Coaching in the Library

A professional coach can help leaders and staff up their game in dealing with an ever-changing environment and shrinking resources

By Ruth Metz

The greatest challenge to library organizations is to continuously adapt in an ever-changing, ever-more-complex environment. Library leaders need to direct the continuous redevelopment of libraries. The ability to tackle this and other institutional challenges effectively is fundamental to the success of leaders and the survival of libraries. One way to achieve this is through the use of coaching.

Coaching is the purposeful and skillful effort by one individual to help another achieve specific performance goals. Whether the coach is working with an individual or a group (the "player"), she facilitates the player's attainment of the player's goals. The success of this effort depends on the cooperation of both parties. The player is willing to be challenged, supported, and influenced by the coach; the coach enables this willingness throughout the stages of coaching.

People in today's workforce at every level constantly have to work on the interface of their knowledge, skills, and experience in a changing and somewhat unpredictable environment. Coaching is not just something that engages people's efficiency; it increases individual and organization effectiveness through changing times. Coaching has a multiplier effect. It enhances the library's assets. The more able the individual is to apply his skills dynamically to an ever-changing environment, the more valuable he is to the organization.

Picture the new director of a library whose operating costs are rising at a higher rate than its revenues. The deficit is largely structural and will continue to grow, driven by fixed obligations inherent in how the library system is structured. It is costing more to operate the library each year than the library is receiving in revenues, but for years the library's operating reserves have offset the deficit. Now it looks as if the new director will be forced to reduce hours and staffing as the revenue-to-expense situation worsens.

The new director believes that part of the solution lies in developing new service models that can deliver needed services at less cost. However, many obstacles exist to creating these new service models: Some staff is resistant to change. Managers and supervisors are overly concerned with appeasing staff and have lost sight of community needs. The senior managers have never developed team leadership. Some managers will be retiring soon, but there is no apparent "bench" of aspiring leaders to follow them. Staff and the community have been unaware that operating costs are outstripping revenues.

Coaching for this organization would begin with the director, followed by sessions with the director and executive team together. It would include an organizational assessment and strategy for developing the organization according to its needs: the need to develop new service models; to resolve the structural budget deficit; to engage staff; to develop succession leaders; and to help staff through change transitions, including their own career and work-life balance transitions.

This library would benefit from multidimensional coaching to:

■ Support the library director in clarifying and prioritizing executive direction

■ Build executive, management, and team leadership capacity

■ Facilitate the process of service modeling and sustainable budget development

■ Develop new leaders and a leadership bench

■ Develop coaching behaviors in the library director, managers, and supervisors

■ Sustain effective individual and group performance

Whether the coaching is for individuals or groups, it has the overarching purpose to improve organizational effectiveness. Just as libraries have a strategic plan of service,

they need to take a strategic approach to organizational development. Coaching strategically helps organizations respond to the reality of their situation. It is a process that requires time and multiple interactions.

But coaching isn't only for library leaders; it is for everyone. The work of libraries today calls for a much more diverse array of knowledge, skills, and abilities than ever before. The expectation is for more flexibility. People who work in libraries must constantly learn and adapt to new technologies and working in collaboration with others. They are constantly being called on to do what they were not expected to do before.

At the same time that technology is changing the work of libraries, other factors are impacting the volatility of the workplace. Individuals are facing challenging work-life decisions. Many who planned to leave the workforce are staying because of the economic downturn. The care of children, the elderly, and the disabled are straining workers' capacity to work full-time and to make ends meet.

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The 2009 International Coach Federation (IFC) Global Client Coaching Study reports that 36% of coaching clients put work-life balance as one of the top three motivators for seeking coaching. Meanwhile, some who were recruited into the profession with the promise there would be jobs as the boomer generation retired are leaving by the side exits for other careers. Considering these conditions, the need for coaching in libraries is ever-present and increasing.

Libraries must become purposeful about the application of coaching on a broad scale.

Libraries are not alone in facing these challenges. The coaching industry is one of the fastest growing in the world. The ICF, with over 16,000 members in over 90 countries, has seen a 645% increase in membership since 1999. Coaching has become more accessible to more people. Where once coaching was for the business elite, its benefits are now well known and dispersed across industries and throughout organizations, penetrating into all levels of the workplace.

There is a growing expectation in both the private and public sectors for organizational leaders themselves to be leader-coaches and to integrate coaching into their organizations. Many organizations have adopted the ability to coach as a core competency for their chief executives.

The application of coaching has become more strategic, with organizations integrating coaching with other learning experiences, developmental processes, and internal human resource processes. There is growing organizational demand for leadership-development systems that prepare tomorrow's leaders. The changing workforce is apt to challenge long-standing norms that affect how emergent leaders develop as leaders. Coaching can play a significant role in bridging the way.

According to the Center for Creative Leadership's *CCL Handbook of Coaching* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), many organizations are moving from individual leadership development to collective leadership development. It isn't only the leader but the leadership team, the management team, and the cross-functional team that need leadership development. These organizations are integrating coaching with other learning practices and building their internal coaching capacity. This takes the form of classroom instruction and skills practice, shadow coaching, ongoing workshops, and individual coaching that helps the coach improve her coaching. They are integrating internal and external coaching, accessing the variety of specializations and expertise, and building a cadre of coaches that they can easily access.

In effect, organizations are creating a new norm in organizational learning and in the process developing a culture of coaching. The evolution of coaching in organizations is toward greater normalcy and transparency. Organizations are building cultures of coaching through dialog about coaching, building a shared vocabulary and knowledge where concepts, approaches, and ideas can be discussed and resources shared. The practice of coaching has a cascading effect throughout organizations, increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of both individuals and teams.

More than problem-solving

It is time for library leaders to think about coaching as more than a tool for developing themselves, improving substandard performance in others, or building a leadership bench. We have to get away from the idea that all coaching is problem-solving and that you call in a coach when a problem needs to be corrected.

Libraries must become purposeful about the application of coaching on a broad scale. Leaders can authorize and influence the development of a coaching system in their organizations that supports the learning and development of individuals and the organization as a whole. A coaching system can in turn be integrated into ongoing systems such as learning, performance management, and leadership development. Integrating coaching wisely into the organization begins with intentionality and an understanding of organizational need.

In the midst of the current severe economic downturn when budgets are strained, leaders may dismiss the notion of integrating coaching into their organizations as unaffordable, impractical, or both. However, the economic downturn is all the more reason to do so. Typically, library organizations are spending 65% or more of their budget on personnel, and coaching leverages human capital. Strategic coaching that focuses on a plan for organizational development strengthens the capacity of the entire organization. It has a multiplier effect, enhancing the library's assets. The more able the individual is to dynamically apply his skills to an ever-changing environment, the more valuable he is to the organization Coaching has many dimensions and purposes. A thoughtful defining of your coaching needs is the first step in selecting the right coach. If you have built coaching muscle within your organization, you can look internally first. Your human resources department might be able to provide coaching or a referral. Some libraries have established a cadre of coaches—internal, external, or both—that they call into service as needed.

Otherwise, sleuthing by way of colleagues may be the best way to begin to look for a coach. This may seem a parochial approach; however, the coaching profession is

going through a kind of crisis of accountability stemming from a lack of rigor in coaching standards. Until this improves, the search for a coach is best begun by talking with trusted people in your network of associates, which includes peers in other libraries, library association committees, and consortia, as well as community, business, governmental, and educational peers. You may also have established relationships with management consultants who could be a source of referral.

The coach has to be a person that the individual or the group can trust by demonstrating he is credible in an interpersonal way. A good coach should not take the position that he has all the answers and that the client is only there to listen to him, or that you've done everything wrong and now he'll tell you how to do it right. Instead, he comes in with an attitude that is respectful and recognizes that coaching is a balanced relationship. The coach's advice needs to be exactly tied to the real situation as the person or group sees it. The coach has to respect the breadth of knowledge and understanding of those inside the organization. A good coach takes time to assess the situation.

Interview any prospective coaches with an eye toward learning about them, their credentials and experience, and their fees. Fees vary widely depending upon credentials and locale, from $60/hour to $400/hour.

In interviewing prospective coaches, be as interested in their listening and interpersonal skills and questions as you are in their credentials and fees. A good prospect is someone who restates your need in a way that captures the essence of the issue. The interview should help you understand your need better than when you started; if it doesn't do that for you, keep looking.

Coaching actively and willingly supports people in libraries as they continuously learn. It is, after all, our consistency of interaction in the face of constant change that leads to stability, predictability, and a more durable workplace. This durability gives people a firm place to stand, even amidst constant change. It is the ultimate place from which to be consistently effective as an organization and community institution. ∎

RUTH METZ (www.librarycoach.com) is a library consultant, workplace coach, and author. The second edition of her Coaching In the Library: A Management Strategy for Achieving Excellence will be published this summer by ALA Editions. The revised edition will include "best resources" on coaching, finding coaches, coaching special populations, the leader coach, and coaching workshops and classes.