Enhancing Learning through Coaching: Cadet Company Coaching & Development

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Abstract

Coaching is a form of learning in which two people enter a one on one process between a coach and their subject or a coachee. In this experience, the coachee is responsible for their learning while coach offers questions, feedback, ideas, and other points of view to help deepen the learning already being conducted by the coachee. The C1 Coaching Program has been conducted for three semesters and continues to train third class cadets or “yearlings” on how to be better team leaders. Their coaches – first class cadets or “firsties” - take time to help the yearlings understand the learning they are going through as team leaders. This paper reviews some literature with regards to coaching, organizational learning, and action learning, while describing a cadet driven, Army officer run program and why it is important.

Introduction

When hearing about coaching on ESPN, we are usually referring to comments made from the previous night’s big game from one of the coaches. Coaching in sense that “one who instructs or trains” (Merriam-Webster, 2017), gets boiled down to a manager of men or women responsible for the overall performance of the team in most professional or college coaching. The US Army, in their Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) for Army Leadership explains coaching differently: “…relies primarily on teaching and guiding to bring out and enhance the capabilities already present”. It goes on to state “Coaching refers to the function of helping someone through a set of tasks or with general qualities” (ADRP 6-22, 2012). I have spent the past three semesters building up a coaching program and tried to impart a need for something specific to help develop team leader learning, a transformational position in the United States Corps of Cadets. While not 100% successful for various reasons, coaching is a tool recognized by the Army and many businesses and corporations to develop others. Learning how to coach and how to be coached helps both the soon to be second lieutenant and the team leader respectively. Coaching does not only deal in advice or "how I did it" but understanding how to be a guide and sounding board through learning. Every cadet should be afforded the opportunity to be coached
through their experiences in order to make the most meaning possible for their advancement as an Army Officer and Leader and to coach others in preparation to be a commissioned officer in the United States Army.

C1 Coaching Program: Part 1

Coaching is important; but how we are currently conducting provides context to why should be coaching and maybe doing more of it. The C1 Coaching Program Design began as part of the E-Portfolio Project conducted by the West Point Leader Development System (WPLDS) Integration Committee. After one semester, Company C1 continued the program during AY17. The initial setup was simple, allowing for First Class Cadets to be coached by outside personnel (coaches, officers, other members of the community) and also coach cadets in the Third Class. After the first semester in this format, coaching opportunities outside the company were not beneficial enough to continue without buy-in and oversight from the TAC Team. During the second and third semester, first class cadets were paired up with third class cadets (team leaders) on a 1:1 basis and were expected to meet six different times between October 2016 and March 2017. During the meetings, the coaches (Firsties) were to coach the Yearlings on how to be a better team leader by listening to their experiences and give feedback/ask questions in order to deepen their experiential learning. The C1 Coaching Program will continue into Academic Year 2018, continuing to develop based on feedback from the cadets and other programs at USMA (Cadet Character Development Program). My own personal coaching experiences are coaching a few youth sports teams, taking a three credit coaching course at Columbia University, and coaching two cadets as part of a coaching practicum through Columbia University. While this is a small amount of experience, I believe have had many informal coaching opportunities with cadets, soldiers, and peers during my time in the Army.

Why Coaching?

The International Coach Federation refers to one of their four core coach competencies as “facilitating learning and results” (Fazel, 2013). We spend time here at USMA in a never-ending learning experience without much time devoted to the deepening of learning when talking about the experiences we face at times. As a PL300 instructor, I see cadets reach out to mentors to determine the feedback from their crucibles and their understanding of how they are doing as a leader during most cadets third year at USMA. While the interaction between cadet and mentor is varying, coaching responsibility has been placed on the TAC Team when there are more resources available to leverage. If utilized correctly, coaching can become a powerful tool.

Coaching as a learning tool is already used in various ways that allow understanding how experiences can have a deeper meaning and learning impact. For
teachers, it is used, for example, to continue professional development and to begin initial training for teachers who are just starting on the job (Wang, 2012). This is similar to the initial understanding of cadets when they go through their initial training as leaders in Cadet Field Training and then continuing to grow during the academic year as team leaders within the cadet company. Coaching also mostly rooted, as mentioned in the opening paragraph, in sports coaching along the lines of teamwork and reaching a goal (Fazel, 2013).

We must rely on a coaching strategy in order to make the cadets want to talk about their experience and gain feedback to increase their learning. “In coaching, the coachees’ stories matter: stories should be told and re-told so that they become less of a defensive shell behind which a coachee can hide and more of a way of revealing an understanding of oneself…” (Eastman, 2016). Christine Eastman worked with students to help improve a coaching model that was not connecting with her group of subjects. This is similar to my aims of the coaching program because there was too much free or unscheduled time that was being underutilized. As educators and leader developers, we must dissect what is working in our craft and change something when it does not work. In an effort to strengthen a program for cadets, rather than use literature, I took advantage of those that have been through their experience recently before: older cadets from the same company. This caused for a better ability to tell their story with someone who understands their journey.

Coaching is an individual event of learning in which a one on one relationship can occur. Because of this, different learning styles can be accommodated for. Since the coachee is the one that must own the process, it is his or her learning style that must be tailored to (Haan, 2005). It is an individual learning strategy that is used in facing learning environments and materials (Yee, 2015). Because of this, we need to take into account that each coachee will have a different experience, not because of the coach, but for the coachee’s individual talent. Yee conducted a qualitative study about technical students and their relationship between high order technical skills (HOTS) and Kolb Learning styles. The students are high level technical students being trained on how to think rather than memorizing facts that might not serve them in any situation post-graduation. The predominant style was “Doer”, similar to Active Experimentation, found as the Accommodating or Converging learning styles described in Haan’s book. Most cadets seem to have the same learning style at times because they would rather do than watch others or read about it first. We help shape this mindset by continually assigning cadets roles and help them grow through experience (active learning, described later in this paper). The individual coach should research and understand which type of learning style so the coaching can be tailored to the individual coachee.

Finally, the article that spurred this thought after one semester of this coaching program was from The Center of Creative Leadership. In the article it states “Specifically, we’ve seen that successful integrated coaching systems typically have
several elements in common that span the full coaching spectrum. They include executive coaching, mentoring, peer coaching, HR coaching, manager as coach initiatives, digital goal tracking and reminder systems, and team and group coaching.” (Riddle, Hoole, & Guillette, 2015) We do most of these things at the Academy; as part of the West Point Leader Development System (WPLDS) and more specifically the leadership experiences created for cadets. I think to continue to build a successful “integrated coaching system” we need to have a company coaching program to help enhance the learning found in those experiences.

Action Learning Variant

The most fascinating learning experiences I have had as an Army Officer and as an Adult have been in an Action Learning setting. Most Army Organizations go through their version of Action Learning at The National Training Center at Ft. Irwin, California. According to the book “Optimizing the Power of Action Learning”, there are six parts to action learning: a problem, a group, questioning/listening, action on the problem, commitment to learning, and a coach (Marquardt, 2004). To identify each of these in the Army context, I would align the problem to organizational effectiveness and their mission statement. A Group would be the Army Battalion or Brigade and questioning/listening would be the interaction from the Observer Coach/Trainers (OCTs) at The National Training Center (NTC). The action on the problem takes place during the unit’s rotation at the NTC and the commitment to learn is aligned with the profession of the military (espoused for all units). Finally the coach is the OCT, a trained veteran who has been in the position those going through the rotation are currently working in. I have been through two rotations at the NTC and I believe I have evolved as an Officer each time.

Action Learning can occur here at USMA as well, and it does, whether planned or not. Maybe not exactly the way Marquardt lays it out in his book, but it does align to somewhat to the Leader Development Model as part of WPLDS. USMA and Army Organizations undergo a mix between multiple-problem program (members of the group bring their own problems to the group and they solve them together) and single problem or in-company program (entire group focuses on a single problem). Each part of an Army Organization must complete the overall problem of making the organization work better, but they have smaller problem they each need to figure out for each other.

While Marquardt states that some organizations do not utilize all components of what he lays out for Action learning, they do not have the same efficiency level as they would with all the components (Marquardt, 2004). I believe this is the case at USMA at times, we do not have the appropriate amount of “OCTs” or coaches to enhance learning for cadets. Aside from the coaching arrangements from Division 1 and Competitive Club teams, the only formal learning partnership at USMA is mentoring in PL300, Military Leadership Course in BS&L (I teach one section of this). There are
times where counseling occurs by superiors and subordinates, more of a paper drill at times if you speak to the cadets. Coaching can bridge the gap to meet the requirements Marquardt describes as a functioning action learning group, but it would have to be done with cadets.

Cadets would be required to control a few different skills if they will be assigned as coaches. Coaches must model listening and questioning skills in order for the partnership to work (Marquardt, 2004). They must also be able to give feedback and advice, but not to take certain actions or tell the coachee what to do. Coaches should be asking questions than to tell the younger cadets how they did it. In the initial meeting at the beginning of the second semester, cadets were given the same guidelines of what skills it takes to be a coach. This took a few iterations and some feedback from me to get the cadets to focus on the skills to be a team leader rather than personal growth for the individual yearling cadet. In the end, it will be a lesson learned to present before the next round of coaching partnerships.

Action learning can have a place in the cadet company, it is more often than not used already to a lesser extent as part of the Cadet Character Development Program. I think it is important to continue to highlight action learning as a way for a coach to be involved, but it will not be effective ever without more top support for implementation to occur within the company. Currently, I use open Commandant’s Hours to allow for the coaching relationship to take place, but they were more limited during the third semester and it was tough to get free time from a Firstie. More instruction is necessary and more preparation on how to be a coach would be necessary if action learning became a stronger part for how to achieve WPLDS outcomes and other experiential learning opportunities.

Creating (Making) Opportunities

While the cadet company does not have a Learning and Development section or an Human Resources Team Member that can sit in, I created a position for two cadets (one each academic semester) to manage the program. One was a December Graduate who had fulfilled all his requirements, waiting to graduate and another who was complete with being the cadet company commander. Both were responsible enough to make sure it was happening. Tracking coaching, as an article reviewed pointed out, is not very easy to do. It stated over 55% of organizations they researched do not know the status of each of their coaching relationships. They used various tools and deadlines to ensure tracking (Yates, 2015). This seemed low to me, but over time, I saw interest losing within the company. My First Class cadets can see the finish line with graduation and commissioning as Second Lieutenants, whereas the yearling cadets lost interest based on their coach’s input and interest. After the first three sessions, all but two were turned in on time out of three sessions by 30 or so coaching pairs. After six sessions, many were late to turn in and one deadline was pushed back.
altogether.

Another factor tracked by the same article was the quality of coaching within the organizations. My range of First Class cadets were from completely bought into the program to can’t believe I was making them do this. While they were forced to complete six sessions in each coaching pair, I believe there was some struggle between three major factors: willingness to participate, desire to be coached (and learn from coaching), and chain of command oversight (grades). While the first factor affects the quality of learning (lack of preparation and competing demands), the other two factors were attempted to be mitigated through understanding why this was important.

In the article from Yates, the term “chemistry meets” between coachee and coach were included by only five of the organizations surveyed in order to make sure they were the right fit. Only ten percent of the organizations even monitored quality in coaching (Yates, 2015). The C1 Coaching Program allows to pick a coach and coachee relationship (from within the company) in order to hopefully strengthen the interest in the coach. While the cadet in charge of the program monitored quality, I also read all entries from the first two coaching sessions and gave specific feedback to coaches and coachees on how they were recording their sessions. Quality lacked in some partnerships, but I felt there were many opportunities that could be considered successes (if we have a strong success measurement).

Measurement and determining how to use this gained experience proved to be difficult in the third semester of this program. When we continue this program in the fall, I will include the cadet chain of command (like the article has with managers and coaches interacting) to build on the learning and to give feedback to the coaches. We will also continue to talk to the yearlings at the end of the program each year to see how they liked it and what we can do to improve. Improvements we made based on feedback after the first semester were: allowing for pick of coach, given more time between reports, open ended topics, better structure for feedback.

Overall, I think this is a strong opportunity heavily influenced by the TAC Team (me). I think I have created an opportunity by making the cadets do it, and it will be beneficial after they are out of the current role they both play.

The Chain of Command’s Job

More often than not, my Firsties that did not want to partake in this situation remarked “this is the chain of command’s job, where is their squad leader at?” I got sick of this very quickly as I explained to them the difference between a squad leader and a coach in the initial meeting and every other time the issue was raised. This line continues to be blurry with young adults who are often deciding a task in front of them should be done by someone else. I defined for all cadets the following: the squad leader is the evaluator of all team leaders and the coach is a teammate for all team leaders. Described by Lenhardt, coaching is “help, guidance, and a co-construction”
(Lenhardt, 2004) Squad leaders can give help and guidance, but their sole responsibility is to evaluate the preparedness of each member in their squad for the next higher level of responsibility. Coaches were responsible to listen and question the actions of the team leaders in order to gain better meaning from being a team leader. One of the rules for the coaches was that you could not be coached by your own platoon leader. We did not want to have a coach with a stake in their coachee with regards to their evaluation (military development grade). This could change how the team leader would possible do exactly what their platoon leader told them to do (Lenhardt, 2004).

While the current company coaching program does not call for it, there should be some more interaction between the coaches and the squad leaders. A standard cadet company is made up of a top 3 (Commander, Executive Officer, and First Sergeant) and four platoons (three “normal” platoons and a headquarters platoon, filled with firstie and cow cadets). They have a mix of a pyramid company with a taylorian culture and a company organized as a matrix. The roles in both types of setups can get confusing and will lead to great confusion (Lenhardt, 2004). I eliminate the network company from this discussion because there is a much reduced “interpersonal relationships” weighing in on the confusion due to USMA’s unofficial motto “cooperate to graduate”. With the other two types of culture pulling on each other, the squad leader and coach need to be on the same page in order to facilitate learning for both the coach and the coachee.

The feedback (in a follow-on section described) was placed on the yearling, the coachee. They provided the proof that the coaching session occurred. This feedback resided with me through the coaching process, but should have been redirected back to the chain of command to understand the coaching process for their subordinates. This would also be a good time to understand for the squad leader why it was important for coaching to take place and tell the coach other things to consider when meeting with his or her client in terms of environment or big pictures items the team leader may not be able to either understand or have the context for to be a good team leader.

The role of the Chain of Command was support the coaching program and to give buy-in for the integrated coaching system and evaluate the successfulness of the program (Riddle, Hoole, & Guillette, 2015). I think over time, with feedback from the coaches and the chain of command, the program will become stronger.

**Contracting (Directing) for Change (and Feedback)**

When I first demonstrated and modeled the coaching partnership with the first cadet in charge of the program, there were a few laughs around the room. We spoke about what was off-limits and the reasons we were both entering this partnership and contract. Most cadets were probably thinking part of the contract is that our TAC is making us sit here for at least 30 minutes before we are allowed to leave.

When discussed further, I explained to the cadets the need for a contract or conditions necessary for their partnership. This pertains to either the content to make
sure it is what both of you want to talk about and the process in which how to act as the coach (Lenhardt, 2004). Another way to enter into the coaching relationship is to discuss what is needed from each other, expectations and assumptions, and the first impressions of what/how this will work (Haan, 2005). Being open and honest with these topics can allow for some discomfort at the beginning but will set the pair up for success later on. In the book Coaching with Colleagues, there are five different types of a coaching relationships that can come from a coaching pair. The one most similar to the cadet coaching program was the guild master/freeman relationship; “the coachee presents practical issues and the coach immerses him or herself in those issues and says something meaningful about them” (Haan, 2005). While the level of immersion was different from every coaching pair in the program, all understood why contracting was important, since feedback was going to be involved.

After the end of each session, each yearling owed a one page feedback form from the session. I asked for them to input at the beginning of each page any contracting rules they had made for their pair. During the first three sessions, I focused on this because I wanted them to create a relationship built on trust and want to share the story with each other; much like Eastman was hoping for through her program (Eastman 2016). In the latter three sessions, I tried to have the cadets imitate the coaching guidelines given by ADRP 6-22: Focus Goals, Clarify the Leader’s Self-Awareness, Uncover Potential, Eliminate Developmental Barriers, Action Plans and Commitment, and Follow-up. (ADRP 6-22, 2012). This allowed for more focus on what they were doing and learning rather than just talking about the problems without solutions. This was the only feedback monitoring and quality assurance I could conduct, trying to stay within the same standards from the study mentioned previously (Yates, 2015). From another resource, I found the coaching we were doing had a name already: directive coaching.

Directive Coaching is “the coach keeps a grip on the conversations and puts the coachee on a leash, so to speak, providing encouragement and helping him or her resolve their issues” (Haan, 2005). Two methods (GROW and solution-focused) are provided to show how while the coaching may be directive, it allows for facilitation instead of compliance for the coaching art. The GROW method more closely aligns with the Army guidelines, but maybe in simpler terms: Goal, Reality, Options, Will. Both approaches (GROW and the Army guidelines) can be successful in this environment.

Ensuring contracting and guidelines were followed were tough with not much preparation or understanding on how to conduct the coaching relationship. I relied on one coaching class I gave both groups and feedback given to everyone based on the first few feedback forms received. Using the Army Guidelines and GROW will bring about change with more practice and understanding for why coaching brings about meaningful learning.
Learning for the Coach

This program is directed at the yearling cadet who is just beginning to be a cadet noncommissioned officer but there is a second supporting mission as well. First class cadets are about to be second lieutenants in the US Army. They need to be able to practice coaching. When given the opportunity, a second lieutenant will need to be able to train their subordinates and help them get to the next level in their career. Just as TACs, Faculty, other members of the West Point community develop the next generation of Army Officers, we also must teach the next generation to develop others as well. I told the cadets that to get coaching repetitions here at USMA will only give them more experience when they actually need to conduct coaching as part of development for others. Coaching will help set up a positive climate and a learning environment for their new platoon, company and even battalion (ADRP 6-22, 2012).

Coaching Programs in the Regular Army

The last two sections apply to where I want to see this coaching program lead to within the regular Army (outside of USMA) and the how I assess the results and what the next step will be.

I think the guidelines used by the Army are good, but how often are they used? I reached out to the NTC to ask what their OCT training program looked like. It sounded like they had an indoctrination program to get everyone on the same page, but then they were left to their own experiences to train other units. I would like to see a program at the battalion level which takes brand new non-commissioned officers and assign a coach for them at the Sergeant First Class level or higher. During the first year of being a non-commissioned officer, referred to as “buck sergeant” or a sergeant of the lowest rank in the Army, they experience legitimate power held over another individual for the first time. I have personally seen this power go straight to their head or be mismanaged, which could hurt or disrupt the development of younger soldiers.

I would design an integrated coaching system, much like the C1 Coaching Program, but with some changes that are necessary at the Company Level. I would have an initial meeting with the Command Sergeant Major, the coach, and the coachee to describe the program and how the terms would work for the individual. Most “buck sergeants” would be about 20 or 21, rough a year older with more military experience than the cadets currently being coached. The young sergeant would be coached by a NCO they look up to that is not in their own company and would reflect on their interactions between the coachee and his subordinates. Time would be set aside once every two weeks for an hour or so to discuss what has occurred and goals to set for the next step. A coach would have to sign off on their development as ready to come off of the program, minimum of six months. The coach would give feedback to the Command Sergeant Major who would filter ideas and themes back to all First Sergeants.

While this is a general outline with need for more details, I believe this could both
benefit the non-commissioned officer corps as well as strengthen an active learning competency that is missing from our young soldiers. This program probably occurs informally by great senior noncommissioned officers for those they believe high potential, but for real learning and opportunity for all; this would need to have the support of the battalion or brigade leadership.

Results & Conclusion

Every cadet should be afforded the opportunity to be coached through their experiences in order to make the most meaning possible for their advancement as an Army Officer. This project has been completely unofficial and company driven for the last two semesters. I really believe in coaching and reflecting on it and talking about the program in the Master Teacher Program small groups has given me ideas to strengthen the learning that goes on outside the classroom. While I believe every cadet needs a coach, I do not think we could ever get to a point where a cadet would be coached at all times. We do not have enough time or resources (people) to complete such an activity.

The results of the program will not be realized until they find themselves in a situation where it is time to coach someone else in order to understand their learning. I hope that cadets see this coaching program as an opportunity and not a waste of time. In the end, the coachee needs to take advantage for this opportunity and the coach needs to care to give back some of the lessons they have already learned. Coaching will continue, informally or formally; but to deepen learning and have understanding of our experiences, we must take time to talk and reflect on those experiences that can affect us if we let them.
References

Army Doctrine Reference Publication No. 6-22, Army Leadership (2012). Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington D.C.


