

Briefing for learning coaches

Thank you for agreeing to be a learning coach. We ask learners to select: 'someone who they respect and who they feel they can learn from' to be their learning coach. It is an important and satisfying role, as the goal is to assist others to become more effective practitioners.

What does the role of learning coach involve?

- Building a positive environment for learning.
- Using questions (especially open questions) to probe and analyze needs.
- Focusing on the needs of an individual, by providing one-to-one support.
- Active listening.
- Discussing and reviewing plans and deadlines for assignments (known as 'outputs').
- Providing on-going, informal support.

It is the role of the learning coach to help learners achieve their aims and develop themselves by using a process called action learning, taking into account their own preferred way(s) of working.

Action learning works best when it:

- Is outcomes-oriented.
- Enables people to learn by doing.
- Creates a culture where learning becomes a 'way of life'.
- Is done mainly on the job.
- Develops skills of critical reflection and re-framing.
- Is problem focused rather than hierarchically bound.
- Breaks down the barriers between people and functions.
- Is an active rather than a passive approach.

For further details, please see the resource: [Introducing action learning](#).

People prefer to learn in different ways and coaches should be aware of these differences:

Activists learn best by doing first and thinking later. They are usually willing to take risks and make mistakes.

Reflectors learn best by observing from a distance, listening to the viewpoints of others. They do not like to feel under pressure, preferring to work at their own pace.

Theorists like to learn by thinking things through methodically and logically. Sometimes they can seem detached and analytical.

Pragmatists prefer to try things out and often dislike too much theorizing. They tend to act quickly and confidently.

For further details, please see the resource: [Introducing the learning log](#).

In preparing for your role as a learning coach, it will help if you consider your own preferred learning style and preferences so that you can better relate to the learner you are coaching. The main requirement though is an open mind, a willingness to learn and to motivate and encourage others.

Ideally you should aim to:

- Build rapport, trust and mutual respect.
- Be a role model.
- Show a genuine interest in the coaching role.
- Ask open questions.
- Listen effectively.
- Let the individual you are coaching work out his/her own solutions.
- Give constructive feedback.

Getting started

There is no definitive process for coaching learners, because every learner and every project is different. This means that the coach must try to be sensitive to the needs of the learner, though you are probably just as busy as they are!

At the first meeting is often a good idea to discuss and agree how you will work together. For example, the coach might expect the learner to:

- Make a real effort to complete each piece of work on time.
- Set aside time to prepare, undertake any research and to write-up.
- Send the coach regular updates on their progress.

Similarly, the coach might undertake to:

- Respect the confidentiality of the relationship.
- Be supportive to the learner's needs.
- Read the work received, but only comment in general terms.
- Set aside time to meet the learner regularly at mutually convenient times and locations.
- Be prepared to end the relationship if both feel it is inappropriate.

Building the coaching relationship

Aim to:

- Create the right environment by thinking about meeting the learner in places where they can feel relaxed and uninhibited. It does not have to be in your own office.
- Allow for a settling-in period until you feel comfortable with each other.
- Never compromise your integrity or professionalism.
- Try to create a climate of trust and recognize that your seniority (age, experience, job role) might intimidate the learner.
- Be informal, but organized.

Support the learning

Aim to:

- Hold up a mirror and help the learner reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.
- Give constructive feedback and encouragement.
- Share mutual respect and learn from each other.
- Set agreed goals and actions.

During meetings, the coach should be aware of physical and mental actions that will affect the interactions:

Physical: Maintain an open posture; Face the speaker; Keep eye contact; Stay relaxed; Don't interrupt; Watch for non-verbal signs on how things are going.

Mental: Keep an open mind; Try to determine a central theme; Think ahead; Analyze what is being said; Pay attention to key words and feelings; Listen to what is not being said.

Guided learning

A key part of the role of being a learning coach is to guide the learner as he/she seeks to articulate ideas and possible solutions to work-based problems. You are not expected to be an 'expert' in any particular topic area, but you can help by asking questions! (Please see Table 1 for some examples of the type of more specific questions you might use.)

In addition to topic or project-based questions, do ask general questions such as:

- What action have you taken and is being taken?
- What are you learning from the (current) experience?
- How does the (current) experience compare to the experience of others and any reports you have read?
- What are you doing to apply the learning?

Table 1: Example guiding questions

Questions	Issues
Are the aims clearly stated, and addressed?	Good introduction, questions answered, insight?
Is the output easy to read? Would you submit the output in its present form to your boss?	Presentation, clarity, errors, style?
Is there evidence of action being taken as a result of this output?	Action planning and evidence?
Has this work made a difference? Is there clear evidence?	Benefits for the organization and the individual?
How has the learner approached investigating the problem?	Critical ability using a range of sources to inform the topic?
Is the analysis and discussion convincing?	Reflective analysis that sheds new light on a problem?
Have you supported your work and recommendations with evidence? How does your work compare with the findings of others?	Verified by data and/or good practice?
Is this all your own work? (note: it is fine for learners to delegate, but they must write the outputs themselves)	Learner's own 'voice' reflected in thoughtful conclusions?
Is the work well balanced?	Well planned, objective, convincing?
So what? How can the conclusions be applied?	Summary and conclusion with relevant solutions?

Additionally, the following list of words might be useful when you are exploring ideas with learners:

Analyze	Examine critically or in detail. Break down into component parts.
Assess	Consider the value of, weigh up (see evaluate).
Compare	Explore similarities and differences.
Contrast	Look for differences.
Criticize	Through a discussion of the evidence or arguments supporting a theory or opinion, make a judgement about its merit.
Define	State the meaning of a word or phrase.
Describe	Give a detailed account of something.
Discuss	Explain and give different views about, or implications.
Distinguish	Look for differences.
Evaluate	Determine the worth, value or validity of something through an examination of the supporting argument.
Illustrate	Make clear and explicit; often requires the use of examples.

Writing outputs

Here are some tips to help learners to submit good work:

Start promptly. It is a good idea to collect ideas and thoughts in a computer file or scrapbook; otherwise the ideas might be lost. This gives longer to reflect on the ideas and polish them later.

Brainstorm. This means jotting down ideas and/or talking to other members of the team.

Be selective. Try to avoid information overload. Aim to rate your ideas according to how important and relevant they are.

Sequence. It might be easier to write the middle section of your output first, and then add the ending and finally the introduction. If this appeals, ensure that you have clear objectives for the output from the outset.

Structure. Decide on the most logical structure that will enable you to get to the desired end point.

Drawer it! It is often a good idea to put the output into a drawer for a few days and then come back to it before finishing it off. This probably means that the learner will need to plan their timetable carefully.

Dealing with difficulties

As with many intense and important relationships, the going may at times get tough for both coach and learner. For example there may be obstacles, lack of energy, personal problems that get in the way. Here, the learning coach has a role to play in helping the learner to determine the cause of the difficulty and trying to resolve it. Table 2 lists some examples of typical difficulties and ways in which they may be addressed.

Table 2: Dealing with difficulties

Nature of difficulty	Suggestions / questions
Spouse is complaining about working too hard	Could the coach discuss some of the learning problems with the family and get them to proof-read some outputs?
Not enough time at work to do the learning	Is it possible to use the learning to sort out real organizational problems? This is a very effective use of time.
Writer's block	Take some time off to relax and think.
Too much information	Ensure that the topic is focused down so that the scope is narrower and the outcomes clear.
Feeling overwhelmed	Check that the output is structured logically and help the learner to bite off a small piece at a time
Situation is ambiguous	Review the aims and help the learner to make connections so as to form some conclusions.

Summary

This resource has introduced the main aspects of being a learning coach and how this role can be a mutually enjoyable and rewarding relationship.

Some key points are:

- Coaching is a one-to-one relationship in which the coach's experience assists the learner with their action learning.
- Learning can be a powerful and life changing pursuit, of benefit to individuals and organizations.
- Learning through experience follows a cyclical pattern, and coaches can help especially with the reflection and concluding part.
- Individuals prefer to learn in different ways and the coach should be aware of such differences.
- The role of the coach in action learning is to support and enable the learner.
- Building a comfortable relationship at the outset is important.
- The will to complete the learning or be a good coach is the main success factor.
- The coach should focus on the needs of the individual.
- Both learner and coach is likely to be busy, but there are coping strategies that can help.

Happy coaching!