



Impactful Talent Solutions

Developing People And Culture Through Cohort Coaching

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DEVELOPING PEOPLE AND CULTURE THROUGH COHORT COACHING



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With the current scarcity and mobility of talent, companies need proven and repeatable mechanisms for developing the talent needed to “win” in the marketplace. Cohort coaching can be a key element in an organization’s talent strategy as it combines the effectiveness of individualized coaching with the scale, efficiency and sustainability of group learning.

So what is cohort coaching? Simply put, it is an interactive approach to development in which a coach leads a group of four to nine people through targeted learning and application.

Historically, leadership coaching is a one-on-one model in which a leader meets with a coach on their individual development needs. We have repeatedly seen one-on-one coaching transform careers and even change lives. However, it can be difficult to scale a one-on-one coaching solution within an organization.

Cohort coaching provides the individual focus and high impact of coaching while also exponentially increasing the number of people who can receive coaching. In our work with leaders and organizations, we have found that cohort coaching does work, in some ways even better than one-on-one coaching. However, the design and approach matter. The following seven elements are critical to designing and running a successful coaching cohort.

1. Set the expectation and the pace. Cohort coaching goes through a typical life cycle of team familiarity and trust. We have found six-, nine- or 12-month programs to be most effective. The level of commitment is also critical—typically there is one to two hours of cohort time each month and between-session assignments. Participants need to be prepared to dedicate four to six hours a month to their cohort coaching experience.
2. Build momentum through expected outcomes. Having a compelling “why” is key. Cohorts operate best when they begin with the end in mind. Each participant needs to know the path they will take and how the outcomes will be beneficial to their personal development and career progress. Seeing the program blueprint and the role of the group in their learning creates the compelling “why” needed for the program to be successful.

3. Create a confidential and safe environment. The team culture and dynamic need to be supportive. To accomplish this, the coach should establish guidelines, what we often call “Road Rules.” Have the cohort answer the question, How will we create a safe environment for full learning? The agreed-upon behaviors should be documented, posted and referenced as the cohort moves forward.

4. Design for individual and team learning. Leverage the power of the peer in a cohort. When people share insights and make commitments to others, the level of follow-through and sustainability goes up measurably. Building on ideas, sharing observations and social contracting can help facilitate embedded development.

5. Composition facilitates engagement. The diverse perspectives of a cohort are key to the development experience. Bringing new people together facilitates new insights, learning and bridge-building. For example, we consistently see the retention of top talent go up with cohort coaching as they feel connected with a broader group of colleagues and have an appreciation for the investment in their development. In creating a cohort, there are three key guidelines:

- Create a group of level-based peers with no reporting relationships with each other.
- Cross-pollinate with participants from diverse functions, departments and backgrounds.
- Share the rationale with the composition of the group. For example, whether they were formed as a top-talent group or as a team with a common development goal

6. Facilitate application through accountable partnerships. Along with the team connection, individual commitment and application are fostered through partnerships. Pairing people with each other, with the expectation of meeting outside of the cohort at least once a month, facilitates the support and accountability needed to acquire and embed a new skill or behavior. The strength of peer support is seen in the most successful behavioral transformation methodologies, including Alcoholics Anonymous. Using this same peer support is a key element to a successful cohort experience.



7. Maintain an active alumni network. There needs to be a beginning and an end to the formal cohort experience, however, the connections will carry on. Having a formal closing and recognition event builds credibility and commitment. An alumni lunch every three or six months is a reminder of commitments and reinforces the culture created and embraced by each cohort. We know from research that one of the biggest drivers of retention is having a friend at work. Cohorts set in motion the formation of broader connections while normalizing the feedback and development that is core to an agile culture and organization.

In summary, when cohorts are led by a strong coach who embeds these seven elements, we have seen it measurably improve development, promotability, retention and engagement. Cohorts foster deeper connections that create the social fabric of a strong culture.

When cohorts are mobilized across the organization, they can facilitate change while building the capacity needed to execute a strategy in an increasingly dynamic business environment. In this era of hybrid and remote working, cohort coaching can be a uniquely effective vehicle for building a culture of connection, accountability, development and performance.

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