth the effort and invest in their futures. *****