Principles of Effective Coaching

WHO CAN COACH?
Anyone can be a coach. They can come from a variety of clinical or administrative backgrounds, from any rank within the facility, or from outside the facility altogether. Experience from the BetterBirth trial and from the WHO Collaboration showed that a peer-to-peer model works best – in other words, nurses coaching nurses and doctors coaching doctors. A Checklist coach can coach others full time, or they can coach part time, in addition to their other responsibilities. A coach can be, but does not need to be, a senior member of the facility. No matter what the coach’s background, they must have the characteristics of a good coach.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD COACH
A good coach is someone who is:

- Coachable
- Respected
- Humble
- Patient

Effective coaches are those who are coachable themselves – they are motivated by the goal of improving their practices, they are willing to be observed while working, and they will openly answer questions about their own performance. People who respond well to being coached usually have the insight, sensitivity and understanding needed to coach people themselves.

While a good coach does not need to hold a senior position in the facility or health-care system, effective coaches should be trusted and respected by their peers. Similarly, coaches do not need to be clinicians, but they are better able to build trust with birth attendants if they understand, can relate to, or have expertise in the environment surrounding childbirth. However, pretending to have all the answers can destroy the trust that is so vital to a successful coaching relationship. A good coach acknowledges what he or she doesn’t always know.

Coaches who are humble and honest are able to build successful relationships with their colleagues. Effective coaches treat others as though they are doing their best to help the mother and newborn and to provide safe care. With this humble attitude, coaches are much more likely to get birth attendants to listen to and respond to feedback. Good coaches recognize birth attendants for the positive actions they take and acknowledge that they are trying to learn and do their best. When offering observations of other people’s practices, coaches do not judge what or how they did.

Coaches also have the patience and flexibility to allow others to learn by reaching their own conclusions. Effective coaches convince birth attendants to reflect on what has happened and guide birth attendants to identify for themselves the challenges and potential solutions for improving their performance. In doing so, coaches create opportunities for others to solve their unique difficulties themselves, rather than presenting ready-made solutions to generic problems. Not only does the coach better address the birth attendants’ concerns, but the birth attendants are also more likely to make use of the solutions they themselves have created.

Coaches must demonstrate flexibility by using multiple approaches to meet the needs of others. For example, coaches may meet with birth attendants one-on-one or in small groups. Similarly, coaches may coach birth attendants in person or remotely (by telephone or by internet). Coaches should make their decisions about how to coach based on what will be the most effective choice for the birth attendants they coach, or for the facility or health-care system at large and based on what will work with the resources available.
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NECESSARY COACHING SKILLS

In order to help birth attendants improve their skills, coaches should use the following skills:

- Building relationships based on trust
- Demonstrating genuine curiosity
- Using effective observation and communication skills

In order to help others improve their practices, coaches must convince them that their practices can be changed for the better. Birth attendants will offer a commitment to improving their practices only to coaches who have earned their trust. An effective coach will take the time to build a rapport with others and understand their perspective, in order to gain trust and a commitment to improve. Expressing empathy when appropriate is important and lays the foundation for a strong coaching relationship. Demonstrating genuine curiosity or sincere interest while observing and asking questions will enable greater trust and success. Coaches can do this by using a nonjudgmental tone and open-ended questions that prompt conversation and reflection. Others should want to talk to and seek support from the coach.

Additionally, coaches who keenly observe and ask the right questions can accurately diagnose root causes of problems. While assuming the best of individuals and teams, coaches who understand root causes can better facilitate solutions that are appropriate and achievable. For example, a birth attendant may be skipping measuring temperature not because s/he doesn’t know how to do this, but because there is no working thermometer at the facility. When coaches can help others identify for themselves the barriers that stand in the way of improvement, it is a much more powerful motivator for change.

In order to facilitate change, a coach must understand what keeps others from improving their practices. A coach is likely to witness three factors34 that make it difficult for others to perform the items on the Checklist:

- OPPORTUNITY – Environmental or contextual factors beyond an individual’s control (for example: leadership support challenges, human resource, time or supply constraints)
- MOTIVATION – Interest or internal belief
- ABILITY – Skill, knowledge, or technical confidence.

HELPFUL COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO ENCOURAGE PROGRESS

In discussing practices, giving feedback, and helping birth attendants to identify problems and solutions, a coach must use good communication skills. A good coach knows when and how to listen well, how to speak to others with respect and kindness, and how to communicate ideas clearly and simply.

Using open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes, no, or other one-word answer. Such questions typically begin with Why or How. By using open-ended questions, a coach creates an opportunity for birth attendants to discuss and reflect on their practices rather than simply agreeing (or disagreeing) with the coach.

Seeking commitment

By encouraging birth attendants to clearly state specific, concrete goals with definite timelines, a coach helps others to commit to changing their practices. While a coach should not judge or shame a birth attendant for not reaching a goal, they can help by motivating a birth attendant to reach their own objectives and by discussing ways in which, together, they can make reaching those goals easier.
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**Actively listening**

Actively listening requires a coach to participate in the conversation, even when they are not speaking, by paying close attention to the speaker and by confirming what they hear. A coach may use verbal and non-verbal cues to show the listener that they are interested. For example, they may nod to show they are interested and they agree with the speaker’s statement, or they may use statements like “What I’m hearing you say is ...” to be certain that they have heard the right message.

**Giving respectful and constructive feedback**

A coach offers their observations about a birth attendant’s practices in order to help that birth attendant understand why and how to change their practices for the better. Feedback should never discourage but instead should build others’ confidence and motivation to improve. Therefore, feedback must be given respectfully and constructively:

- A coach should set an appropriate time and place to share their observations. If they wait to give feedback on a past action or situation, their observations will not be as powerful because the birth attendant will not necessarily remember the event well. Additionally, the coach should be sure that the time and place in which they choose to give feedback is not threatening or embarrassing for the birth attendant.

- A coach should describe and discuss facts and their observations rather than generalizations. They should be as specific as possible and should not express stereotypes or judgments based on assumptions.

The three-part question allows a coach to give feedback in a safe and productive way by organizing their feedback and the conversation that results from it in a respectful way. The figure below offers an explanation and some examples of the 3-part question. These important communication skills always require a calm, polite, interested tone in order to avoid offending or angering a listener.

**FORMULATING THE 3-PART QUESTION**

The 3-part question is based on a simple formula:

1. **YOUR OBSERVATION**
   - **GOALS**
     - Explain your observation
     - Be specific and clear
     - Remain as objective as possible
   - **EXAMPLES**
     - “I saw...”
     - “I observed...”
     - “I watched...”
     - “The team did...”
     - “The team didn’t...”
     - “I noticed...”

2. **YOUR THOUGHTS**
   - **GOALS**
     - Share why you are focusing on a specific behavior or action and explain its importance.
   - **EXAMPLES**
     - “I think...”
     - “I believe...”
     - “It’s really important to...”
     - “I am pleased that...”
     - “I am concerned that...”

3. **YOUR QUESTION**
   - **GOALS**
     - Allow the team to reflect
     - Display genuine interest in what happened
   - **EXAMPLES**
     - “Can you help me understand?”
     - “I am curious, what do you think happened?”
     - “What is your point of view?”
     - “How did you experience that?”
     - “I wonder what you think happened?”