The Importance of Coaching: A Brief Survey of Probation Officers

Melanie S. Lowenkamp
Implementation Specialist
Oriana House, Inc.
Charles R. Robinson
Probation Administrator
Office of Probation and Pretrial Services
Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts
Igor Koutsenok
Center for Criminality & Addiction Research, Training & Application
University of California, San Diego School of Medicine
Christopher T. Lowenkamp
University of Missouri - Kansas City
Natalie Pearl
Research Division
San Diego County Probation

RECENT ADVANCES in community corrections supervision practices are nudging probation and parole philosophy out of its 40 year stagnancy (Bourgon, Gutierrez, & Ashton, 2011). Research-based supervision models focus officers' face-to-face interaction with offenders on long-term behavior change rather than the long-standing focus on compliance.

These practice models share a common lineage and are based on core correctional practices as enumerated by Andrews and Carvell (1998). Core correctional practices include dimensions of effective correctional practice like relationship building, effective reinforcement, effective use of authority, modeling pro-social behavior, problem solving, and the use of community resources (Dowden & Andrews, 2004). Nationally, at least 60 different local jurisdictions and federal districts have implemented various examples of these models, including Trotter's model of working with involuntary clients (Trotter, 1999), Taxman's *Proactive Community Supervision Model* (Taxman, 2008), Bonta et al.'s *Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision* (STICS) (Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon & Yessine, 2008), Lowenkamp et al.'s *Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest* (STARR) (Lowenkamp, Robinson, Alexander & VanBenschoten, 2009), and *Effective Practices in Correctional Settings-II* (EPICS-II) (Lowenkamp, Lowenkamp, and Robinson, 2010).

Evaluations of these models demonstrate their value and effectiveness (Trotter, 1996; Bonta et al., 2008; Taxman, 2008; and Robinson, Lowenkamp, Holsinger, VanBenschoten, Alexander, & Oleson, 2012) and consistently show a relative reduction of recidivism of up to 25 percent. There is no longer a question of whether staff should be trained in these practices; rather, the question is: What is the most effective way to get staff to use these newly learned techniques when they engage with offenders? This question is based on what we know from research in Canada (Bonta et al., 2008) and the United States (Robinson,

VanBenschoten, Alexander, & Lowenkamp, 2011), that demonstrates that officers are slow to adopt and use these newly learned skills after initial training, even when the agency has made a commitment to implement a new practice model (for a summary of research on implementation in educational settings, see Hall, Loucks, Rutherford, & Newlove, 1975; and Hall & Loucks, 1977).

Workshop training models have been shown to be limited and to not produce the type of permeated use of skills necessary to impact recidivism (for thorough reviews see Backer, David, & Saucy, 1995; Rogers, 2003; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Sholomskas, Syracuse-Siewert, Rounsaville, Ball, Nuro, & Carroll, 2005; Baer, Wells, Rosengren, Hartzler, Beadnell, & Dunn, 2009; and Bourgon et al., 2011). This emerging research indicates the importance of ongoing training and coaching. As a matter of fact, in a summary of their experiences, Joyce and Showers (2002) report that training in theory, modeling of new skills, and role play with feedback leads to 5 percent of the trainees using the new skill in their work environment. Adding on-the-job training or coaching to the training package increases that rate to 95 percent.

The current research seeks to understand the manner in which coaching assists officers in adopting and using newly acquired practice model skills. This is important, as understanding the mechanism by which coaching and booster sessions work to increase skill adoption and use helps to make these sessions more efficient and effective. Developing such an understanding is beneficial for several reasons. First, the responses to the survey provide useful information for evaluating the trainees' perception of the value of coaching. Second, possible barriers to the adoption and use of newly learned skills are identified. Third, information related to barriers to implementation helps to refine training curricula (both in class and coaching). Fourth, trainees can provide subjective assessments of how coaching improves the likelihood that they will use the skills with clients above and beyond the likelihood of use based on just training alone.

TABLE 1.
Coaching Survey Content

Item	Response
Who was your coach?	Check box multiple responses possible
The coaching sessions helped me to better understand how I can use the skills in my job.	Rating Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree
The coaching sessions allowed me to express concerns that I couldn't express in the classroom training.	Rating Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree
After the coaching sessions, I had a better understanding of how I could personally use these skills with clients.	Rating Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree
The coaching sessions allowed me the opportunity to ask questions about the skills	Rating Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree
The coaching sessions make it more likely that I will use the skills compared to just classroom training alone.	Rating Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree
How could we make the coaching sessions more beneficial to you?	Open text response

TABLE 2.
Coaching Survey Results—Percent that Strongly Agree or Agree with Statement

Survey Item	All	County	Federal
The coaching sessions allowed me the opportunity to ask questions about the skills	93%	92%	93%
The coaching sessions allowed me to express concerns that I couldn't express in the classroom training	83%	81%	85%
After the coaching sessions, I had a better understanding of how I could personally use these skills with clients[1]	88%	80%	93%
The coaching sessions helped me to better understand how I can use the skills in my job	92%	94%	91%
The coaching sessions make it more likely that I will use the skills compared to just classroom training alone	72%	70%	74%

[1] *difference significant at .05 level.*

Method
Training Curricula and Project Sites
The current study uses results of surveys administered at the conclusion of training efforts in two different systems. In the first project, training was provided to 90 senior probation officers in a large county probation system. The training included three days of classroom training in a curriculum called Integrated Behavioral Intervention Strategies (Lowenkamp & Koutsenok, 2011), which is a combination of motivational interviewing and EPICS-II skills. The three days of classroom training were followed by one-on-one, in-office coaching between the trainee and one of the trainers. These one-on-one interactions consisted of 20-30 minute discussions to uncover and resolve concerns about the skills, answer questions not covered in the training, and adapt any material to fit individual officer's needs. This was followed by 30-40 minutes of direct observation of the trained officer interacting with a probationer using the new skills. Finally, approximately 30 minutes were spent giving feedback and coaching.

The second training project was conducted in the U.S. Probation System and involved the development of STARR coaches. The training for STARR consisted of three classroom days and graduated practice. Graduated practice consisted of opportunities to practice the STARR skills with former offenders who

volunteered to interact with officers at the training. Trainers directly observed officers and gave the officers feedback on their skill use. In addition, following the trainings, staff submitted audio recordings and subsequently received ongoing feedback. In total, 95 officers took part in this training event.

Survey and Administration

In an effort to gain a better understanding of how the officers viewed coaching, we compiled a short seven-question survey guided by the constructs identified in the innovation diffusion literature (Rogers, 2003). The survey items are shown in Table 1. The current research focuses on the responses to the five items that used the four-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

Surveys were administered through email using an online survey service following a modified version of a recognized survey method (see Dillman, 1978 and Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). The officers received an initial email that informed them of the purpose of the survey, that their participation was anonymous, and that they should expect an email with a link to the survey in about a week to 10 days. Over a period of three weeks, the officers received a total of three more emails asking them to complete the survey.

Analysis

Once the web links to the surveys were deactivated, all responses were collected and combined into one dataset. The four-point scale was collapsed into a dichotomous scale. The first category included the strongly disagree or disagree responses. The second category included responses that indicated that the respondent strongly agreed or agreed with a statement. We calculated percentages of responses that fell into the "agree or strongly agree" category for the entire sample. We also used chi-square test statistics to determine if there are any differences in the results based on the group an officer belonged to (county versus federal).

Results

The survey methodology used in this research produced a response rate of 70 percent (63/90) for the sample of county probation officers and a response rate of 91 percent (86/95) in the sample of federal probation officers. The combined response rate is 81 percent (149/185). The percentages of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing with each of the statements on the survey are reported in Table 2. The tables show results for all respondents, as well as the results for the county and federal samples.

As indicated in Table 2, a high percentage of the respondents agreed with the statement that the coaching sessions allowed them the opportunity to ask questions about the skills and express concerns about the skills that they could not express in the classroom setting (93 percent and 83 percent for county and federal respondents respectively). A high percentage of respondents also agreed that the coaching sessions helped them better understand how they could use the skills with clients and how they could use the skills as part of their job (88 percent and 92 percent respectively). One difference between results from the two groups is that the percentage of county officers agreeing with the statement that the coaching sessions helped them better understand how they could use the skills with clients is lower (statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level) than the percentage of federal officers agreeing with that same statement. Finally, a somewhat lower percent, but still the overwhelming majority (72 percent), indicated that the coaching session increased the likelihood that they would use the IBIS/STARR skills compared to training alone.

Discussion

Results indicate that the respondents see the value in coaching and report that coaching increases the likelihood they will use the skills with clients. This is consistent with Bourgon et al.'s (2011) research indicating that the skill use increases as officers participate in a greater number of post-training booster sessions. This coalescing of research is valuable as we can begin to understand the mechanism by which coaching and booster sessions might work to increase the level of use. For example, the survey included in this research indicates that officers were more likely to develop a better understanding of the skills when given an opportunity to try the skills, and observed the applicability of skills to the clients they work with on a regular basis.

These findings coincide with the research on innovation diffusion, which indicate that simplicity, opportunities to try the new innovation, observable results, and relative advantage are all factors that predict if an innovation is likely to be adopted (Rogers, 2003). The ability to watch other practitioners use an innovation provides an opportunity to observe if an innovation is safe and/or beneficial. The more obvious

the evidence of rewards, the more likely the strategy will be adopted. Relative advantage refers to the participants' ability to identify whether (a) the benefits of using the new practice outweigh the risk of adoption; and (b) the new practice improves upon the existing strategies. The greater the perceived advantage, the more rapid the rate of adoption. To the extent that officers were able to resolve concerns and questions about the skills they were trained in, officers were able to better understand, or simplify, the new skills. To the extent that the officers were able to try the skills in a safe environment with support and coaching they received the opportunity to experiment with the skills and reduce their uncertainty about the value of the skills. Finally, the opportunity to increase understanding about the skills, receive answers to questions about the skills, and try them in a controlled setting possibly led to the firsthand observation of the value of the skills. As one officer recently commented, the more experience accrued in using the skills ". . . the more meaningful my interactions with offenders have become."

Limitations

This research provides insight into how coaching might assist probation officers in the acquisition of newly learned skills. While the research adds to the understanding of how skills are acquired, the current study has limitations that should be considered when reviewing the results. First, the sample size is small and represents two community corrections systems. The research findings may not represent the perceptions of a larger sample of probation officers or a larger pool of probation systems. The second limitation is associated with the length of the survey used to gather the data. The survey used in this research is brief. The brevity of the survey prevents measuring the level of use or overall adoption of the skills. There is no claim that the survey adequately addresses all or any of the constructs known to predict innovation diffusion; however, the main constructs as identified by Rogers (2003) guided the selection of items to include on the survey.

Future Research

The current research focused on understanding a group of probation officers' perceptions of the impact of coaching. Future research will advance the understanding of the added value of coaching by expanding the survey to better measure how coaching impacts perceived benefits of the skills, self-efficacy in using the skills, and understanding. Future research should also focus on investigating the link between coaching and the level of use, and the rate of adoption by individual officers. Finally, future research should also focus on how coaching indirectly impacts clients' outcomes through the level of use of the skills.

Summary

The landscape of community corrections is evolving at a rapid pace. As agencies advance the implementation of evidence-based practices, supervision models are being developed to support the probation officer's use of core correctional practices and the philosophical shift associated with becoming a change agent. Early evaluations highlight the value of using core correctional practices and the role of coaching and booster sessions. Given the evidence supporting the effectiveness of core correctional practices and our knowledge of the importance of coaching, it is important to understand why implementation strategies like coaching might assist officers in adopting newly learned skills. The current study focused on understanding the impact of coaching by surveying a sample of probation officers.

The current study demonstrates why coaching might influence the adoption of newly learned skills. Analyses suggest that coaching provides an opportunity for participants to ask questions that are left unresolved after the classroom training and an opportunity to better understand how they might use the skills with clients and how the skills apply to their day-to-day jobs. Additionally, analyses suggest that coaching makes it more likely that participants will use the skills than if they just receive classroom training. Given the philosophical shift associated with adopting the use of core correctional practices, it might be unreasonable to expect that classroom training alone will establish competency and motivate officers to use the skills with clients. Policy makers, agency leaders, and trainers should take this into account when planning how to help probation officers transfer skills from the classroom to day-to-day work.

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