Coaching: The True Path to Proficiency, From an Officer's Perspective

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THE PAST SEVERAL decades have seen a dramatic shift in the understanding of community corrections and effective supervision. In general, researchers have found that implementation of the Risk-Need-Responsivity model can significantly impact recidivism rates (see Andrews & Bonta, 2010a, for a review of this research and Lowenkamp, Flores, Holsinger, Makarios, & Latessa, 2010, for a review of its application to supervision-based programs). A recent meta-analytic review (Andrews & Bonta, 2010a) demonstrated that adherence to all three principles leads to the greatest reductions in recidivism, while non-adherence to these principles leads to increases in recidivism. Unfortunately, analysis of conversations between officers and offenders have demonstrated that there is little adherence to the RNR model (Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon, & Yessine, 2008). For probation officers, the shift has focused on moving from a strict monitoring role to one that balances monitoring with what has come to be known as the "change agent" role. The officer as change agent focuses on officers having a more therapeutic role, understanding the principles of cognitive-behavioral intervention and social learning, and assisting offenders with learning skills and applying them to high-risk situations. The idea of officer as change agent has been

detailed elsewhere (i.e., Bourgon, Gutierrez, & Ashton, 2011, Lowenkamp et al., in press), but overall these techniques have come to be known as Core Correctional Practice (CCP). Andrews and Kiessling (1980) defined these correctional practices as:

1. use of authority,
2. role modeling/reinforcement,
3. problem-solving strategies,
4. use of community resources, and
5. relationship factors.

Dowden and Andrews (2004) provided a meta-analytic review of the core correctional practices, indicating that the use of authority, disapproval, reinforcement, modeling, teaching problem-solving skills, and structured learning are all related to the effectiveness of correctional services. While much of the research reviewed by Dowden and Andrews was devoted to treatment programs, other research has examined the use of these skills in community supervision settings (Trotter 1996, 1999; Taxman et al., 2006). Several studies have demonstrated favorable results for these approaches (e.g., Bonta et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2012), with decreases in recidivism ranging from 25 percent to almost 50 percent relative risk reduction when compared to traditional supervision. Clearly, using these types of interventions can fundamentally change the work of probation officers.

While the potential effectiveness of these core correctional practices is becoming clear, what has been less clear is the ability of agencies to implement these changes at the officer level. Since 1998 a number of training protocols have focused on shifting officers from "check-in" supervision to a more skill-focused interaction between the corrections professional and the client, including training curriculums from Trotter (1996) and Taxman (2006); more recent trainings include the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS, Bonta et al., 2010), Effective Practices in Correctional Settings (EPICS), and Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Rearrest (STARR, Robinson et al., 2012). All of these curriculums emphasize teaching officers specific skill strategies to be used during client contacts, in the hopes that they will help offenders internalize prosocial thinking and behavior. While these trainings differ from one another, they all focus on teaching core correctional practices through lecture, role play, and most important, follow-up coaching and feedback. Unfortunately, many agencies have had difficulty implementing all aspects of these training curriculums, particularly in regards to follow-up coaching. Importantly, the quality of implementation can significantly impact the effectiveness of an intervention. For instance, in a review

of cognitive-behavioral programs (CBT) for offenders, Lipsey (2007) found that effective implementation was one of the three main elements that impacted the effectiveness of CBT. In a similar review of juvenile offender interventions, Lipsey (2009) concluded "…in some analyses, the quality with which the intervention is implemented has been as strongly related to recidivism effects as the type of program, *so much so that a well-implemented intervention of an inherently less efficacious type can outperform a more efficacious one that is poorly implemented*" (p. 127). In this article we focus on the importance of coaching in skill development.

Coaching

A review of implementation research consistently demonstrates that trainings focused simply on knowledge transfer, with no skill training or follow-up, do not lead to changes in everyday practice (Fixsen et al., 2005). For example, Joyce and Showers (2002) reviewed the research on skill acquisition for teachers. When workshops focused on theory and discussion, there was little change in skill use in the classroom; even when demonstration and practice within the training were added, there was only a 5 percent use of the skill in the classroom. Only after on-the-job feedback and coaching were included were substantial gains (95 percent use in the classroom) achieved. Similarly, greater proficiency in MI is demonstrated by those individuals who receive coaching and feedback versus those who only receive workshop training (Miller, Yahne, Moyers, Martinez, & Pirritano, 2004). Research on training in cognitive-behavioral therapy suggests that the use of follow-up/coaching is essential to increased knowledge and use of the skill (Cully, Teten, Benge, Sorocco, & Kauth, 2010). And several studies of cognitive therapy have shown that outcomes improve as therapist skill level improves (Shafran, Clark, Fairburn, Arntz, Barlowe, Ehlers, Freeston, Garety, Hollon, Ost, Salkovskis, Williams, & Wilson, 2009). Research in other areas suggests that having a mentor and participating in discussions with others about new practices are more likely to lead to integration of new techniques into daily practice (Cook, Schnurr, Biyanova, & Coyne, 2009), pointing to the importance of developing an environment of colleagues that support the new intervention. Finally, Cully et al. (2010) and Miller et al. (2004) have demonstrated that on-the-job coaching is essential to ensure successful skill transfer from the classroom to the community. The coaching relationship relies on having a knowledgeable coach as well as developing a safe atmosphere in which trainees will feel comfortable discussing the questions, concerns, and issues they are experiencing when attempting newly learned skills. Additionally, it is important for trainees to receive appropriate feedback, which means that coaches need a means to accurately assess the skill level of the trainee. This is where audio (or video) taping of interactions comes into play. Without such data, it is impossible to know exactly what has occurred in an interaction. For instance, Miller and Rose (2009) observe about training in Motivational Interviewing (MI):

> We know of no reliable and valid way to measure MI fidelity other than through the direct coding of practice samples. Clinicians' self-reported proficiency in delivering MI has been found to be unrelated to actual practice proficiency ratings by skilled coders (Miller & Mount, 2001; Miller et. al., 2004), and it is the latter ratings that predict treatment outcome.

While there is little research to date on the impact of audiotaping and coaching on probation officer skill level, some findings are emerging. Bonta et al. (2010) found that officers who were more involved in the clinical support (coaching) activities demonstrated more of the skills and focused conversations on appropriate risk factors. Research on MI training (Alexander, Robinson, & Lowenkamp, in press) found that officers only received one follow-up coaching session and, not surprisingly, very few officers were found to have beginning proficiency or competency as measured by the Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity (MITI) scale. Research has also suggested that officers find value in the coaching experience. Lowenkamp et al. (2012) found that a majority of officers reported that coaching sessions helped them better understand how they could use the skills. Officers also indicated that having coaching sessions increased the likelihood that they would use the skills taught.

Current Study

This article explores officers' views on audiotaping and coaching, expanding on the previous research by Lowenkamp et al. (2012). Additionally, we report on the extent of skill use. All officers underwent training in STARR, which included initial 1–3 day classroom training followed by mandatory audiotaping and attendance at coaching sessions. The initial group trained in STARR was coached by an expert trainer and, once they reached proficiency, the members of this group were approached about becoming coaches for the next groups of officers trained. All officers agreed to become coaches and completed a minimum of two days of training in coaching STARR, followed by mentoring from the expert trainer. Coaching responsibilities included listening to audiotapes and giving individual feedback, as well as running group coaching sessions ("boosters") with their assigned officers. Coaches were assigned no more than three officers to coach at a time. Group coaching sessions included didactic review of skills, discussion of problems/issues encountered, tips for using the skills, listening of audiotapes and peer feedback, and role play of skills with immediate peer and coach feedback. In general, the coaching sessions lasted 1–1½ hours, with sessions occasionally lasting as long as three hours.

All officers trained in STARR were asked to complete an anonymous survey covering both audiotaping and coaching. Of the 15 officers trained, 13 completed the survey, an 87 percent response rate. As part of their STARR training, all officers were expected to attend at least monthly coaching sessions and turn in 1–2 audiotapes per month. Officers have turned in an average of 28 tapes since training began in 2012, with a range of 13–53 audiotapes submitted. Officers have also attended a significant number of coaching sessions, averaging at least one per month, with some locations having sessions twice monthly or once every three weeks following the initial training (the three locations held 10, 12, and 16 sessions, respectively).

Results

Audiotaping

Officers universally experienced anxiety about taping before beginning to tape contacts. As one officer stated: "During my initial STARR training, I was informed that I would be asked to submit recordings of live personal contacts to a STARR coach, who in turn would provide me with feedback. I vividly remember feeling nervous, anxious, and overwhelmed because of the idea of somebody evaluating my performance of a newly acquired skill." Another officer commented: "At first I was skeptical and hesitant to use STARR techniques. I felt uncomfortable recording my conversations with offenders, it felt scripted and robotic." Another officer's statement captures the importance of audiotaping: "After

going through initial STARR training I really wasn't sure what to do. I was hesitant to record my interactions and the thought of role play made me nervous. I would attempt a STARR skill in my office with an offender but really have no clue as to how I had performed. I had not recorded it and my coach had not observed it." Once they got over their initial anxiety, officers quickly began to see the value in audiotaping. Nearly all (77 percent) of the officers indicated that they listen to every contact they audiotape, and 38 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the conversation was different from how they remembered it. Officers overwhelmingly felt that the requirement to audiotape ensured that they actually practiced the skills and that taping was the litmus test to determine if they actually performed the skill with fidelity. They found it helpful to be able to listen to themselves so that they could accurately identify errors, missed opportunities, and missed steps as well as things they did well. Eighty-five percent of officers indicated that listening to the tape before coaching sessions helped them learn more during the session, and anecdotally coaches reported that there was a "clear difference" between coaching officers who had and had not listened to their tape before the session. Additionally, all of the officers indicated that listening to their audiotape helped them critique their own skill level, and nearly all (92 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that listening to their tapes enhanced their skills.

Coaching

A smaller but still significant proportion (46 percent) of officers reported anxiety about being coached before the commencement of coaching. One officer stated "I remember being nervous about taping my sessions and about being 'critiqued.' Although I had been performing the job of a probation officer for many years, my confidence was low about whether I'd be able to master these skills and become proficient." Officers participated in both individual and group coaching sessions, and both appear to be useful in enhancing skills, but perhaps for different reasons. All of the officers agreed or strongly agreed that the coaching sessions (group and individual) were helpful to them. Group sessions appeared useful in hearing other officers' use of the skills, receiving peer feedback, and sharing struggles they are experiencing. Individual sessions allowed the coaches to provide more targeted, individualized feedback, which may assist more with actual skill development. Despite

the initial anxiety, all of the officers subsequently reported that coaching and booster sessions were useful in helping them understand when and how to apply the skills. One officer stated:

> . . . contrary to my initial feelings about having a coach, I found the coaching sessions to be extremely supportive, encouraging, and motivating. My coach instilled the belief in me that I was putting forth effort, making progress, and quickly becoming proficient in STARR. I would take the feedback received during each session and try to incorporate the recommendations into my next contact. In addition to my coach providing me constructive feedback on the skill usage, I was also taught to answer questions on my own about why I was learning the skills, how it might be beneficial to the client, and also how I could identify opportunities to incorporate the skills into my supervision duties.

Several officers also expressed surprise that the coaching differed from their expectations:

> The coaching sessions were not what I expected. I was given an opportunity to provide my own feedback first about what I thought I did well and my coach and I would discuss those areas and other areas that she may have picked up. We would then discuss areas that I thought could have gone better. Sometimes she would offer suggestions I hadn't thought of, and together we'd discuss my goals for the next time I would use this skill. It was a very safe exchange and left me feeling good about my efforts and my ability to improve my skill level.

Interestingly, one officer connected the coaching to his fundamental reason for doing the job, helping people: "The most gratifying part of being coached was that for the first time in my career I was actually being trained on how to bring about pro-social change in an offender. Helping people, that is why I chose this profession."

In general, the group sessions occur monthly, and the majority (77 percent) of officers felt this frequency of coaching was "just right." Perhaps most important, 92 percent of officers indicated that the coaching sessions made it more likely that they would actually use the skills. It is likely that this process becomes a positive feedback loop—as officers audiotape contacts and attend coaching sessions, they receive feedback that improves both their skill and confidence; in fact, 92 percent strongly

agreed or agreed that the coaching sessions increased their understanding of how to apply the skills. As one officer stated:
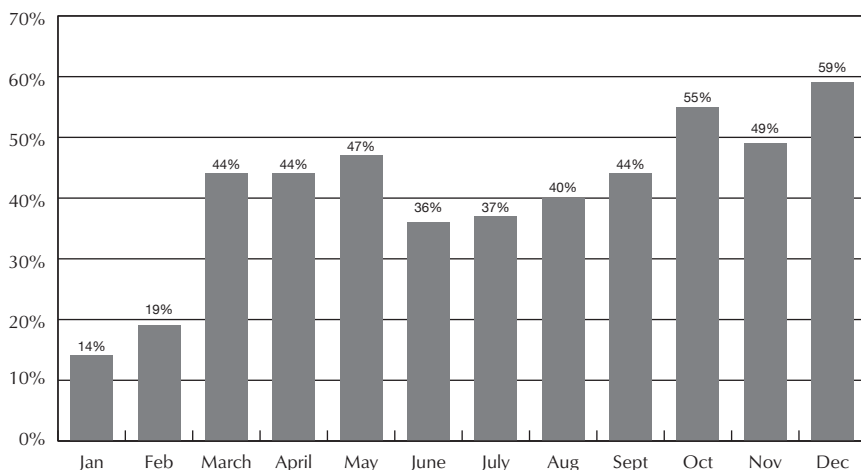
> My experience of being coached has been an extremely positive one, and I feel that coaching was the primary reason my STARR skill level and usage is where it is today. I have always thought I was good at evaluating myself and what I needed to improve on, but it helps to have the "outside" point of view from the coach. I was pretty hard on myself in the beginning when first learning the skills, and my coach helped me to see the positive things I was doing as well. This helped me get through that period of discomfort and anxiety when trying to do something new like STARR, and get over the fears of recording.

Increased understanding, coupled with confidence in using the skills, makes it more likely that the officers will use the skill in the future. As one officer bluntly stated, "I can honestly say that without the individual coaching and booster (coaching) sessions my use of STARR would have declined or stopped shortly after returning from my initial STARR training." As the coaching allowed them to overcome this tendency, officers began to see the usefulness of the skills. One officer commented:

> I became more comfortable and developed my own style. This allowed me to deepen my conversations with clients. These conversations resulted in offenders opening up and discussing daily life, risky behaviors, drivers of risk factors, ways to address them and allowed clients to think about benefits and consequences of their actions. Contacts with clients became more collaborative. I am now talking with offenders rather than at them. STARR guides offenders to think for themselves and to make the appropriate choices. Additionally, I like to think that STARR has allowed me to maintain a better rapport with clients. I realized that STARR was a powerful tool when I had a conversation with a member of the Bloods. A hardened criminal opened up to me, discussed personal issues that drove his criminal behavior, and cried. At the end of the conversation he made a commitment to get back on track and work on staying out of trouble.

Such testimonials are substantiated by the data regarding skill use. Since the training/coaching began, there has been a steady increase in skill usage as time progressed (see Figure 1). The slight drop in usage in June

FIGURE 1.
STARR Skill Use as Percentage of Contacts, by Month, 2012

Another coach noted that having to coach others develops other leadership and management skills: "As I reflect upon the coaching experience, it provides tremendous leadership training. I was evaluating performance and leading meetings in my office." One coach was subsequently promoted to a supervisor position, and has commented:

> It [coaching] has been beyond rewarding. As their coach and SUSPO [Supervisory United States Probation Officer], I see on a daily basis the transformation in supervision skills and practices that has occurred. I have also seen a decrease in violation reports and increase in positive officer/offender rapport. I have been approached by countless offenders that recognize the efforts of their officers. I hear statements like, "I have never had a probation officer speak with me or treat me like this before." It is gratifying to know that as a coach I have played a small part in helping that officer and offender achieve success.

Since beginning implementation of the RNR model and use of STARR skills, the district has seen revocation rates steadily decrease, as evidenced in Figure 2. Currently, the revocation rate is one-third lower than the national average for federal probation districts. Research is underway to determine exactly which RNR and CCP strategies may be influencing this reduction.

reflects a new group of officers being trained and added to the data. To date, over 70 percent of the officers trained are using the skills in at least half of their contacts.

In addition to surveying the trained officers, we asked the STARR coaches to reflect on their experience of coaching. All of the coaches began as peer coaches, having no supervisory oversight of those they were coaching. Coaches reported that the experience has been both challenging and rewarding. One coach noted:

> It was a challenging transition as I began to provide feedback to my coworkers on their interactions with offenders. This was not a role that I was accustomed to. Typically, officer and offender interactions were done in a private setting and I was beginning to listen in on these conversations. Fortunately, the officers that I worked with were very coachable and appreciated the feedback that I provided.

Another stated:

> Some of the challenges of being a STARR coach are modeling the use of STARR skills at a high frequency of contacts with competency, providing meaningful and constructive feedback to my fellow coworkers (some of which are very experienced officers), responding to criticisms about the use of STARR in supervision, and motivating people to try something new."

Another coach stated:

> I think the fact that all of us coaches were new learners is an asset that we can bring

to a coaching relationship. I think it's valuable for my peers to hear about instances in which I got stuck trying out a new skill for the first time as they realize that they are not alone in their learning curve. One thing I've noticed in almost all of my interactions with my officers is that they are oftentimes much harder on themselves than me! They want to talk about their areas of improvement before discussing all of the things they did well when executing the skill. I think the coaching relationship gives the officer a chance to get feedback in a safe setting.

The coaches also noted that having to coach others helped them hone their own skills:
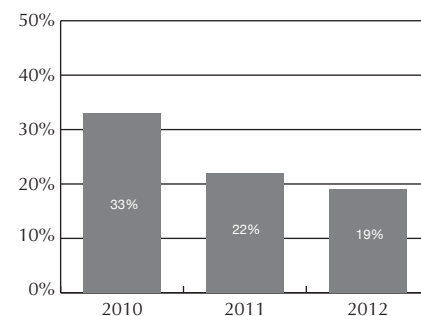
> My experience as a coach has not only allowed me to help those who I coach become better in their application and usage of the skills, but has also allowed me to become better in my use of the skills. I truly believe that hearing others demonstrate the STARR skills, in addition to using them myself, has helped me in my skill development. Coaching has also helped me improve certain interpersonal skills, such as listening to and providing someone constructive feedback. My greatest challenge was to provide someone feedback that would still give them the blueprint for improvement but not deteriorate their motivation. My sense of empathy has also become greater, as I recognize what the officers are going through when they first learn and start using the skills, because I was once in their shoes.

FIGURE 2.
12 Month Revocation Rates

Conclusion and Next Steps

The survey results support research demonstrating that coaching is absolutely essential to officer skill development in Core Correctional Practices. Although most of the officers expressed significant anxiety before the audiotaping and coaching, they overwhelmingly felt that both were indispensable to the learning

process. Clearly, management must assist officers in working through this initial resistance and create a safe learning environment that allows officers to take full advantage of the coaching experience. Additionally, we recommend addressing organizational issues in order to assist officers in finding the time to invest in learning activities. Providing officers with both the emotional and logistical support necessary to undertake this structured learning process is more likely to result in successful implementation of CCPs such as STARR. Specific strategies for implementing new initiatives can be found in resources such as the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) and previous articles on implementation (e.g., Alexander, 2011). Future research will focus on developing specific competency-rating scales for each of the STARR skills and exploring how competency and frequency of STARR skill use is related to recidivism.

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