

Can Federal Agencies Afford *not* to Coach High Potential Performers?

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Abstract:

Federal executives and rising leaders are continually tested under difficult and changing conditions. They face budget uncertainty, hiring freezes, reorganizations, potential government shutdowns, and other challenging situations. When faced with resource constraints, the temptation is to cut investments in important developmental processes. Yet critical times like these increase the need for coaching to help facilitate successful outcomes. Focusing on the professional growth of federal employees, this white paper describes this enhanced need for coaching, distinguishes coaching from other developmental processes, suggests who are the ideal coaching candidates, summarizes the key benefits and common obstacles of coaching, and provides examples of coaching scenarios and successful strategies.

The Need for Coaching in the Federal Government

Federal employees face budget cuts, agency reorganizations, and often overwhelming workloads. In this uncertain environment, there is a natural tendency to pause growth and success-building opportunities, in particular coaching opportunities for staff.

"In an era where we're dealing with budget constraints and lots of new and sometimes overwhelming mission requirements, it's often times difficult to focus on things that really can help our organizations grow more successfully," explains Steve Shih, Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Deputy Associate Director. "We're constantly fighting fires. Sometimes it's difficult to step back and figure out a different way to fight fires." Shih feels that expanded use of coaching is important in times like these. "Our ultimate goal is a coaching culture across the government, empowering leaders at all levels to practice the types of skills and approaches we believe are vital to learning and success," he said. "These would be: self-reflection,

creativity and problem solving, accountability, and candid and respectful communication" [1].

The opportunity for organizational improvement and staff development is evident by trends documented in a series of surveys of federal workforce effectiveness. To assess the government's

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– International Coach Federal (ICF)

organizational health and work culture, the government conducts annual assessments. The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) conducted by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) "provides government employees with the opportunity to candidly share their perceptions of their work experiences, their agencies, and their leaders." Conducted since

2004, this survey is widely perceived as a useful barometer of federal government workplace culture. In 2016, more than 400,000 federal employees across 80 federal agencies responded to the survey. The survey contained more than 80 items to measure the perception of federal employees about "how effectively agencies manage their workforce" [2].

Examining the 2016 report's trend analysis over the last five survey years (2012-2016) reveals areas for improvement across all federal agencies. Several areas addressed in the survey often arise during coaching sessions and can be addressed using coaching, including the following:

- Over the last five years, a range of 56-59 percent of respondents felt that their **workload** is reasonable.
- Over the last five years, a range of 44-48 percent of respondents indicated that they have sufficient **resources** (e.g., people, materials, budget) to get their job done.
- Over the last five years, a range of only 35-38 percent of respondents indicated that creativity and **innovation** are rewarded at their agency [2].

According to the 2016 survey report, employee “training and development opportunities are a key component for the engagement and satisfaction of employees” and available actions include ensuring “employees have access to a mentor or coach” [2].

Distinguishing Coaching from Other Developmental Processes

Coaching means different things to different people. This paper adopts the definition of the International Coach Federation (ICF): “Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” [3]. Executive coaches use an appreciative or discovery-based approach by asking the right questions so the client can form their own answers.

Although coaching is becoming increasingly prominent in the federal government, some uncertainty remains about what coaching truly entails. The terms coaching, mentoring, facilitating, and other workplace developmental strategies are often used interchangeably because of the similarities between some of these processes. Table 1 provides definitions

of various developmental strategies. Each strategy has its purpose and applicable uses, and offers paths to personal and professional growth. Regardless of the development process, a confidential, supportive, and collaborative environment helps develop trust and enable the individual to expand their potential.

Leading and *following* is a dance. If only one partner learns the dance steps, they are likely to step on each other's toes.

Who Works with a Coach?

Bright motivated leaders, and “followers” who are eager to succeed, work with coaches. Coaches typically partner with government executives to identify, develop, and leverage the leader’s distinct strengths to achieve future focused, self-defined outcomes. However, leadership coaching is only one part of the equation. Coaching is also beneficial and widely used with

Table 1. Summaries of Various Workplace Developmental Strategies

<i>Mentoring</i>	Mentors employ a training-based and learning approach to transfer specialized knowledge from a more experienced person to a less experienced individual. Government agencies use formal and ad hoc mentoring.
<i>Consulting</i>	Consultants are subject matter experts or advisors, often from the private sector, that provide solutions to specific business or technical challenges. Consultants typically use an analytical approach to define requirements, formulate strategies, and plan and execute actions to achieve the desired result.
<i>Facilitating</i>	Facilitators provide a structured environment. They use structured meeting processes, tools, and techniques to guide groups and teams in problem solving or solution development typically in a meeting or workshop setting. A facilitator uses a “guiding” approach to keep meeting participants focused on the desired meeting outcome.
<i>Coaching</i>	Coaches typically partner with government executives and individuals with high potential for advancement to identify, develop, and leverage the leader’s distinct strengths to achieve future focused, self-defined outcomes. Executive coaches use an appreciative or discovery-based approach by asking the right questions so the client can determine their own best answers.

non-supervisory or other federal employees with high potential for advancement. According to leadership scholar Warren Bennis: "In many ways, great followership is harder than leadership...But great followership has never been more important, if only because of the seriousness of the global problems we face and the fact that they must be solved collaboratively, not by leaders alone ..." [4].

Leading and following is a dance. If only one partner learns the dance steps, they are likely to step on each other's toes. This is why coaching of high potential employees is equally important. Talented, motivated federal employees at all levels benefit from a qualified, well vetted coach, especially during times of change or transition.

Conversely, coaching is not the right developmental approach for addressing poor performance, crisis control, or to provide employee evaluations or job performance feedback. Training, mentoring, counseling, or other human resource (HR) recommended methods of personnel development are more appropriate in these situations. When in doubt, an HR professional should be consulted.

Key Benefits and Value of Coaching in the Federal Government

As part of the coaching startup process, the employee/client identifies results and outcomes they would like to achieve. While the coach serves as a catalyst in helping the client define their desired outcomes, it is the responsibility of the client to achieve their self-defined goals and objectives. Figure 1 illustrates a sampling of typical coaching benefits and desired outcomes.

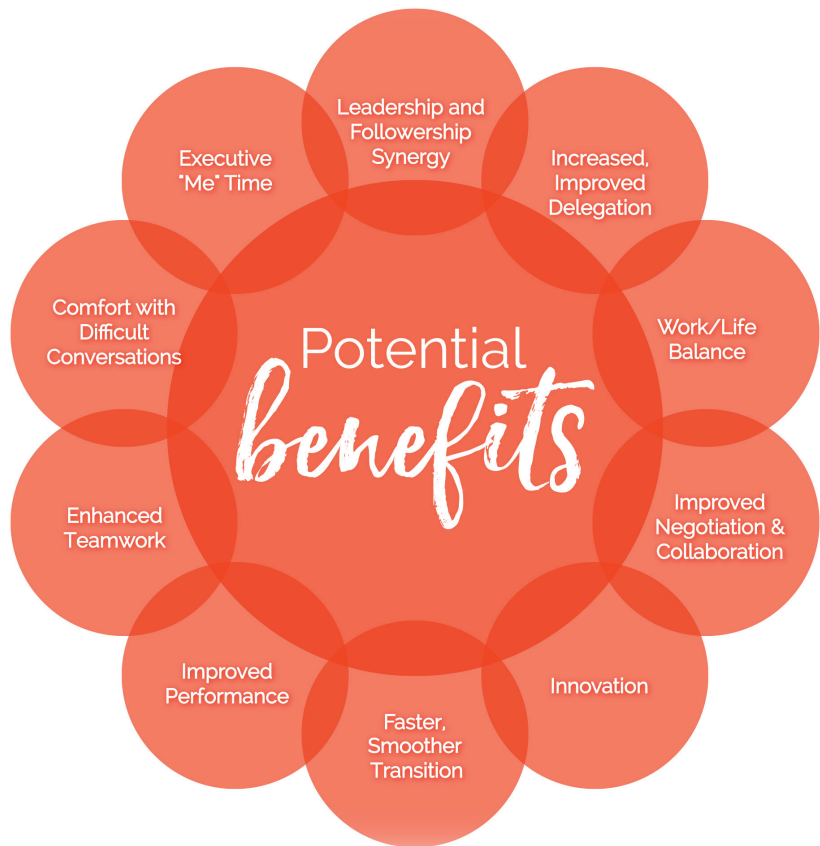


Figure 1. Sample Benefits of Coaching

Actual coaching results and benefits manifest largely by what the client commits to achieve. As part of the coaching process, a good coach asks the client their definition of value and asks what results or outcomes they wish to achieve. For some clients, desired outcomes could be time allocation optimization, teamwork, improved performance, stronger leadership skills, effective delegation, negotiation and collaboration, smoother transitions, and other goals. Some leaders elect to formally measure and report return on investment (ROI) to demonstrate and quantify improvements realized as a result of the coaching engagement.

Coaching also helps clients break through barriers and limitations resulting from isolation. Working in isolation blocks external influence

and insight. Coaches can help clients infuse the work culture with innovative thinking, lessons learned from the successes of others, fresh ideas, and a positive mental attitude.

Perceived Obstacles to Coaching in Government

Common obstacles and constraints to implementing or expanding coaching in the federal government are a perceived lack of time and money.

- **Time Constraints** – A perceived lack of time to accomplish critical tasks is all the more reason to engage a coach. One of the most common coaching goals in federal government is to free up time. This is often

accomplished via delegation, process redesign, innovation, and other creative ideas generated by the client.

- **Funding Limitations** – Many federal decision makers believe they cannot justify the cost of coaching. The reality is that leaders cannot afford not to integrate coaching into the workplace as a priority initiative. The demands imposed on federal agencies – budgetary constraints, agency reorganizations, uncertainty, and others – call for creative, innovative leaders and rising stars to overcome these challenges. In these and other situations, coaching is needed more than ever to help clients proactively break through barriers by way of innovative strategies, actions, and expanded thinking. Short-term investments can lead to long-term efficiencies and cost savings.

Coaching Scenarios and Strategies

A motivated client with clear coaching goals, a well matched coach, thought-provoking questions, and a commitment to the coaching creates a powerful, nonjudgmental, and safe environment for a client's innovation and productivity to emerge. While each client brings to their coaching session topics of their choosing, it's not surprising that many of the low-scoring areas identified in recent Federal Employee Viewpoint Surveys (FEVS) are often discussed in federal coaching sessions. This section examines three such subject areas and summarizes strategies and results that clients and coaches may discuss to address areas for improvement.

Coaching Topic #1: Innovation

Survey Results and Challenge: The FEVS found that consistently more than 60 percent of respondents do not feel that innovation is rewarded at their agency [2]. Finding time and resources to generate new ideas and processes to improve agency performance, while meeting day-to-day demands, is perceived to be a challenge.

Strategies and Results: Using the topic of innovation as a coaching goal, one strategy is to take a few minutes each day to make a list of possibilities, each starting with the phrase "Wouldn't it be nice if..." This encourages the client to brainstorm ideas that may lead to increased innovation. This exercise can lead to "Eureka!" moments, resulting in new or modified processes or methods that previously were not conceived or seemed out of reach for the client.

Coaching Topic #2: Excessive Workload

Survey Results and Challenge: The FEVS found that more than 40 percent of survey respondents have consistently found their workload unreasonable [2]. Coaches of federal clients have been told that workloads often exceed 60 or 70 hours per week. Some clients have expressed the sentiment that they feel guilty if they do not personally do all work that comes their way.

Strategies and Results: An important first step for clients working to reduce excessive workload is to define their personal concept of "reasonable," and to consider their definition of work/life balance. Within the coaching relationship, clients are invited to consider "When you say 'yes' to work, what are you saying 'no' to in your personal life?" By using

To encourage innovative thinking, some coaches encourage clients to make a list of possibilities, each starting with the phrase: "Wouldn't it be nice if..."

To help clients break the pattern of automatically accepting all tasks they receive, some coaches encourage clients to ask themselves: "Why did this task land in my lap?"

To help clients address resource limitations, some coaches ask clients to ask themselves: "Who and what are my sources of support?"

coaching sessions as time to recharge, a client may be better able to practice self care and function more effectively without getting run down. The coaching sessions can be a time to "disconnect to reconnect" within the coaching relationship. Clients may also choose to examine their exercise, sleep, nutrition, values, family time, and support mechanisms. They can also work on how to "carve out the life they want."

Another client approach is to pause and take a drink from a water bottle as a means to stop and think before responding to a "drive-by" request to take on a task. This gives the client time to think through an appropriate response, rather than immediately and automatically accepting the task.

Another effective yet simple approach is to ask "Why did this task land in my lap?" This question encourages the client to break the pattern of automatically assuming and completing work out of force of habit. In some cases, this can

lead to delegation of the task to another party, who may develop professionally as a result.

Coaching Topic #3: Resource Limitations

Survey Results and Challenge:

The FEVS found that more than 50 percent of respondents have insufficient resources (e.g., people, materials, budget) to get their job done [2]. This means that lack of resources is a consistent reality for more than one-half of the respondents in the survey.

Strategies and Results: A strategy for this challenge is for the client to ask themselves “Who and what are my sources of support?” By accounting for all of their sources of support, a client is likely to identify available resources that were previously overlooked, given the hectic and overwhelming nature of the client’s work situation. When a leader gains a clearer picture of their available resources, they are in a better position to allocate resources more effectively.

Self-accountability can be a powerful force to motivate clients toward their goals.

Two Key Overarching Aspects of Coaching

For each of these strategies, and others, two important aspects of coaching are 1) the simple act of setting aside time to define and actively work on goals, and 2) self-accountability. Regarding the first point, the lion’s share of coaching’s benefit is the commitment – by the agency and the individual client – to schedule time with a coach to define client goals and objectives. Scheduling executive “me” time is a crucial step in and of itself. And the agency commitment to schedule coaching sends a strong signal to federal staff – that their professional growth and commitment to leadership excellence are important.

Regarding the second point, when the client commits to taking action to bring about change, the client knows that these actions will be discussed in the next coaching session. This self-accountability can be a powerful force to motivate clients toward their goals.

Conclusion

While there is no silver bullet for achieving excellence in the federal workplace, coaching employs effective strategies and resources to help clients grow and excel. OPM Director Katherine Archuleta explains “Coaching is one of the most valuable developmental resources we can offer our people, and has been linked to positive outcomes such as increased productivity, retention, and engagement” [5].

Current and high potential leaders excel faster with a coach. Which leaders and high potential employees are vital to your agency’s present and future success?

About the Author

A federal coach since 2004, Anne C. Kelly, PCC, has coached over 100 federal personnel nationwide for many agencies, including the DOT, DOD, VHA, FEMA, NPS, and USDA. A former federal employee herself, Anne provides coaching services to federal employees seeking to improve performance and personal awareness on the job, as well as enhance their work/life balance. Anne is a professional certified coach (PCC) 2005-present; a Master Certified Inspired Learning Facilitator 2008-present; subscribes to the International Coach Federation (ICF) Code of Ethics; and holds four other federal coaching and training certifications. Based in the Washington D.C. metro area, she also now mentors and teaches professional coaches around the globe. Anne wishes to thank Mona Singleton, PMP and Steve Hoffman of [Hoffman Marketing Communications, Inc.](#), for their contributions to this paper.



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