



Leadership

# The Surprising Power of Peer Coaching

by Brenda Steinberg and Michael D. Watkins

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**Given a choice between working one-on-one with** an executive coach or working with a group of peers in a facilitated coaching process, most executives would choose the former. Surely, the thinking goes, it's better to have an experienced coach's focused attention instead of relying on dialogue with your peers to support your development. The coach will get to know you well, understand your development needs, and focus exclusively on you. How could working with a group possibly be better?

This rationale overlooks the substantial benefits of small-group coaching. In the leadership programs we facilitate, our participants often comment

on how much more valuable the group coaching experience was than they expected. The benefits are different from and complementary to those realized in a one-on-one setting.

The benefits of small-group coaching come from powerful learning interactions among leaders who aren't on the same team but are roughly equal in experience and position. By bringing people together who have no formal accountability to or interactions with each other, you can create deep learnings that wouldn't be available otherwise. We've found this happens because the process provides the following benefits.

**Immersion in real-time group dynamics.** In one-on-one coaching, the coach does not see you interact with others. So, the belief that the coach will know you better through individual coaching sessions doesn't hold up in practice; their experience of you is quite limited. If, for example, your goal is to engage more effectively with your team, both the coach and the group will witness and feel the impact of your behaviors in the group setting.

**Insight into diverse perspectives.** If the process is set up well, your group members will have different personalities, experiences, and goals. They'll see the world differently, and you'll benefit from understanding their perspectives and challenges. These differences will allow you to gain deeper insights by comparing yourself to others in your group. Identifying commonalities and differences will help you better understand your strengths and the impact of your blind spots.

**Opportunities to practice new skills in a safe space.** The small group is a vehicle to enhance valuable leadership skills, including listening, being vulnerable, getting comfortable with others' perspectives and emotions, asking insightful questions, giving and getting direct feedback, and helping people find their own solutions. Many of these skills will directly relate to your learning objectives, and you'll become better at coaching, motivating, and developing people.

**A robust accountability system.** Many leaders experience challenges in getting direct and honest feedback at work. As your group develops a foundation of psychological safety, you'll get that feedback. Whether your goal is to be bolder, develop your strategic thinking skills, or emotionally connect with your team, your group members will give you regular input on your progress. Additionally, by openly sharing your goals and action plans and having regular check-ins, other group members will hold you accountable. The social forces operating in coaching groups are likely to have a more powerful impact on you than can be achieved by working with a coach alone.

**An enduring support network.** Finally, with enough time together, most coaching groups develop a foundation of openness and trust. Being a senior leader can leave you feeling isolated; there are often business issues and personal concerns that cannot be shared with your reports and peers. Group members can become a source of both support and valuable insight. These relationships often continue beyond the formal small-group process and don't depend on the coach to be sustained. Additionally, many leaders, having experienced the group's deep bonding, will work to create greater connectedness both at work and in their personal lives.

You won't realize those considerable benefits unless you build some essential foundations early on. The ultimate goal of small-group coaching is to achieve the highest possible levels of individual and group learning. To get there, all members of the group must be committed to the following actions.

**Nurturing a climate of trust and support.** To build such an environment, group members must have a shared commitment to maintain complete confidentiality. A sense of psychological safety allows group members (including you!) to feel comfortable revealing doubts and weaknesses and sharing perspectives with total honesty.

**Having a collaborative attitude.** Group members must take responsibility for helping others improve rather than just pointing out their mistakes or weaknesses. Small-group coaching is not a vehicle for evaluation, nor should it be a forum for competition. Group members should strive to be collaborative, objective, and fair. The goal is to support each other by providing constructive feedback and advice without being cynical or judgmental.

**Listening actively.** Group members should be each other's thinking partners, giving accurate information about others' behavior, asking relevant and probing questions, and sharing their views. In these ways, they demonstrate that they value others' skills and judgment. Be curious about other participants and their experiences.

**Providing direct feedback.** Collaborative and empathetic attitudes should not be a reason to avoid discussing shortcomings. Too much positivity leads to complacency and mediocrity, while too much negativity creates defensiveness and withdrawal. Group members must be open to seeing themselves from others' perspectives.

**Being generous.** In small-group coaching discussions, strong emotions inevitably emerge and need to be discussed. They should be handled through appropriate expressions of understanding and exploration.

**Taking risks.** Group coaching will require you to step outside your comfort zone. To create learning, you'll need to be vulnerable in exploring your challenges and in summoning the courage to question others on sensitive issues and give direct feedback.

The process of small-group coaching can generate leadership development impacts that exceed what's possible in one-on-one coaching. If you follow these guidelines, you'll learn more about yourself and the organization you lead. Moreover, by asking for support from others and creating a safe place

for exploration, you'll build foundational skills for all future personal and organizational growth.

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**Brenda Steinberg** is a leadership consultant for Genesis Advisers with 20 years of experience coaching senior leaders. She regularly coaches in “Transition to Business Leadership” and other programs at the IMD Business School.

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**Michael D. Watkins** is a cofounder of Genesis Advisers, a professor at IMD Business School, and the author of *The First 90 Days* and *Master Your Next Move* (Harvard Business Review Press).