

## **Building a Coaching Culture: Translating Human Services Values into Everyday Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Human services systems that support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, and complex behavioral or medical needs often struggle to translate policy ideals into daily practice. Training is typically front-loaded, supervision is primarily administrative, and systems tend to reward compliance more than growth. This article presents a coaching culture as a practical and sustainable framework for bridging that gap. In a coaching culture, supervision becomes mentorship, learning is continuous, and staff growth is both visible and measurable. Behavioral Skills Training, Goal Attainment Scaling, and simple technology-based workflows make reflection and feedback part of everyday practice. As Pennsylvania and other states move toward performance-based contracting and credentialing for Direct Support Professionals, a coaching approach provides the structure needed to translate those policy shifts into genuine quality improvement. By strengthening workforce capacity and producing meaningful data, coaching culture enables systems to pay for outcomes rather than outputs and ensures that organizational values are consistently reflected in daily care.

### **Introduction**

It's 6:45 a.m. in a residential program for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism. The supervisor hurries through morning notes, reviews staffing coverage, signs medication sheets, and answers three emails marked "urgent." The team meeting that follows is short and functional: who's calling out, who needs coverage, and who has an appointment. Everyone leaves with a list of tasks, but no one leaves feeling more capable.

Scenes like this play out across human services every day. Supervisors and staff work hard and care deeply, yet their time together often centers on logistics and compliance rather than growth and learning. The system reinforces short-term efficiency over reflection, documentation over dialogue.

We talk about person-centered care, trauma-informed practice, and dignity of risk, but these values are difficult to sustain when the people delivering care rarely have space to reflect, learn, or receive feedback themselves.

The solution is not another checklist or training module. It's a coaching culture, an environment

where supervision becomes mentorship, learning is continuous, and staff are supported to practice the same values they're asked to model.

### **The Challenge**

Across human services, the gap between policy and practice often begins with how staff are developed and supported. New employees receive hours of orientation and mandatory training, but these sessions are front-loaded and compliance-driven. Staff complete the modules, check the boxes, and start working before they've had a chance to internalize what those values look like in action.

Supervisors, meanwhile, are tasked with administrative oversight rather than capacity building. Many are promoted for their reliability or tenure but are given little training in how to teach, coach, or model reflective practice. The result is a workforce that is technically trained but rarely developed, operating within systems that reward crisis response rather than proactive learning. Organizational behavior follows the same principles as human behavior; it does what it is reinforced to do. If organizational structures reward compliance, compliance becomes the culture. If organizations reinforce reflection, learning, and professional growth, those qualities become the culture.

When supervision becomes primarily administrative, it unintentionally reinforces the very patterns the system hopes to change: staff burnout, reactive problem-solving, and disconnection from purpose.

The challenge isn't a lack of caring; it's a lack of reinforcement for the behaviors that sustain caring.

### **Creating a Coaching Culture**

Creating a coaching culture redefines what it means to lead and learn within human services. In a coaching culture, every interaction becomes an opportunity for reflection, feedback, and growth. Supervisors are not only managers of workflow but teachers of practice.

Coaching shifts the question from "Did you complete your training?" to "How are you using what you learned?"

At its core, coaching depends on three interconnected practices:

1. **Modeling** – Supervisors demonstrate the behaviors they expect: curiosity, empathy, and professionalism.
2. **Observation and Feedback** – Learning happens through short, structured observations followed by timely, supportive feedback.
3. **Reflection and Reinforcement** – Staff and supervisors regularly review progress, identify barriers, and celebrate growth.

Behavioral Skills Training (BST) offers a structured framework for these steps. It combines instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback; methods long proven to improve skill fidelity and confidence. But BST is only a piece of the larger cultural puzzle. What makes it work is not just the procedure itself, but the organizational environment that prioritizes reflection and practice over paperwork.

Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) complements this process by giving both staff and participants a shared language for progress. Supervisors can use GAS to set small, measurable goals and track progress on a five-point scale. This approach reinforces growth for staff and mirrors the person-centered planning used for participants, aligning the whole system around learning.

As Pennsylvania moves towards Performance-Based Contracting, the state is taking a step in the right direction. Funding structures that reward outcomes rather than outputs mark progress toward accountability for what truly matters in service delivery, quality of life, consistency, and growth. Yet, defining quality is complex, and even well-intentioned measures can reward surface-level compliance. Coaching offers a practical solution. When organizations invest in supervisors as coaches, they generate important data on skill growth, competency, and aligned participant progress. These are the core indicators of quality.

At the same time, the push to credential direct support professionals establishes an important foundation for competence. But credentials alone cannot transform culture. True change happens when credentials are paired with coaching and when supervisors help staff translate knowledge into daily action.

### **How it Works**

Building a coaching culture doesn't require new resources as much as new routines. Every organization already has the tools to begin.

1. **Redefine supervision.** Supervisors need dedicated time and structure to coach. Weekly or biweekly one-on-ones focused on feedback, problem-solving, and goal review can replace reactive supervision with intentional mentorship.
2. **Embed learning in daily practice.** Instead of saving learning for classroom training, organizations can bring it into everyday routines: five-minute skill refreshers, team huddles focused on success stories, or shadowing sessions where new staff observe effective strategies in action.
3. **Technology can either burden or empower.** Many organizations already use EHR or EMR platforms, which can generate valuable reports and trends. However, these systems often aren't configured or integrated in ways that support coaching and reflective supervision. Most organizations already have access to tools like Microsoft Power Automate, Google AppSheet, Zenphi, or similar workflow applications, but aren't fully using them to simplify data entry, automate reminders, or visualize team progress. These

existing tools can free supervisors to spend more time with people rather than on paperwork. Dashboards that highlight progress on staff goals, participant outcomes, and communication frequency can reveal where coaching is working and where more support is needed. Looking ahead, the ethical use of artificial intelligence (i.e., AI that helps identify patterns in progress data or automates documentation summaries) can make this process even more efficient, while still preserving the human judgment and compassion that define good care.

4. Track what matters. Metrics should measure growth, not just compliance. Using GAS to track both participant and staff goals connects learning with outcomes. For example, a supervisor might monitor “percentage of staff demonstrating active listening” alongside “percentage of individuals achieving personal goals.” Both tell the story of a learning organization.

## **Impact**

When supervision becomes coaching, change happens at every level.

For staff, coaching increases confidence and reduces turnover. People feel seen, supported, and valued for improving, not just performing.

For supervisors, it shifts focus from managing crises to developing people. Supervisors spend more time teaching and less time correcting.

For participants and families, the benefits are direct: more consistent support, stronger relationships, and greater trust.

For organizations, coaching creates stability. Teams become better at problem-solving, communication improves, and mission statements move from posters to practice.

Research supports what organizations see in real life: consistent feedback and coaching improve staff competence and participant outcomes (Parsons et al., 2013; Erath et al., 2021). Teams that collaborate across disciplines deliver better continuity of care and achieve higher satisfaction among both staff and participants (Suen et al. 2021; Kunze and Machalicek 2022).

While these findings highlight the promise of coaching and interdisciplinary collaboration, more research is needed to empirically demonstrate how a coaching culture functions as an integrated and evidence-based model within human services organizations.

## **The Core Principles**

1. Front-loaded training builds awareness; coaching builds mastery.
2. Credentialing sets a foundation; culture sustains it.

3. Technology should enable relationships, not replace them.
4. Supervisors are the system's mirrors. When supervisors model curiosity, reflection, and compassion, staff learn to do the same.

### **Looking Ahead**

Human services systems are filled with people who care deeply about helping others. But caring alone is not enough; systems must reinforce learning, connection, and reflection as everyday habits.

Building a coaching culture is not about adding another initiative. It's about changing the way we see supervision, from oversight to partnership, from compliance to growth. It is about giving supervisors the same grace and support we ask them to give their teams.

When organizations adopt coaching as a mindset, they unlock their greatest resource: the people who already believe in the mission.

The path forward is simple, though not easy. Start small. Observe, reflect, and teach in the moment. Celebrate progress, not perfection. The culture will follow.

When coaching becomes the culture, human services stop talking about values; they start living them.

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