

# Peer Coaching in a University Reference Department

Gwen Arthur

*Seeking to extend its regular staff development program, Temple University's Reference and Information Services Department implemented in Spring 1989 a semester-long peer coaching program designed to provide staff with support in fine-tuning and maintaining certain reference desk skills. The program combined training in positive reference behaviors, objective observation, and feedback. In addition to detailing the peer coaching experience at Temple, the article covers the origins of the program, coaching basics, and peer coaching's applicability to the academic library setting.*



For many years the Reference and Information Services Department at Temple University has had a training program for all reference desk staff, both professional and paraprofessional. We also have regularly scheduled departmental staff development programs that cover a variety of topics from specialized reference sources, such as the *CIS Index*, to special collections in the Temple and Philadelphia library communities to communication strategies for library staff working with special student populations such as handicapped and foreign students. Still those responsible for training and staff development wondered if we were doing everything we could to develop our staff's skills and knowledge. We were considering various directions in which to take our program.

Since we already had programs that introduced and periodically reviewed a variety of reference sources, we thought we should go elsewhere for program ideas. Increasingly imperative issues seemed to be those of behavior and communication in the reference interview. We had also become aware of the training research that

shows that the information and skills learned at workshops may not always be transferred to the on-the-job situation.<sup>1</sup> This research also concerned us, because of our established commitment to library continuing education at Temple.

In 1983 the Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Library Development and Services conducted an unobtrusive study of public library reference services. The study revealed that on the average only 55 percent of reference questions were answered correctly.<sup>2</sup> These findings were similar to those of other unobtrusive studies of reference service.<sup>3</sup> The findings in the 1983 Maryland survey (that used questions to which the answers could be found in just a few basic reference sources) also seemed to indicate that variables most strongly associated with correctness of answers were staff behaviors, including negotiation behavior (probing, paraphrasing, and open questioning), interest in the patron's question, comfortableness with the patron's question, and follow-up.<sup>4</sup> Maryland's Division of Library Development and Services has since instituted a statewide program for

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*Gwen Arthur is a Desk Services Coordinator at the Reference and Information Services Department, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122.*

reference training. The program focuses on the development of positive reference behaviors, using peer coaching as one method of maintaining desired interpersonal and communication behavior on the job. Studies done after the implementation of this training program revealed a dramatic increase in percentage of correct answers in reference departments in which these model behaviors were applied on a consistent basis.<sup>5</sup>

We at Temple recognized that coaching might be useful to our reference staff, not only assisting them in their transfer of new skills or information to on-the-job situations, but also providing them with support for fine-tuning and maintaining positive reference desk behaviors. The Maryland statewide study and statistics provided us with the incentive to plan a coaching program. The video *Coaching: Practice Makes Perfect* produced by the Library Video Network in Baltimore and its accompanying material on peer coaching, along with some basic training literature on coaching and feedback, provided us with a starting point for our plans.<sup>6</sup> But before describing the coaching program planned and implemented in Spring 1989, here are some coaching basics.

#### TRADITIONAL COACHING AND PEER COACHING

Coaching has been used in business and industry both as a means for resolving performance problems and for helping employees develop and maintain skills. Coaching as a facet of training or staff development may be short-term or long-term. It may cover a variety of jobs and skills: manual, intellectual, or managerial. In business, coaching relationships are frequently between supervisor and employee, and the business literature often emphasizes coaching strategies that reflect the dual role of the supervisor as coach and evaluator.<sup>7</sup> This hierarchical emphasis is somewhat mitigated by the recent management literature trend that emphasizes communication and motivational strategies based on positive feedback and reinforcement.<sup>8</sup> Elements of the coaching process in the business environment commonly include: (1) agreement

between supervisor and employee on problem or performance objectives; (2) mutual agreement on action to be taken; (3) follow-up by both parties; and (4) reinforcement from supervisor.<sup>9</sup> This same supervisory style of coaching exists in libraries. It is mentioned in passing in some of the library training literature, but little is found in-depth on this subject, except for M. G. Williamson's *Coaching and Counseling Skills*.<sup>10</sup> Supervisors who are interested in traditional coaching should consult the broader training and supervisory literature that details coaching approaches applicable to a variety of work environments.

The dearth of information on coaching in the library literature might indicate that library administrators and supervisors assume that new information or skills learned by staff, either during initial training or via various continuing education or staff development programs, will later be applied on the job. If so, these administrators need to pay more attention to the research that shows that without adequate practice and feedback, skills learned may not be transferred or maintained.<sup>11</sup> As Beth Babikow and Becky Schreiber point out in their article about coaching alternatives in library settings, librarians "do not have the opportunity to practice skills everyday [and] . . . until performance reflects new skills, can it be said that the skills have truly been learned?"<sup>12</sup> The larger issue of skill transfer was well covered in a bibliographic essay by Deborah Carver in a recent issue of *Library Administration and Management*.<sup>13</sup>

Babikow and Schreiber also advise that the traditional hierarchical mode of coaching may be uncomfortable for both the supervisor and the subordinate. Staff awareness of the dual supervisory responsibility for coaching and evaluation may inhibit their practice of the very skills that coaching is intended to develop.<sup>14</sup> Yet coaching still seems in order, as research in education shows that skills learned during training may not be applied to the job unless observation and feedback occur.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the collegial nature of certain professions like teaching and librarianship, peer coaching rather than supervi-

sory coaching is a model that should be considered for use in these environments. Peer coaching uses some of the same coaching basics (mutual agreement on objectives, reinforcement) as the more common style described above. However, the hierarchical relationship is no longer in effect: coach and coachee are colleagues, not supervisor and subordinate. Often employees may even pick their coaches. The opportunity in peer coaching to choose a trusted colleague as coach may reduce some of the tension inherent in the coaching situation (particularly in the traditional supervisory-subordinate arrangement). The process of peer coaching, as described by Babikow and Schreiber, includes: (1) picking a coach one trusts; (2) drawing up a contract identifying objectives; (3) observing of coachee by coach; and (4) providing feedback from coach to coachee.<sup>16</sup> With the exception of choice these steps are similar to those described above in traditional coaching.

Basically, the coach should adhere to certain tenets in any coaching situation. First, because the coaching situation may make the coachee feel vulnerable, an element of trust should exist. Also, the coachees must feel that they are getting something out of the coaching. Therefore, agreement on goals and objectives by both coaching partners is necessary. Observation and feedback are essential components of coaching; both should be objective.

### PEER COACHING IN LIBRARIES

Presently, peer coaching seems to be a model that has developed more in public libraries than in other types. At least one library system, that in Maryland discussed above, has planned and conducted reference workshops including coaching techniques to insure transfer of skills learned in the workshops to on-the-job situations.<sup>17</sup> The LVN video *Coaching: Practice Makes Perfect* has a public library emphasis.<sup>18</sup> The only formal coaching program in academic libraries may be part of the training program for preprofessionals at the University of Illinois Libraries.<sup>19</sup> In response to an informal query sent to

RLG libraries in the Summer of 1988, we received no positive responses regarding the use of any type of formal coaching program, either peer or supervisory. Some libraries did indicate that they use peer observations for purposes of evaluation. Evaluative peer observation is an entirely different matter.

Although peer coaching has evidently not been widespread in a variety of libraries, the technique may be particularly suited to the nature of librarianship. Many librarians consider themselves professionals. Because they often may function fairly autonomously as professionals, they may not respond favorably to the more common hierarchical coaching mode that dominates business. Peer coaching provides a context that may reduce some of the awkward or uncomfortable aspects of the traditional situation. After all, coaching does involve placing an individual in a vulnerable position, open to criticism. First, peer coaching allows the librarians to set their own objectives. Second, they can pick a trusted colleague as coach. Third, common experiences and concerns shared by coaching partners may provide the basis for particularly realistic, yet non-judgmental, feedback. Also, since it appears from the library literature (or lack of it) on coaching that many supervisors may not conduct formal coaching, peer coaches are not necessarily any less experienced at coaching than supervisory ones.

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All these points may be doubly true for academic librarians. The academic library environment is often both professional and collegial. Professional relationships maintained in this setting may reduce the emphasis on supervisor-subordinate roles. Professional and/or faculty unions



may make increased peer communication and interaction particularly important. All of these elements make the academic library a setting in which peer coaching may be a particularly useful method of providing staff with support for developing, maintaining, and fine-tuning skills.

#### PEER COACHING IN TEMPLE'S REFERENCE AND INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

The more we learned about peer coaching, the more promising it seemed for providing support for staff in incorporating new skills and maintaining positive reference behaviors on-the-job. Moreover, several Temple librarians had already expressed an interest in coaching for a variety of reference functions, including library instruction, computerized database searching, and communication and interpersonal skills at the reference desks. For a variety of reasons we decided to focus our initial coaching program on reference desk skills. First, reference desk service seemed a library function particularly well suited to coaching, since it often involves highly visible and observable behavior—interaction with the public. Second, by beginning with something simple, that is, observable behavior, we hoped to encourage objectivity in coaching. Third, because coaching on desk behaviors did not require any special subject or technical expertise, we could involve both professional and paraprofessional desk staff in the program, and hopefully eliminate evaluation as an issue by minimizing distinctions between experienced and inexperienced staff. Fourth, because some reference desk behaviors seem to be related to the accuracy of desk service, as the Maryland study demonstrates, coaching fit our ongoing priority for quality reference desk service.<sup>20</sup> (Coaching lays the foundation for feedback, modification, further observation, and more feedback.)

The Temple University program was initiated in February 1989 in the Reference and Information Services Department of the Central Library System. It was conceived as a semester-long program, at the end of which the staff would evaluate its

usefulness. Early in the term we planned to review positive reference desk behaviors, including nonverbal behavior, open questions, and other elements. Then we would introduce the concept of peer coaching, including the basics of objective observation and feedback. Then participating staff would coach one another on their reference desk behaviors for the rest of the semester. Depending on staff response, we could then continue and extend the program in following semesters to involve other staff. We hoped that beyond encouraging positive desk behaviors, the program would foster positive communications and teambuilding among department members.

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When we introduced the proposed program to Temple reference staff, they initially expressed some concern over how the program would be administered. Typical issues included scheduling of observation and feedback. Although staff did not express too much anxiety about being observed, they were quite conscious of the potential for psychological strain among coaching participants who were not comfortable with one another or who had not had some instruction and practice in objective feedback. We attempted to allay these concerns by providing a clear outline of our program and by emphasizing that the focus of the program was to provide objective feedback, not evaluation, of reference desk behaviors. We reminded them that they would choose their own coaches and draw up their own contracts.

To summarize, we began our program by using the "Reference Behaviors Checklist" included with the LVN video *Coaching: Practice Makes Perfect* to focus on various desirable reference desk behaviors such as follow-up, negotiation, and positive nonverbal behavior such as smiling.<sup>21</sup> The LVN video was also used to introduce

the peer coaching concept. Staff viewed additional videotaped sketches of reference interviews in order to stimulate further discussion. We covered the basics of behavior observation and objective feedback, again using videotaped simulated interviews in order to practice observation and feedback techniques. The entire reference staff participated in the initial training; about half were actively involved in coaching for the duration of the semester. A more detailed outline of the entire program is given in figure 1. (See figure 1.)

In May, at the end of the semester-long program, we received feedback from the coaching participants. This feedback was useful both in gauging some of the benefits of the program and in planning how to continue it. Not surprisingly, staff reported initial awkwardness about being observed and receiving feedback. However, they indicated that they felt more

comfortable as the semester progressed. They also reported that being coached sensitized them to question negotiation and made them generally more aware of their interpersonal and communication styles. Positive feedback particularly made them aware of which communication behaviors worked well for them; positive feedback reinforced good behaviors. Overall, coaching helped them fine-tune and maintain the positive reference behaviors.

Staff also felt that the experience of observing other staff in action was a valuable one. In many cases, serving as a coach and an observer provided staff with perhaps their first opportunity since their early training to *observe* the entire reference process in action and to evaluate how it works or doesn't work. The process also gave them a chance to observe patron reaction to different types of communication styles

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| First Session:  | <p>Session leaders stress nature of the program: it focuses on (1) learning about and using positive reference desk behaviors (2) coaching each other in order to maintain them.</p> <p>Entire department views ALA video <i>Coaching: Practice Makes Perfect</i>.</p> <p>Staff discuss concept of peer coaching; also details such as choosing coaches, contracts, scheduling conflicts.</p> <p>Positive desk behaviors are covered, using "Reference Behaviors Checklist."</p> <p>Volunteers agree to participate as coachees; rest of staff requested to cooperate if asked to participate as coaches.</p> |
| Second Session: | <p>All department members observe videotaped sketches of reference interviews and use the "Reference Behaviors Checklist" to practice their reference and observation skills.</p> <p>Coachees and their selected coaches share with the rest of the department how they drew up their contracts.</p>  |
| Third Session:  | <p>Staff covers basics of good feedback.</p> <p>Staff views same video sketches from Session Two and additional ones; using videos as basis for behavioral observation, they practice providing feedback both as a group and in teams of two.</p>   |
| Next six weeks: | <p>Coachees and coaches observe each other at reference desks, provide feedback to each other.</p>  |
| Fourth Session: | <p>Entire staff meets to discuss progress in coaching program; if and how it should be continued.</p>   |

FIGURE 1  
Temple Reference Peer Coaching Program Outline

and to judge for themselves which behaviors evoked positive responses from patrons. As contracted observers, they could do this without feeling intrusive, uninvited, or pressed for time because they themselves were on duty. Senior staff not only reported that observation of others sensitized them to their role as role models for new staff, particularly as they saw new staff emulating their desk behaviors, but also gave them a fresh perspective on possible ways to improve reference desk behaviors.

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Problems raised in our review of the program included scheduling. Since half the departmental desk staff was participating in the program, scheduling was difficult. Coaches did report the problem of patrons persisting in asking them questions when reference desk activity was high. Another problem was that coaching sometimes turned into consultation when a more experienced staff person was observing a new staff person.

### CONCLUSION

In spite of some problems, the overall response to the program from staff was positive. Because participants were able to select coaches from their peers, the coaching environment proved to be relatively nonthreatening. The program focused on coaching specific reference desk behaviors, so participants were able to set relatively unambiguous goals for observation and feedback in their contracts. Equally important, they were also able to emphasize those specific identifiable reference behaviors that were important to *them*.

The reported effects of the program were (1) greater clarification of the reference process for all staff involved in coaching; (2) increased recognition of positive communication behaviors, both through observation and feedback; (3) increased self-awareness of individual communication style and desk behavior; and (4) increased reinforcement of positive desk behaviors.

Departmentally the program introduced and reviewed reference techniques, such as using open questions, question negotiation, and follow-up. It made staff aware of good reference behaviors, encouraged their use by all staff, and supported staff application of them on-the-job via coaching. Also all staff became acquainted with the basics of objective feedback that can be useful in a variety of situations. Finally, the program fostered a team feeling among the participants.

Overall, the Temple reference staff felt that coaching provided a different sort of staff development program. Rather than just covering reference sources or acquiring new technical skills, such as computerized searching, the coaching experience provided them with the opportunity for polishing their communication skills and reinforcing their positive desk behaviors. The rush of activity at a busy reference desk often strains these behaviors. Staff participants felt that coaching, both observing and being observed, was a *supportive* experience, definitely worth continuing in some form in future semesters. Staff coaching teams of Spring 1989 say that they anticipate coaching each other in semesters to come, and we plan to have more of the staff start coaching in Fall 1989. Coaching will become a long-term component of our reference staff development program to be used regularly to support skills maintenance and development, and to stimulate and re-sensitize staff to the reference process. Although we have not evaluated the coaching program beyond the self-reports of the participants, we think that it has added a vital dimension to our reference training and staff development at Temple.



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