



Work in Progress: Coaching as a Midcareer Faculty Development Approach

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Dr. Heidi Sherick has worked in higher education for over 25 years. Currently, Heidi is the Faculty Development and Leadership Specialist in the College of Engineering and the Medical School at the University of Michigan. Her primary role is to design and initiate a suite of professional leadership development activities and coaching, mentoring, and sponsoring strategies for faculty. She provides one-on-one coaching for faculty in new executive leadership roles and for Associate level faculty in Engineering, facilitating career advancement, fostering connections, and providing leadership development opportunities. Heidi served as the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Diversity in the College of Engineering at Montana State University from 2001-2012. She also served as the Director of EMPower, the engineering minority program. Heidi earned her PhD in Educational Leadership from University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2014. She studied developmental relationships in higher education and investigated the processes through which higher education leadership is fostered including mentoring, coaching, role-modeling, sponsoring, and networking.

WIP: Coaching as a Mid-Career Faculty Development Approach

Abstract

This work in progress describes a piloted coaching program targeting recently promoted Associate Faculty at Michigan Engineering. As engineering faculty enter the workforce, they are supported through New Faculty Orientation, start-up funding, Launch Committees, and pre-assigned departmental mentors. It is after they have completed the tenure process that there is often a void of concerted effort to offer enriched career support. Simultaneously, this can be a time when feelings of isolation and disengagement emerge.

The College of Engineering has implemented a program that uses individual coaching as a career development approach. The faculty members are offered coaching service and can craft the engagement frequency as well as the agenda topics in that coaching. This paper will highlight the approach and common themes that emerged from these coaching engagements. The themes may serve as framework for mid-career faculty development interventions more broadly.

The next phase of the program will engage participants in an optional group coaching experience. The objective of the proposed group coaching program is to reinforce and build on the gains made by faculty who have participated in individual coaching and to emphasize shared experiences.

Tags: Faculty Development, Coaching, Mid-Career

Background – Mid-Career Faculty

Promotion to Associate Professor rank places faculty in a new place in the academic life-cycle and can serve as an exploratory time with less pressure than the earlier Assistant Professor period. However, this is a time of transition that can often lead to isolation, confusion, and ambivalence [1] – a perfect time to increase support. The intention of the coaching program described in this paper is to help newly tenured faculty to explore their opportunities and identify resources they need to strive towards developing their leadership potential whether that be in research, in their academic discipline, as a policy maker, a change agent, or as an academic leader.

Vague expectations, including less than explicit requirements for promotion to full professor can be demotivating and lead to disengagement [2]. Baldwin, et. al. [3] reinforce the challenges regarding the increased competition in research funding as well as the changing fabric of the academic identity at the Associate Faculty rank, requiring for increased collaboration. Once faculty achieve tenure they face a different set of pressures, including questions about identity, impact, leadership, and legacy [2]. Kiernan Mathews highlighted that The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE), based at Harvard Graduate School of Education, finds that the experienced associate professor (at that rank for more than 5 years) is less satisfied with his or her institution and department than is the recently tenured associate professor [4]. The COACHE report, as well as other references [1],[2],[3],[4], emphasize the need for mid-career support.

Why Coaching?

Coaching is partnering with faculty in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential [5] – helping the faculty member become the best versions of themselves. The primary motive of the coach is to help the faculty unlock their abilities, triumph over their challenges, find their own solutions, and pursue their aspirations. Through the coaching process, learning focuses on two areas: learning about self and learning about self in relation to others [6]. This requires faculty to learn and unlearn some things or thinking about things in a different way. The coach and faculty member work together to challenge assumptions, create doubt, offer new perceptions, and make space for the faculty member to generate new interpretations and possible alternative realities. Coaching is a collaborative process that is highly relationship-driven.

The Coaching Approach

The Faculty Development and Leadership Specialist coordinates the coaching efforts in the College of Engineering. She is an Executive Coach trained at the PCC level through an International Coach Federation (ICF) credentialed program and frequently participates in continual learning such as Master Coaching programs. The formal training in coaching behaviors and competencies combined with experience in higher education administration (specifically Engineering administration) is invaluable to her coaching expertise.

The coaching philosophy implored in the program is based on self-awareness, intention, and choice. Observation and the natural skills and abilities that helped get the faculty members to this point in their careers are emphasized in the coaching process. Meeting them “where they are at” is a common principle. Initially, there was no planned structure for each person; the coach allowed each individual faculty member to choose the agenda and topic to work on for the session. The essence of the coaching perspective is that other people are full of potential. They are naturally talented, innately resourceful, and destined for greater things. They are also fully capable of making their own decisions, solving their own problems, and seizing their own opportunities and are much more likely to follow through when they do [6].

Program Summary

With a new Dean, who was aware that the college does a good job of supporting junior faculty *to* tenure, the Faculty Development and Leadership Specialist (FDLS) was charged with identifying ways to support mid-career faculty. The FDLS conducted needs assessment interviews with willing faculty members who had been promoted in the past two years to help target the approach. At the conclusion of each of the interviews faculty were offered the opportunity to participate in the coaching pilot program. The design of the program was to infuse purposeful support in the form of exploratory coaching just after faculty achieved the rank of tenured professor.

Coaching sessions were scheduled to last one hour. The majority of faculty members preferred to meet in their offices; however, the coach offered to meet in alternate locations and some faculty chose to meet in the Faculty Commons or in the Coach’s office. The frequency of the sessions depended on the individual faculty member. One participant wanted to meet every other week (most frequent) and another participant only met with the coach 3 times over the

entire academic year. On average, the frequency of the meetings were approximately once per month or about three sessions in the semester. When contracting with the faculty in the first cohort, engagements were made through December (only one semester at a time). Since then, the minimum engagement is six months, with the opportunity for re-contracting. The second set of newly-tenured faculty members were given contracts for the academic year based on the popularity from the first cohort. It is anticipated that most faculty will experience a minimum of 3 sessions and the average will be approximately 5-6 sessions.

It is important to note that each coaching conversation is different and the agenda is driven by the faculty member. The critical commonality is that there is time and space given to focus on the subject at hand – the Associate Faculty member. Giving space to their growth and goal-setting and remaining in inquiry as they navigate the new direction is powerful for both the coach and the faculty member. In general, two types of coaching can make a difference: behavioral and situational. Behavioral helps faculty be more self-aware and then (as needed) help them deploy new behaviors that are likely to be more effective than their default patterns in their key interpersonal encounters with students, staff, colleagues, and administration. Examples include if a faculty member wants to learn when to say yes and how to say no, let go of perfectionism, practice empathy or broaden their leadership style and presence. Situational coaching uses experience and training related to specific situations the faculty member is facing. Examples include clarifying communication, dealing with difficult colleagues, navigating crucial conversations, or negotiating potential opportunities [7].

Second Phase – Group Coaching

The first cohort who participated in the coaching program academic year 2016-17 was invited to participate in a second phase of the coaching pilot. The second phase is a Group Coaching experience. To date, the group has convened four times. The established goals of the Group Coaching were to: (1) provide support; (2) heighten contact; (3) build relationships; (4) identify shared needs; (5) share information/gain more clarity; and (6) learn from each other.

In communicating the parameters of the Group Coaching, it was important to emphasize topics the faculty often do not or cannot tackle on their own. The coach set an experimental tone, knowing that the organizing principle of the group was that each had participated in the original coaching cohort as individuals and the group would define the outcomes. The coach continues to use inquiry just as she did in one-on-one coaching. This specific coach has received training on coaching groups and teams, so has experience on facilitation and practices to enhance learning and development in group dynamics.

In the first meeting of the Group Coaching Cohort, rules of engagement were established (i.e. everyone should be heard in the group). Questions discussed initially were: (1) What do you really want to happen? (2) What is the most valuable way to spend time and why? (3) How can this group help you get your needs met?

Preliminary Findings – Phase 1 (Individual Coaching)

During initial meetings with faculty participants, several challenges that were on their minds as Associate Faculty were shared. The most common themes were:

1. Many participants expressed apprehension in regards to the next step in the promotion process and the lack of clarity about expectations for promotion to full professor.
2. Competition for funding. Funding can be particularly limited for researchers at the associate level and many faculty members expressed concerns about competing with full professors for funding and the depletion of start-up funds.
3. Path to leadership. Some faculty members are interested in exploring administrative and leadership opportunities yet they are not sure what kinds of service would be most valuable.
4. Collaboration. The subject of collaborating in different ways, outside of the department and discipline, was discussed. Faculty members are challenged by barriers to collaboration and a system that they believe rewards working in isolation.

The broader research on mid-career faculty supports the commonality of these themes beyond just one institution [1],[2],[3],[4],[8],[9].

Participants have reported an increased capacity for planning and prioritizing, better communication with colleagues, and an enhanced understanding of the academy as an organization as a result of participating in coaching. Research on coaching outcomes indicates that this kind of service is most appropriate for those who view coaching as beneficial and who are willing to give priority to the process, to ask for and accept feedback, to test assumptions, to explore and practice new behaviors, and to be direct and honest with the coach. Having the dedicated time to focus on goal setting and check in on accountability is a reported advantage. In the second year, after receiving feedback that engineers tend to be “structured beings” the faculty members are offered a thought experiment with guided journal prompts similar to the “*Finding Your Post-Tenure Pathway*” series published by Kerry Ann Rockquemore [8].

Preliminary Findings – Phase 2 (Group/Cohort Coaching)

Preliminary feedback and results from the approximately monthly gathering of the Group Coaching Cohort was that the Associate Faculty members appreciated the opportunity to engage in peer to peer exchanges and “learn more about unspoken things.” The term “sounding board” has been used in the interactions – they believe it was a good place to problem solve together and discuss ideas. The participants have also found value in the broadening of their perspectives by understanding how other’s navigate issues or what experiences people from different disciplines and other departments have. On average, 6 faculty members attended each gathering. From an administrative point of view, the Group Coaching support mechanism is high impact and low cost. The Dean’s Office (Associate Dean for Academic Affairs) pays for lunch. The internal coach is present to loosely guide the conversation through inquiry; however, the faculty members drove the agenda and conversation in the sessions thus far.

Next Steps

As this is a work in progress, the next stage of the project involves the tracking of future developments of the program and individuals. Tracking how useful faculty participants rate the experience over time and success measures such as self-correcting mechanisms, and reflection on goal setting and goal achievement will be included in the feedback gathering to assess impact.

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