Activating Peer Coaching
The Formula to Unleash Employee Potential at Scale
1. INTRODUCTION TO PEER COACHING

Peer coaching is a process through which two colleagues work together to build and refine skills, reflect on their experiences and aspirations, solve workplace problems, uncover new insights about themselves and their work, and teach one another based on their respective insights. Peer coaching is emerging as perhaps the most effective way to support transformational learning. Peer coaching:

- Is a transformational learning method that uses verbalization and social reinforcement to increase chances of goal completion.
- Offers new channels for career development through teaching self-advocacy.
- Builds connection amongst employees which is key for retention.
- Transforms organizational cultures and develops psychological safety.
- Allows managers to learn coaching skills critical to their success.

This paper outlines these benefits as well as how Imperative's peer coaching platform was designed to make it easy to implement and get groundbreaking results.

What is the difference between peer coaching and mentoring?

Peer coaching is fundamentally different from mentoring. Mentoring is built on external knowledge transfer. Someone has knowledge to impart to someone else. Peer coaching is built based on process and isn't dependent on knowledge. The value comes from going through a process with another human being and about validating and activating knowledge about yourself.

Peer coaching enables everyone in an organization to engage in social learning and removes the complexities of mentoring. Peer coaching doesn't require screening for knowledge and mentoring skills nor is it limited by a scarcity of people with specific knowledge or experience. Finally, it doesn't reinforce hierarchy and dependence on senior employees.

2. WHY IT WORKS

While traditional learning models can be effective for developing technical skills, peer coaching has the unique ability to effectively develop both leadership and soft skills. It provides the experiential and relational learning and social reinforcement that is necessary for these skills to be adopted and honed.
Peer coaching is an activity that is already informally practiced in the workplace. 62% of people report “regularly engaging in conversations about their development and careers with their peers”.1 People who reported engaging in peer coaching also reported being:

- 65% more likely to be fulfilled,
- 67% more likely to report being a top performer,
- Are employee net promoters (Score: 19),
- 73% more likely to report feeling a sense of belonging,
- 50% more likely to expect to stay in their job for more than 5 years.2

Traditional learning has focused on managers and content experts as the primary source of learning for employees. When asked, however, employees are more than twice as likely to report that they learn more from their peers than their managers. Furthermore, 90% of employees reported they would happily coach a colleague if asked.3

2A. Transformational learning model.

Experiential and relational learning.

Only 10% of learning is from courses. The other 90% is from other people and on the job experiential learning.4 Peer coaching has employees actively working on core soft skills in every conversation that combines experiential and relational learning. Talent development organizations have known for decades that experiential and relational learning is more effective than classroom or online learning for soft skills. It provides the opportunity to take an idea out of the abstract and use it in the real world and begin to change behavior.
Verbalization.
We are much more likely to remember information if we verbalize it. A 2017 study published in Memory[^6] found that verbalization is the most effective way to recall new information. By processing new ideas and information out loud, peer coaching increases the odds that the information will be retained.

Commitment to follow through.
ASTD found that you have a 65% chance of completing a goal if you make a commitment to someone. This probability rises to 95% if you have a specific accountability appointment.[^6] Despite best intentions, many people never finish online courses that they begin. With peer coaching, employees make a commitment to each other to complete the process and understand that their colleague is dependent on them to achieve their goal as well.

Social reinforcement.
Social reinforcement includes simple human expressions of support and affirmation such as smiles, acceptance, praise, acclaim, and attention from other people. Neuroscience has demonstrated that when we get positive social responses from people it increases the odds that we will alter our behavior. When peer coaches show they understand and validate each other they reinforce the value of the person and what they are saying. It increases the connection between the two people and alters their subsequent behavior.

By being in the presence of people who have been social reinforcers for them in the past, this can re-trigger the reinforcement. So, each time someone interacts with someone who served as a peer coach it will trigger the desired behaviors and mindset. If an organization is able to do rotational peer coaching where employees are able to work with different peer coaches over time, it creates an environment where this social reinforcement is a trigger as they interact with the colleagues in the regular course of work.

90% of people are happy to coach colleagues if asked. Fig. 4.

Deep Learning Benefits of Peer Coaching

“By deep we mean whole-person learning- learning that goes to the core of who a person is. Whole-person learning incorporates thoughts, feelings, observations, values, and inherent assumptions. Deep learning involves reflecting on those deeply held attributes and values, self-image, self-esteem, and self-identity that influence ways people behave to preserve a sense of self. A deep learning process can feel risky and difficult and is likely to extend beyond a usual comfort zone. Importantly, it is also has the potential to lead to significant personal change.” Fig. 5.
2B. New channels for career development.

**Self-advocacy.**
People who advocate for themselves are much more likely to get their needs met. They are more likely to be considered for new opportunities and seen as having leadership potential. For many people, especially women and people early in their careers, this can be difficult and is uncomfortable. Peer coaching provides employees with the opportunity to practice talking about themselves, their needs, and what makes them valuable in a safe and affirming environment. It develops the confidence and ability to speak up for themselves and to do so authentically.

**Champions.**
Peer coaching builds self-advocacy capacity in employees but also begins to convert peers into champions. Once a peer understands the needs and abilities of a colleague, they are more likely to bring them opportunities that they feel might be of interest and/or suggest them for opportunities when they come across them.

**Network development.**
In a peer coaching program that matches employees with multiple peers from different parts of an organization over time, employees grow their internal network. This exposes employees to potential career paths and opportunities inside the organization that they might not have known about otherwise.

2C. Builds connection.

**Wired to connect.**
Only 1% of people who report being fulfilled in life reported not having meaningful relationships at work. Brains have evolved to reward us for connecting with other people. If we don’t have these connections, it leads to a spiral of negative psychological consequences including depression. Peer coaching provides a safe way for people to engage and, if designed well, can create a strong sense of sustained connection.

**Connection gap.**
49% of people report not having meaningful relationships at work. This is part of a broader trend in society that is being largely associated with the rise of technology. Social media, by many reports, is actually making us more isolated. Fewer people have real conversations and make time to truly connect with other people. Workers spend almost 50% of each day on digital vs. in-person communication, and more than half feel lonely as a result.

Peer coaching gives permission and a structure to have real conversations. This is especially important for employees who may not be skilled at social interactions and benefit from conversations that are less casual and unscripted.
Social Retention.

According to a 2018 study WorkplaceTrends, 60% of people would be more inclined to stay with their company longer if they had more friends. This was especially true for younger employees. Gen Z (74%) and Millennials (69%) would be more inclined to stay with their company longer if they had more friends. It is also acute with men (57%) and introverts (63%).

One of the leading indicators of success and retention, according to Gallup, is having a “best friend” at work. A “best friend” is someone who is trusted, can be confided in, and has our back. Peer coaching quickly creates bonds between colleagues that begin to build these types of relationships.

2D. Cultural transformation.

Learning culture.

A learning culture is one in which people are not only encouraged to constantly improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities but actually do it. Offering online and offline courses and encouraging managers are important, however, to make a true learning culture it needs to be part of the social fabric of an organization. Peer coaching turns every colleague into part of an employee’s learning team and brings learning into the daily experience of work.

Generosity.

There are scientific benefits generated by generosity. In other words, helping someone makes people feel good. It strengthens the relationship and creates a positive association with the workplace. Peer coaching enables employees to experience helping others directly. Done on a large scale this becomes part of the culture of the organization and changes the perception about the organization.

“Organizations themselves can never be truly agile unless people who work within the organization are agile – and more importantly emotionally agile.”

- Susan David, Harvard Medical School, Author “Emotional Agility”

Empathy, inclusion, belonging, and psychological safety.

More than skills or talent, psychological safety has been found to be the foundation of high performing teams. When people feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of negative consequences, it brings out the best in them. Peer coaching develops psychological safety by building empathy skills and removing fear from relationships with colleagues. It also helps to establish commonality between people and reinforce a sense of belonging. This creates a work environment where people thrive regardless of their background.

Shared experience.

Shared experiences help to define a culture, for better or worse. If everyone goes through the same experience they associate it with the organization and use it to define the values of the organization. Peer coaching, if done throughout a team or
organization, becomes one of these shared experiences and reinforces messages about investing in people, caring about their success, being a place where you are seen, and building strong work relationships.

2E. Manager and leader development.

Peer Coaching Develops Leaders.
“Leadership Development Coaching is based on a mindset for learning organizations that is fundamental to the development of effective leadership. Coaching works by leveraging relationships and conversations to elicit a variety of mental processes in those who are coached, such as exploring alternatives, persisting with problem solving, initiating solution seeking, and collaboration across boundaries.”

Coaching skills.
Over the last decade, coaching skills have been identified as critical to successful managers and leaders. Companies are increasingly investing in programs to teach these skills. Peer coaching early in a career can develop these skills effectively and accelerate readiness for management positions.

Support.
Being a manager or leader, especially when first taking on the role, can be incredibly challenging and stressful to navigate. Peer coaching between managers can provide the support needed that might not be possible from other people (their supervisor or HR).

Practicing fulfillment.
Relationships, impact, and growth are the three sources of fulfillment in life and work. Peer coaching, in its design, is a fulfilling experience. It creates or strengthens a relationship. It enables us to make an impact on another person. And it clearly helps us grow as people and professionals.

There is a 1% chance of being fulfilled without meaningful relationships. There is a 2% chance of being fulfilled without meaningful impact. There is a 1% chance of being fulfilled without personal and professional growth.

3. HOW IT WORKS

Based on the latest adult learning theory and the growing body of scientific insights about human interaction, Imperative has developed a platform to enable employers to scale transformational peer coaching across their organization.
Imperative provides the first scalable and transformational peer coaching platform for employers:

- It is built on the foundation of the purpose assessment. This provides the insights and common language that enable transformational conversations.
- Peers are matched based on a proprietary algorithm that increases the odds of producing the right interactions.
- Coaching engagements are focused on a specific outcome and consist of three 45-minute conversations that are completed over the course of a month.
- Each conversation guide provides prompts and tips that are designed to achieve a specific goal and create the right interaction between the peers.
- Employers have an administrative tool to manage the program and track progress.

**Built off the Purpose Assessment.**
The journey on the platform begins with Imperative’s groundbreaking purpose assessment. In under 15 minutes, it uncovers the psychological drivers of purpose for an employee. The results provide a foundation on which to build peer coaching conversations. It gives each person a starting place to talk about themselves and what matters to them. The focus on purpose celebrates and shines a light on their best-self which makes them more comfortable entering into conversations with peers and disclosing authentic insights. The assessment also creates a shared language to talk.

**Matching algorithm.**
Employers can assign peer coaching matches but we also provide matching recommendations. Based on insights collected about an employee in their purpose assessment and through their use of the platform over time, we are able to suggest matches for peer coaching. This algorithm is regularly being improved to increase the quality of connection in each coaching module.

**Three conversation modules.**
The peer coaching platform is designed around modules that are each focused on a different topic or goal. We have found that the optimal number of conversations in a coaching module is three and that each should be around 45 minutes. It is long enough to build trust and find patterns and short enough to keep it manageable and create a sense of accomplishment when it is complete. It also prevents peer coaching relationships from stagnating. The module is designed to be completed over three weeks, keeping the experience under a month.

**Structured coaching conversations.**
Each coaching conversation is designed to make it easy for any two people to have a meaningful dialog. They each anchor to content from the participants purpose assessment results to ground the conversation. The platform provides 3-5 specific conversation prompts for each conversation that leads the peers through the learning cycle of information, reflection, creation.
and active testing. They are also provided with conversation tips with each question based on the research of Harry T Reis on how to build strong connections. They build participants skills for understanding, validating and caring.

Reciprocity and responsiveness.
Unlike one way coaching conversations, Imperative’s platform has people each answer the prompt questions before moving on. This increases empathy and makes it easier to find connection points and reveal “ah ha” moments. The peers are also guided to take notes for the other person to build active listening skills. This model of reciprocity is based on studies on how to quickly build “intimacy” and “connection” between two people.

Reflection.
At the end of each conversation, each person documents their takeaways. This helps retain the process and retain the insights from the discussion. It also serves as a “learning journal” for future reference. At the end of the three conversation module, they can review these notes to further internalize them and reference them in the future.

Action.
In addition to noting their key takeaways, the peers identify and commit to one action they will take as a result of the conversation. This creates the final step in the learning process - active testing and begins to create behavior change.

“Self-awareness is perhaps the most important deep learning element, as it provides the foundation for sustained behavioral change.”

Aaron Hurst is the foremost expert on the science of purpose at work and in 2014 brought global awareness to the rise of the fourth economic era in history, the Purpose Economy. He is the CEO and Co-Founder of Imperative, the technology platform for leaders in the new economy. Previously, as the founder of the Taproot Foundation, Aaron catalyzed the $15 billion pro bono service market. He is a third generation graduate of the University of Michigan.

Imperative is the global leader in the science of purpose at work. We partner with forward-thinking employers to equip them with the tools, resources, training and coaching that unlocks the power of purpose. To learn more about Imperative and our solutions for employers in the APAC region, please visit our regional purpose partner www.eccoh.co or contact Ian J Lowe.
References

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

Figures

Fig. 1. 2019 Workforce Purpose Index. Imperative, 2019.
Fig. 3. Eichinger, B., & Lombardo, M. (n.d.). The 70-20-10 Rule for Leadership Development. Retrieved from https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/70-20-10-rule/
Fig. 4. 2019 Workforce Purpose Index. Imperative, 2019.
Fig. 6. 2019 Workforce Purpose Index. Imperative, 2019.
Fig. 7. Susan David, Harvard Medical School, Author “Emotional Agility”
Fig. 8. 2019 Workforce Purpose Index. Imperative, 2019.
Fig. 10. Imperative Platform