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# Using Coaching Practices to Support Leadership and Management Development

Lessons Learned by the  
Leadership, Management, and Governance Project



Photo: Katy Doyle/Management Sciences for Health

**Author**

Sean Dryer, Management Sciences for Health



Yale Global Health Leadership Institute



### **About the LMG Project**

Funded by the USAID, the Leadership, Management and Governance (LMG) Project (2011-2016) is collaborating with health leaders, managers and policy-makers at all levels to show that investments in leadership, management and governance lead to stronger health systems and improved health. The LMG Project embraces the principles of country ownership, gender equity, and evidence-driven approaches. Emphasis is also placed on good governance in the health sector – the ultimate commitment to improving service delivery, and fostering sustainability through accountability, engagement, transparency, and stewardship. Led by Management Sciences for Health (MSH), the LMG consortium includes the Amref Health Africa; International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF); Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health; Medic Mobile; and Yale University Global Health Leadership Institute.

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## 1. Introduction

Between 2011 and 2016, the USAID-funded Leadership, Management, and Governance (LMG) Project has designed and delivered a wide range of programs to develop inspired leaders, sound management systems, and transparent governance at all levels of the health system to support more responsive services to people. The LMG Project is the most recent program in 30 years of investment in stronger leadership and management by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), with each project innovating to build on the lessons learned in the past.

One of these innovations has been the adoption of a suite of practices and techniques adapted from the field of professional coaching to support leadership, management, and governance (L+M+G) activities. Prior to the LMG Project, Management Sciences for Health (MSH) had piloted this coaching approach in Nicaragua, Nigeria, and Tanzania. Due to promising early results, the LMG Project scaled up the approach, integrating these coaching practices into a wide range of programs with substantial variation in size, context, and the challenge addressed by the program.

The LMG Project's approach to capacity building usually involves a facilitated participatory process in which the recipient of the support, usually a team within a health facility, selects a challenge and creates and implements an action plan to achieve a desired measurable result. Our approach to the use of coaching practices is usually to provide or train a coach for this team or individual, whose coaching is aimed at helping them overcome the barriers they experience in implementing the action plan.

We believe this approach has often been effective, but the integration of coaching practices has not always succeeded completely. In some cases, coaching does not take place as designed. In other cases, "coaching" sessions occur, but the content of these sessions is not consistent with the coaching practices as they are taught. In this technical brief, we examine five years of lessons learned on the enablers and barriers to successful integration of coaching practices to support L+M+G programs based on two standards of success: that coaching takes place, and that coaching adheres to the practices, methods, and principles adopted from professional coaching.

## 2. The LMG Project's Approach to Coaching

### What We Mean by Coaching

The LMG Project's approach to coaching is adapted from the techniques and approaches taught and used by professional coaching organizations such as the International Coach Federation. The coaching process is conducted over a series of interactions between the coach and coachee,<sup>1</sup> in which the coach uses questions and observations to help the coachee understand their obstacles, discover their own resources, and find new options to overcome their obstacles. An in-depth description of our approach to coaching is available in the [eManager: Coaching for Professional Development and Organizational Results](#).

Coaching is sometimes confused with mentoring. Mentoring pairs someone who wants to learn from someone else based on that mentor's particular knowledge and skill set. Advice is often given in this type of arrangement. In contrast, coaching avoids giving advice and instead helps the coachee understand the relationship between their behavior and its results, enabling them to draw on their own knowledge to

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<sup>1</sup> In this publication, *coachee* may refer to an individual or to a team.

identify new behaviors that produce improved performance and results. Coaching is a facilitated process that leads the coachee to draw their own conclusions.

While our approach is adapted from that of professional coaching, it differs in several important ways. Professional coaching is focused on whatever result the coachee is seeking during a given session. In contrast, in the context of the LMG Project the outcome always relates to the completion of the action plan created at the beginning of the L+M+G activity. This outcome may be influenced by the interests of external stakeholders such as donors or the national government. In addition, our coaches often switch between coaching and other roles, such as supervision, data collection, or technical assistance.

## **Why We Use Coaching Practices**

The LMG Project and other MSH technical staff have observed common challenges faced by L+M+G and other technical programs that the coaching practices can help overcome.

It is common that technical assistance (TA) providers diagnose organizational challenges and propose technically sound solutions, but recipients resist adopting the solution. MSH has observed that participants in our programs are much more likely to embrace and sustain solutions that they generate themselves, and professional coaching is designed to support the coachee in generating his or her own solutions. Accordingly, the coaching practices become a valuable tool to support our other approaches to building ownership, such as participatory problem solving and the use of adult learning techniques. MSH has also observed that participants also develop more skills when they find their own solutions than when TA providers offer solutions, further aiding sustainability. In the absence of coaching, even when TA results in short-term improvements, the gains are often quickly lost and TA needs to be repeated.

In addition, the sustained relationship between the coach and coachee allows the coach to learn continuously about the coachee's challenges and generates a stronger understanding of their evolving needs beyond a shorter-term needs analysis, allowing the LMG Project to offer more tailored capacity building and continue to provide support for unanticipated challenges that arise during implementation and otherwise prevent the coachee from completing the plan they created.

In other cases, individuals or teams from an organization attend a training, but face resistance from others in their organization in implementing their plans once they return. The continued support of a coach helps the coachee maintain morale and challenges their assumptions in communication while at the same time improving skills that allow them to better navigate internal challenges within their team or organization and generate clear agreements and expectations.

Sometimes participants struggle to find time for the priorities they have identified amid other, often time-sensitive requests. The continued support of a coach helps the coachee remain focused on their planned priorities, especially when coaching is in person.

We find that coaches develop skills that they can use in their other work. They develop a better understanding of their own behaviors and assumptions and become more open to learning and improve their ability to set objectives, and analyze context and root causes. We have observed that coachees become more confident and committed, and show more initiative.

As an additional benefit, we have found that the regular contact between the coach and coachee means the coach is well-positioned to collect data and stories that allow us to better understand and communicate the results of our activities.

**Coaching and Communication Skills Program**

“Through the Coaching and Communication Workshop, I gained skills that I didn’t acquire from formal education institutions I have attended.”

“This course is relevant to managers because they specifically talk about how to handle behavior. If a manager can manage behavior, then definitely performance improves—which is the number one priority of managers.”

“I would recommend that every manager take this course.”



Susanne Balera  
Strategic Advisor for  
Rwanda’s National  
Commission for Children

### 3. Methods

The LMG Project has conducted a variety of activities in 49 countries, many of which used the coaching practices as described above. This brief is based on the lessons shared in key informant interviews by four trained coaches who have contributed to the design and delivery of nearly all of these programs, as well as a review of documentation, data, and ongoing evaluations, primarily from nine activities:

1. A more than four-year multifaceted program to strengthen L+M+G in physical rehabilitation centers across the world that work in partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross/Special Fund for the Disabled (ICRC/SFD).
2. The pilot of a new Communications and Coaching (C&C) training workshop in Uganda and the experiences of the participants following return to their organizations.
3. The design and delivery of the Leadership Development Program Plus (LDP+), scaled up through a training of trainers approach and delivered to International Planned Parenthood Federation Africa Region (IPPFAR) learning centers in six countries. The addition of coaching practices was one of the innovations between MSH’s original Leadership Development Program and its improved version, the LDP+.
4. The adoption and pilot of a peer coaching program among members of the Youth Action Movement (YAM) and other young people working with IPPF Member Associations in three countries.
5. A quasi-experimental study of the LDP+ on postpartum family planning (PPFP) service delivery in hospitals in Cameroon.
6. A multifaceted three-year capacity building program with Rwanda’s National Commission for Children (NCC), including placement of a full-time strategic advisor and executive coach.
7. Multiyear technical assistance in L+M+G, monitoring and evaluation, supervision, and resource mobilization to the Global Fund Country Coordinating Mechanism and Principal Recipients in Côte d'Ivoire.
8. Placement of multiyear full-time senior technical advisors within the National Malaria Control

Programs (NMCP) of seven countries, whose role is designed to gradually shift from technical assistance to coaching over the life of the program.

9. Design of a new Network Strengthening Program (NSP) to deliver capacity building specifically designed for the needs of networks, piloted with two civil society networks in Malawi.

Together, the activities cover a wide range of geographic, political, financial, cultural, social, and technical contexts across which to compare and contrast experiences in using the coaching practices. In addition, these activities have experienced a wide range of successes and challenges in the integration of coaching practices into their activities.

These diverse materials represent a combination of observations by the LMG Project's technical staff and feedback received from program participants. These materials were reviewed for specific lessons and recommendations, which were then grouped into common themes. In general, agreement between the observations of LMG Project technical staff and participant feedback was high, and most lessons described below were supported by both sources. This agreement was intended to provide corroboration of our observations, but because LMG Project staff orient participants to the coaching practices and routinely examine feedback these two sources of information should not be seen as entirely independent. Lessons were also included if they were common from one type of source, in which case this is specified.

This exercise was designed to capitalize on existing data collection and evaluations, but did not collect original data aside from key informant interviews with four technical experts. Successful coaching was not the primary outcome examined by most of the evaluations considered, which used a variety of methodologies. The analysis was exploratory and retrospective, rather than a priori. In the future, hypothesis-driven process evaluation could be used to rigorously test any ideas expressed below where stronger evidence is needed to inform programming.

## 4. Trade-off: Internal and External Coaches

In professional coaching, the coach is always a neutral party, having no stake in the focus or direction of the coachee's objectives, only in the successful outcome of the coaching experience, whatever that may be. The coach can be an outsider or part of the same organization, but it is important in that the coach has no administrative relationship with the coachee. The use of a neutral party is the approach taken by some of the LMG Project's programs, such as the capacity building to Rwanda's NCC and the technical advisors to NMCPs. However, the majority of our programs have instead looked to train individuals within the organization in the coaching practices and techniques, so that they can support their colleagues in implementing action plans.

Training internal coaches has yielded several benefits. While the primary goal in the use of coaching is to support the sustainability of interventions designed to build capacity in other areas, the coaches trained are also able to reapply their new skills to other activities and coaching itself may be sustained or institutionalized. Internal coaches in our interventions were often in the same location or facility, which avoided many logistical barriers that will be described below. Those trained as coaches often developed additional skills that they were able to use in their work, including better communication, management of the work climate, and supportive supervision.

Trust is a known requirement for effective coaching, and the use of internal coaches allowed the program to capitalize on existing relationships of trust, while external coaches usually needed time to demonstrate that they understand the coachee's challenges and build trust. In some contexts, however, external



coaches are seen as more neutral and trust is easier to build.

The individuals we trained to deliver coaching techniques usually occupied higher ranks than implementation teams. Their coaching role kept them involved in the program, and they had the power to remove institutional barriers to the team's success. In addition, their involvement demonstrated commitment and boosted the morale of teams. However, this required a greater commitment from the organization, in freeing the time of these higher-ranking staff to be trained and to conduct coaching. As such, we observed that clear communication of the demands and engagement of senior management and governing bodies at the beginning of the intervention was a crucial success factor.

However, while a strategy of training internal coaches seemed to offer benefits to sustainability, the quality of the coaching was, by our observation, lower than with external coaches, who usually had more experience and expertise. The new internal coaches needed time to practice and develop their skills. In addition, there was a risk that initial poor performance with a coachee may lead the coachee to disengage before the coach's skills improved. When coaches provided coaching to subordinate staff who were less skilled in their technical area, they may see an initial decline in performance when they try not to offer solutions, and this can result in the use of coaching being dropped.

Among our programs that focused on training coaches within an organization, there was variation in the extensiveness of the training, ranging from a short informational session during a time-packed workshop (e.g., the NSP) to five-day workshops dedicated entirely to C&C, as was offered in Uganda and to ICRC coaches.

Where the training was very short, and especially where it did not include skills practice and feedback, the participants had little success applying the skills afterward. The full C&C workshops were much more successful. In preliminary data from our evaluation of the IPPFAR LDP+, team members coached by staff from Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU), whose coaches attended the C&C program pilot in Uganda halfway through their teams' implementation period, were more likely to describe the role of the coach in terms consistent with the principles and practices of coaching as taught. Those coached by staff who only received the shorter LDP+ coaching training more often emphasized supervision or monitoring. In addition, two coaches from ICRC trained in the LDP+ method attended the same Uganda training, found it very useful, and ICRC later requested that the LMG Project conduct two more C&C workshops for other ICRC coaches to strengthen these skills. Some coaches have expressed that coaching a team is more difficult than coaching an individual, so more training may be especially important for these programs.

Even when experienced external coaches are hired, we have found that we cannot assume their past training is consistent with the coaching practices we have adopted. The NCC strategic advisor, who was hired for her coaching experience, also attended the Uganda C&C program pilot and developed new skills. The LMG Ukraine program manager, who also attended the C&C program pilot, used the skills gained to re-assess the performance of the external coach the project had hired in Ukraine and found gaps. The technical team in charge of hiring and supervising the NMCP senior technical advisors learned this lesson from early hires and modified their hiring process to check that applicants shared their understanding of coaching.

## 5. Coaching Sessions: Enablers and Barriers

Our first standard of success in integrating coaching into a program is that coaching actually took place. Some barriers were logistical. For example, the NSP pilot attempted to make use of virtual coaching, but found that poor connectivity for many of the program participants in resource scarce settings often made this impossible. Local coaches, or coaches who already had regular interactions with the coachee during which the coaching practices can be employed, were more successful.

It was also important that financial resources were available to cover the coach and coachee's time and for logistics, such as transport or airtime if required. It was important to identify a comfortable and private physical location for coaching to take place, including somewhere private to take virtual coaching calls.

As described above, the coachee must trust the coach to provide a confidential, judgment-free setting, and that there will not be repercussions for anything said. We have observed that this trust comes much more easily in some contexts than others, and the setting must be carefully considered in determining how coaching can be integrated and whether external coaching is more appropriate.

Coaching took place when both the coach and the coachee saw the benefit, particularly as weighed against other priorities and demands that competed for their time. Coaching was much more challenging for individuals or organizations to schedule where work time was dominated by time-sensitive requests or workloads were excessive—a common challenge for any capacity building activity that the use of coaching practices rarely overcame. The coachee's supervisor (as well as the coach's when the coach was internal) also needed to see the coaching as a priority, so they needed to be engaged early in the process and provided with comprehensive information on the time commitment. As with all capacity building, turnover in any of these positions often compromised success. The Cameroon LDP+ study included one coach whose support ceased for two months due to a life event. However, the impact of turnover in the coach could be reduced by training multiple coaches within a single organization. Following the C&C workshop in Uganda, a large group of participants from RHU found that this had the added benefit that the coaches supported each other upon return to RHU and were more able to secure buy-in from senior leaders.

Some programs, such as the NSP, delivered tightly packed workshops and did not have time to provide participants with much information about coaching. We observed that coachees were very unlikely to prioritize coaching when they did not understand what it is. We have found that some coachees mistake coaching as remedial and do not embrace it or think it useful.

While coaching was helpful in overcoming some barriers to ownership of a capacity building activity, if the desired outcome was imposed from above or by an external actor such as a donor, rather than owned by participants, coaching was unlikely to help. Such lack of ownership, even if not turned into active resistance, became a barrier to success of both the L+M+G intervention that the coaching was designed to support and to the coaching itself.

We know that donor-funded technical assistance is often offered with explicit or implicit desired outcomes that may not be fully aligned with the organization's goals, despite the efforts of the facilitators. In cases such as these, we observed that the organization and its staff were unlikely to feel motivated by the objective and both the coaching and the intervention were likely to show weak results.

The same problem can occur with directives from local superiors. With longer programs, even if alignment is strong at the beginning of the program, this may change over time and demand for coaching will waver. This was especially common where the organization had a change in leadership or direction.



We observed certain characteristics that made participants likely to be open to coaching. Fortunately, these same characteristics also made participants likely to succeed in implementing a capacity building plan. These included an openness to learning and a passion for the organizational vision. Participants who were resentful or felt disempowered were unlikely to take advantage of the opportunity. If coachees were very task-oriented, coaching was likely to continue if they saw quick results—even insights—but their demand for coaching dropped off quickly if not. All these findings highlight the importance of participant selection, which requires a strong champion within the organization, who will help identify the right people. But participation must also be voluntary. We found that when coaching was imposed rather than offered, it was very unlikely to take place as intended.

We also found certain characteristics of organizations where coaching was more or less likely to take place. Organizations where the leader championed coaching, rallied staff, and created an enabling environment were much more likely to succeed. A strong organizational mission and vision that is enthusiastically embraced by the staff also predicted success, especially when the coach was deliberate in helping coachees link their actions to this vision.

Yet we observed that organizations with high turnover, a culture of authoritarian supervision, weak human resources systems, or large disparities among staff were less likely to adopt a coaching culture. Staff were less likely to embrace coaching if their superiors were not onboard, if they had little control over their time, perceived little opportunity for advancement, or where the organization's incentive structure punished mistakes more than rewarded successes.

## 6. Coaching Fidelity: Enablers and Barriers

Our second standard of success in integrating coaching into a program is that the coaching offered adheres to the practices, methods, and principles adopted from professional coaching. As described above, we had more challenges with fidelity to the coaching practices when new coaches were trained within the organization, although this challenge would occasionally arise with experienced external coaches as well.

The most common challenge that emerged was role confusion. The coach must recognize that adhering to the coaching practices is their responsibility. Time must be devoted to explaining the coaching approach to coachees, and the coach and coachee should begin with a dedicated initial coaching conversation to agree on how they will work together and set clear expectations.

The role of “coach” was just one of several roles for most of the individuals who provided coaching in our programs. They also frequently served as program managers, supervisors, and/or technical experts, and collected data or stories as described in the introduction of this report. All of these sometimes created the perception for the coachee that the coach's role was pushing the activity and the risk that ownership of the activity transferred from the coachee to the coach, especially for new coaches whose skills in the coaching practices were still developing.

This risk is especially high when the coach has technical knowledge relevant to the program. In professional coaching, the coachee usually has much more specialized technical knowledge related to their desired outcome than the coach does, so it is easy for the coach to avoid giving advice and focus on helping the coachee find their own solutions.

In contrast, those providing coaching in our programs often had more technical knowledge than their coachees. This created a strong temptation for the coach to provide answers to the coachee, and could interfere with the trust required for effective coaching if the coachee knew the coach had answers, but

was withholding them. It was especially difficult for technical experts to coach without giving answers in contexts that were very deadline-driven, where a trade-off between achieving short-term programmatic goals and developing the skills of the coachee led many coaches to favor giving advice.

The NMCP program had some success reducing this risk because the long implementation period allowed the senior technical advisor to focus on TA early in the program and gradually shift to coaching once the coachee had the knowledge and skills they needed, and just needed support drawing on those skills.

The additional roles of collecting stories and data about action plans also seemed to risk role confusion. This appeared to be another trade-off, as this strategy was effective for improving collection of this information for several of our interventions. However, monitoring could give the coach the appearance of pushing the activity, and the fact that this information would be reported more widely may have compromised trust, whereas coaching is usually confidential.

Much as the selection process for coaches was an important success factor, where new coaches were being trained we found certain characteristics that improve the likelihood that they will succeed in learning and adhering to the coaching practices. The practices were easier to adopt if the coach's personality, position, and context allowed them to be comfortable with ambiguity and with not having all the answers. In addition, in assigning coaches to coachees, role clarity was easier to maintain when the coachee was not the coach's direct report, although trained coaches still developed skills that aid in effective supervision.

Certain elements of program design required careful consideration. It was easier to secure the necessary commitment if the use of coaching practices was integrated from the beginning of the activity. Coaches trained in IPPF's peer coaching program reported that the six-month window was not sufficient to work through some of the challenges presented. Duration was an especially important consideration where the coach was external, as trust requires time to develop.

Support to the coach is also an important consideration. Where coaches were trained within an organization, providing access to an external coach while they developed their skills was described as effective by activity managers, and the NCC strategic advisor specifically requested this support. Several individuals trained in the coaching practices expressed the value of reference materials, such as typical questions, a coaching log, or a coaching framework. Even experienced external coaches benefited from regular opportunities to debrief, attend skills refreshers, and obtain additional training based on the needs of their coachee. Other support, such as access to administrative staff who would promptly address logistical considerations, freed the coach to focus on applying their skills.

The broader context (cultural, political, economic, historical, etc.) needs to be carefully considered in determining how coaching should be integrated into a program. We found that the coaching practices were more difficult to adhere to in highly hierarchical cultures. It was more difficult to create a safe space and existing norms often made it difficult for coachees to open up, especially to those higher on the hierarchy. Even external coaches sometimes found themselves higher or lower in broader social hierarchies. If the coach was lower in the hierarchy, it was sometimes difficult for the coach to hold the coachee accountable to the commitments they made to themselves. However, while coaching was more difficult to integrate in these contexts, we also received feedback suggesting that these contexts may be those where the coaching practices are most needed or valuable.

The participants in the IPPF peer coaching program found that youth challenged with few economic opportunities were often frustrated and cynical, and found it difficult to be open with coaches. We also observed that those in cultures with a greater tendency to focus on the future had more difficulty adopting coaching practices than those in cultures where it was more normal to reflect on the past.

## 7. Recommendations

Over the past five years, we have gained much experience that can be used to inform program design in the future. It is clear that cultural, political, historical, organizational, financial, and other factors should have a significant impact on decisions related to coaching and more specifically whether to use an external coach or train internal staff in coaching and the extent of the training required for a cost-effective coaching program.

We sometimes included coaching in activities that were highly tailored to the recipient without providing the same level of tailoring to the coaching approach. In the future, when a program is identified for which coaching is likely to add value, a review of our lessons learned in similar contexts should be used to craft the right coaching approach. We have identified several trade-offs, so the program's priorities must be matched to the approach chosen.

There may be ways to mitigate these trade-offs. The role confusion associated with using coaches to collect information may be reduced by providing more information to coachees on coaching at the beginning of the relationship, being explicit about when the coach is providing coaching versus other roles, and starting the conversation with coaching, only moving to data collection once the coaching conversation is explicitly closed. Likewise, for many organizations the role confusion associated with the use of internal coaches, especially in hierarchical organizations, may be reduced by using more peer coaching or pairing coaches to coachees in different technical units. In this case, the logistical and skills building advantages of internal coaching may be retained without confusing roles or withholding important technical information.

The tailoring of a coaching intervention (or coaching interventions) should include the criteria to select the coaches. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality can be important to establishing the trust required. When internal coaches are being trained, a champion within the organization should be identified. This champion should be engaged to help understand the organization's context and given criteria for coaches in order to help identify appropriate individuals to train. Once coaches have been identified and trained, we have found that program managers and coaches often learn the most about coaching when they are themselves coached.

Many of the lessons learned and recommendations have cost implications. This needs to be taken into account during the initial planning and budgeting, and discussed during the initial engagement of senior managers and governing bodies in the recipient organization. In some cases, this may require candid conversations with donors to be realistic about what can be achieved with a given budget or timeline.

While our experience suggests that coaching can be a powerful tool, most existing evaluation on the use of coaching looks at broader programs that include coaching, within which the evaluation of the use of coaching is a small component. To justify a greater investment, more rigorous evidence is needed looking specifically at the contribution of coaching to L+M+G and other capacity building activities in different contexts. In the past, any such attempt would likely have struggled with failures in effective integration, which would have confounded any analysis on the impact of coaching on program outcomes.

However, with a better understanding of how to successfully integrate coaching into an activity, we believe the opportunity is now ripe for more rigorous evaluation of its effect on program outcomes, in order to better advocate for the greater investment required to scale up what we believe to be our most effective approaches.



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