

Peer coaching in a leadership development program: the role of developmental relationships

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the increasing widespread of the peer coaching technique for leadership development in the business settings, there is a remarkable scarcity of theoretical and empirical research on the adoption of this technique and on the measurement of its effects, especially in the higher education. This study describes the implementation of peer coaching in a leadership course delivered in a public Italian University to Master's degree students and presents two scales to measure the effectiveness of and the satisfaction with this technique. The results from the adoption of these scales and the students' reflections on their learning experience provide suggestions on how to encompass developmental relationships within the design of a leadership learning journey in the higher education context.

Keywords: leadership development; peer coaching; experiential learning.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions and, in particular, business schools recently have devoted attention to the design of educational programs aiming at developing students' leadership skills vital for contemporary organisations (Allen et al., 2022). However, to date, most of leadership programmes in higher education still strongly rely on cognitive training, limiting the transferability of the learning into the participants' real-life context (Day et al., 2014). Social cognitive and constructivist learning orientations (Allen et al., 2022) maintain that behavioural change in a learning programme can be effectively attained providing participants opportunities to interact with the environment and derive meaning from their experience. In this regards, developmental relationships are identified as a key component of effective leadership development (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). Specifically, experiential learning advocates the value of consulting with knowledgeable peers (Schön, 1983), as it allows individuals to assist each other in learning and drawing insights into personal behaviour (Parker et al., 2008). In this regards, peer-coaching has been increasingly employed in leadership development programs (Eriksen et al., 2020). In a peer coaching session, the peers alternate between being the coach and being the coachee and reciprocally listen to each other and ask open-ended or probing questions to trigger partner's reflections and increase his/her self-understanding (Parker et al., 2008). Notwithstanding the increasing widespread of the peer coaching technique in the business settings, there is a remarkable scarcity of theoretical and empirical research on the adoption of peer coaching and the measurement of its effects, especially in the higher education (Eriksen et al., 2020).

The next sections will review the literature on peer coaching and will describe in detail the implementation of the peer coaching technique in a leadership course delivered in a public Italian University to master's degree students. The presentation of the methodology adopted, the related peer-coaching measurement scale developed and the analysis of the students' reflections on their learning experience will provide suggestions on how to encompass developmental relationships within the design of a leadership learning journey in the higher education context.

2. Theoretical background

The foundation of peer coaching as a way for managers and staff to advance their careers draws on the breakthrough work in clinical supervision by Goldhammer (1969) (Britton & Anderson, 2010). Peer coaching is a sustained, structured interaction that is typically dyadic in nature (D'Abate et al., 2003). The coach-coachee relationship is lateral and mutual and it is centered on the development of a particular set of skills or on performance enhancements, as it entails the coach supporting the coachee's improvement by providing feedback (Hagen et al., 2017).

Peer coaching is considered an effective learning technique, as it allows individuals to develop their skills and knowledge in a particular area (Hagen et al., 2017). This process allows two or more colleagues to reflect on current practices, expand and refine skills, share ideas, teach one another, and solve problems in the workplace. Peer coaching has become increasingly popular amongst teachers to enhance their teaching skills but also among students to enhance their personal skills (Slatter & Simons, 2001; Lu, 2008). Furthermore, those who participate in peer coaching experiences are better able to find their own answers to problems whether they occur at work or even in their personal life (Murry, 2009).

Consistent evidence displays three key components of peer coaching which are trust, reflection, and solid communication skills. The literature explicitly states how crucial it is to build a peer coaching relationship based on trust (Jackson, 2004; Robertson, 2005). According to Wenger et al. (2002), trust in peer coaching grows over time, similarly to a community of practice where members get to know one another better (Wenger et al., 2002). Reflection is another essential component of peer coaching. According to Jackson (2004), peer coaching is fundamentally a reflective activity, hence participants must be adept at reflection (Loughran, 2002; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). According to Jan Robertson's (2005) coaching leadership model, coaches can better enable partners' ability to critically reflect on their issues and topics by developing their reflective interviewing abilities. The capacity to actively listen is fundamental to have fruitful reflective conversations (Robertson, 2005). Finally, solid communication skills include the ability to give non-evaluative criticism. Rice (2012), conducting research on a group of faculty members in higher education, discovered that people who engaged in "formative discourses", while receiving peer coaching, appeared to have a positive opinion of the process. Thus, through peer coaching, leaders can gain deeper insights, develop valuable skills, and create meaningful connections with their peers.

3. Method

3.1. Structure of the Leadership development programme

The Leadership course analyzed in this study is delivered, as elective, in a public University in Italy to Master's degree students. The course lasts six weeks during which students participate in 15 in-person classes for 30 hours overall. After the sixth week students take the exam and subsequently, on a voluntary basis, they can continue their leadership learning path for other 16 weeks. The methodological approach implemented in the course draws on the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), the intentional change process (Boyatzis, 2006) and the whole person learning pedagogy (Hoover et al., 2010). During the in-class lectures, students familiarise with the theoretical framework of emotionally intelligent and resonant leadership (Goleman et al., 2013), understanding in-depth the characteristics of each leadership style (Visionary; Coaching; Affiliative; Democratic) and the techniques to put

each style into practice in real-life contexts. At the end of the course (week 6), students are asked to submit a personal leadership learning plan reporting: i) the developmental objectives, namely the specific leadership styles they want to develop; ii) the concrete actions they wish to undertake to practice their leadership in real-life settings; iii) the contexts and the persons with whom to experiment the new behaviours; and iv) a timeframe for action. In the subsequent 16 weeks students are continuously stimulated to put into practice their personal leadership learning plan in a variety of environments and with different people. During their learning journey they are engaged in at least three peer coaching sessions that consist of a conversation with a classmate to share their experimentation of the leadership behaviours. When in pair, students have the opportunity to learn alternative ways to improve a specific behaviour and progressively become aware of the learning outcomes attained. During the course, the instructor introduces the peer-coaching technique to the students and provides a template to conduct the sessions. After each session students are invited to report, on a digital platform, their reflections on: i) the main topics discussed; ii) the perceived benefits of the session; iii) the coach's questions that helped them to construct meaning from the learning experiences. At the end of the 16th week, a survey is administered to the students to collect their opinions on the peer coaching experience.

3.2. Sample

A group of 112 Master's degree students who completed all the activities of the leadership course serves as a sample of this study. The sample has an average age of 23.93 (SD 1.19), and 66.1% were female. Most of the sample had previous working experiences (59.8%).

3.3. Measures

To measure the effectiveness and the level of satisfaction of the peer coaching activity, we developed two scales.

Peer coaching reflection. Based on the work of Parker et al. (2008), we developed four items measuring the extent to which students make sense of their learning process and the progress attained through the peer coaching experience. Sample items are "The conversation with my coach helped me to become aware of the learning progress I was making over time during the course" and "The conversation with my coach helped me to identify the behaviors that led to positive results in my leadership learning experience". Items were measured on a 5-point scale in which 1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree. We performed an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Maximum Likelihood and Promax rotation, which shows adequate loading magnitude (from .63 to .77), and inter-item correlation (from .42 to .57, $p < .01$). The four items account for 49% of the variance, Cronbach's alpha is .79.

Peer coaching satisfaction. Drawing on Baron and Morin (2009), five items capturing students' level of satisfaction with the peer coaching activity were developed and measured

on a 5-point scale in which 1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree. Sample items are “I felt comfortable sharing my experience with my peer coach” and “I enjoyed the sessions with my peer coach”. EFA showed the items account for 48.2% of the variance, with adequate factor loadings (ranging from .62 to .75) and inter-item correlations (from .33 to .63). Cronbach’s alpha is .81.

4. Results

When asked about the extent to which peer coaching helped them make sense of their learning experience and develop a stronger awareness of their learning achievement, students tend to agree on the positive influence of this technique ($M=4.11$, $SD=0.61$). Verbal comments provided by the student reported that: *“It helped me to compare myself with a totally foreign person. The comparison made me think about many aspects that I did not consider before.”*; *“I was able to express myself freely without feeling intimidated, I always felt listened to, understood. My partner helped me figure out how to change some of my behaviors. She has allowed me to discover further perspectives and ways of acting.”*; *“When I had to tell a situation in which I had been able to put into practice one of the styles seen in the classroom, it was useful to me because I thought about the results obtained and I was able to make a comparison with the past ones and make sure to make the good decision next time.”*; *“At the end of each session, thinking back on what was said, I was always amazed by all the things that I managed to highlight and on which I reflected”*.

This empirical evidence shows that peer coaching has several benefits in terms of development, self-reflection and awareness. Students particularly appreciated looking back at their experience and making sense of it analysing their progresses and results, and discussing with peers about possible alternative behavioural strategies.

Concerning the level of satisfaction with the peer coaching sessions, students agreed they perceived a high level of interpersonal comfort and commitment in their relationship with their peers ($M=4.43$, $SD=0.51$). In their verbal comments they report: *“Peer coaching was undoubtedly helpful, particularly since you have to communicate with individuals you do not know”*; *“I was compelled by this to be as specific as I could be about my goals and personality traits. I was encouraged by peer coaching to communicate more precisely and avoid using unclear words.”*; *“The peer coaching exercise was very beneficial. Speaking with strangers really allows me to be honest”*.

These results show a high level of satisfaction with the peer coaching experience, highlighting the positive environment built by the process, and underlining the impact perceived by the participants on themselves.

5. Discussion

There are several contributions offered by this study to the research on leadership development and to the design of educational initiatives.

First, this study highlights the relevance of a learning technique based on an interpersonal relationship which supports the leadership development process. The peer coaching sessions help participants to give meaning to their learning experiences and at the same time represent an appointment which requires them to have put into practice the leadership behaviors they identified as critical in their learning plan. Since experimenting the leadership behaviors in real and different contexts represented one of the most relevant difficulties for those who attended the course, the mutual discussions with the peer-coach allowed the participants to take inspiration from their peer's experiences and helped them to: identify more situations in their real life to use as learning environments; identify alternative behaviors to practice in specific situations; see their behaviors and their impact from a different perspective; reflect on future behaviors to adopt in similar situations; appreciate their growth over time; share difficulties and understand that these difficulties are often common. This is consistent with previous studies highlighting the role of peer coaching in providing support and encouragement during the development path, and in allowing learning from one another (Anderson et al., 2005; Donegan et al., 2000).

Second, this study offers two scales to measure the peer coaching process from the perspective of those who experienced it. Measuring the perceived effectiveness and satisfaction of the peer coaching experience helps to design learning initiatives that keep the different dimensions of this process under control, and allows to avoid the risk of unfruitful relationships. In addition, these measures help the participants to become aware of the results of their peer coaching experience and to reflect on the characteristics of the relation undertaken, in order to improve it if needed.

Third, this study provides evidence of an educational course characterized by an integration of different learning tools to support personal development. Indeed, this course combines theoretical, experiential and interpersonal dimensions, and consequently encompasses three different learning paradigms to make leadership development more successful. This combination of dimensions and related tools can enhance the learning of effective leadership behaviors by creating a process where the participants understand the characteristics of the leadership behaviors, define a personal learning plan to put them into practice, experiment them in real life contexts and interact with others on this experience obtaining feedback aimed to improve the subsequent experimentation.

One limitation of this study is related to the use of self-reported measures by the participants and their consequent potential bias. Although the satisfaction coming from the peer coaching experience requires a personal evaluation, the measurement of the level of reflection on the

learning experience induced by peer coaching might benefit from a third-party assessment. Moreover, future research may consider implementing quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of the peer coaching activity on the change participants experienced in their leadership behaviours.

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