

Peer Coaching as a Leader Development Tool in Professional Military Education

Liz Cavallaro and Olenda E. Johnson

U.S. Naval War College

Abstract

Peer coaching is a growing practice within the fields of leadership education and leader development. More than general collaboration, peer coaching is a guided relational process between two colleagues of relatively equal status. Each person coaches the other utilizing a defined coaching dialogue to improve ways of thinking, being, and learning. As educators with the responsibility for facilitating the learning and leader development of senior naval leaders, we have used peer coaching for seven years as a functional tool for furthering leader effectiveness. Drawing upon adult development and adult learning principles, we have developed a deliberately structured process specifically designed for military leaders. In this article, we detail how we employ peer coaching in our leadership courses, describe likely obstacles (e.g., skepticism), provide insights for how to overcome these obstacles, and share feedback—from admirals and field grade officers—pointing to the positive outcomes from peer coaching. We conclude with thoughts on how professional military education educators might apply peer coaching in their learning endeavors as well.

Increasingly, educators and leader development practitioners are utilizing peer coaching as an effective tool for furthering learning, growth, and career progression (Bialek & Hagen, 2022; Goysberg & Russman Halperin, 2022). The literature is replete with peer-coaching applications in business education, health-care education, faculty development, employee professional development, and human resources wellness programs, among others (Bell et al., 2020; Bialek & Hagen, 2022; Chesley et al., 2020; Fey et al., 2022; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Schwellnus & Carnahan, 2014). These applications of peer coaching generate favorable outcomes for both the individuals and their organizations. Research shows that peer coaching increases job sat-

isfaction, expands peer support, enhances collective engagement, improves leader effectiveness, heightens psychological safety, and fosters a collaborative organizational culture (Caporale-Berkowitz & Friedman, 2018; Cholli et al., 2016; Groysberg & Russman Halperin, 2022). Concomitantly, there is a growing interest in incorporating peer coaching within professional military education (PME), particularly aligning with the PME focus on joint-leader development (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020a, 2020b).

As PME educators responsible for facilitating the learning and leader development of U.S. Navy admirals and midgrade officers (across all service branches), we have used peer coaching in our leadership courses and command professional development over the last seven years. More than general collaboration, peer coaching is a guided relational process between two colleagues of relatively equal status. Each person coaches the other utilizing a defined coaching dialogue to improve ways of thinking, being, and learning (Parker et al., 2008, 2018). We have integrated peer coaching in one-week courses, throughout a 10-week academic trimester, in a yearlong leader development program, and within multiday professional development events.

We have employed our structured peer-coaching process with three distinct military populations: (1) approximately 150 admirals, generals, and senior civilians participating in a weeklong leadership course; (2) Naval War College in-residence students from ranks O-3 to O-6, where peer coaching is integrated into the leadership curriculum; and (3) participants in fleet command professional development ranging in rank from O-1 to O-6. Collectively, these military professionals indicate that their peer-coaching experience enhanced their peer relationships, enabled deeper exploration of their leadership challenges, afforded them more collaboration opportunities, and influenced the way they approach and address complex problems. Each of these outcomes points to peer coaching as an effective leader development tool for military leaders.

In this article, we begin with a general description of peer coaching. We then describe our step-by-step peer-coaching process. Importantly, we detail the key elements of our approach that enable effectiveness and mitigate obstacles (e.g., skepticism). Throughout, we incorporate feedback from participants highlighting their peer-coaching experiences and the impact on their leadership abilities. We conclude by discussing the utility of peer coaching for professional military education.

Peer Coaching

With peer coaching, each colleague coaches the other utilizing a guided coaching dialogue, while alternating the role of “coach” and “coachee” (Berg & Karlsen, 2012; Parker et al., 2018). Unlike mentoring, counseling, and executive coaching, peer coaching is reciprocal and mutually beneficial (Bialek & Hagen, 2022). The dyadic pairing with a peer—one likely to experience similar challenges—helps the coach and coachee

reflectively and jointly examine their experiences and challenges within their shared professional context (Goldman et al., 2013; Parker et al., 2008, 2018). Peer coaching requires candor, vulnerability, and trust to arrive at the attendant outcomes. Each person must be willing to open up to the other, potentially exposing personal vulnerabilities.

Peer coaching in the workplace is often facilitated by human resource development professionals or professional executive coaches. In the educational environment, the instructor facilitates the peer-coaching experience with students (Bialek & Hagen, 2022).

Facilitating Peer Coaching as Educators

Building peer coaching into a curriculum or learning plan first requires identifying its potential contribution to desired learning and development outcomes. In our leadership courses, peer coaching serves to build relationships, increase engagement with course topics, and promote collaboration and support in addressing leadership challenges. It is important to link peer coaching as an experiential learning activity to other course content, ensuring that it is integrated and serves the broader purposes of the course. Providing relevant context also helps secure student participation in a new or potentially uncomfortable learning experience.

Unsurprisingly, among our military participants, there exists natural skepticism and some resistance toward peer coaching. Engaging in such a self-revealing activity

Dr. Olenda E. Johnson is a professor at the U.S. Naval War College. Her prior academic experience includes tenured professor at North Carolina A&T State University, visiting professor at the U.S. Army War College, and distinguished visiting professor at the U.S. Air Force Academy. She holds adjunct appointments at the Wellington School of Business & Government, New Zealand, and Bentley University. She received her PhD in organizational behavior from the University of Pittsburgh. Johnson is the architect of the Navy's first two-star leader development course, which continues as a premiere learning and growth experience for senior naval leaders. She is a passionate educator and recognized expert in the science of teaching and learning, particularly within professional military education.

Dr. Liz Cavallaro is an associate professor of leader development in the College of Leadership and Ethics at the U.S. Naval War College. She is an adult development scholar and executive coach. She serves as codirector of the Navy Two-Star Leader Development Course and the Stockdale Leader Development Graduate Certificate Program. She also delivers by-request executive coaching, invited lectures, and organizational development for a variety of Navy commands and senior leaders. As an expert in vertical development, she conducts scholarly research in cognitive development, mental complexity, self-awareness, and organizational learning. She received her doctoral degree in human and organizational learning at George Washington University.

Table 1

Peer Coaching Steps

Step one:	Identify peer-coaching topic and develop prompt questions to shape the coaching dialogue
Step two:	Create peer pairs with consideration to similarities and dissimilarities
Step three:	Craft classroom conditions to foster psychological safety and openness
Step four:	Provide guidelines and instructions for the coach and coachee
Step five:	Engage in the reciprocal peer-coaching conversation
Step six:	Facilitate a group debrief to reflect on the process

with a peer butts up against the inherent peer competitiveness that exists in military culture. Thus, we designed our peer-coaching approach to deliberately address these obstacles. The process for the educator or facilitator involves six steps (see Table 1).

Peer-Coaching Topic and Discussion Prompt

Peer-coaching topics should relate to course content and desired outcomes—areas where peer reflection and guided dialogue might further learning and growth. Topics may also relate to student goals or concerns. A defined discussion prompt derived from the identified topic and framed as a question shapes the coaching dialogue for the coach and coachee. Clarity, relevance, and usefulness of the topic and the question are essential for gaining buy-in and encouraging adherence to process guidelines. The facilitator provides the discussion prompt to begin the coaching conversation.

Table 2 shows two examples of discussion prompts that we have used in our admirals' course. The questions are relevant to the admirals' leadership roles (as two-stars) and centered upon key course topics.

Creating Peer-Coaching Pairs

In general, the practice of peer-coaching advocates for peers selecting one another (Goldman et al., 2013; Parker et al., 2008, 2018). Giving peers the choice to choose a partner establishes the mutual relationship. At the same time, for military participants,

Table 2

Examples of Discussion Prompts

How do the qualities of your self-identified complex adaptive challenge make it particularly complex or intractable?
What elements of your leadership role are you currently grappling with through the lens of your professional obligation based on our discussion of the profession of arms ?

we have found that thoughtfully creating the coaching pairs attenuates the awkwardness of choosing, helps overcome initial discomfort, and facilitates openness and trust.

We create peer-coaching pairs using demographic and psychographic variables. We identify at least one similarity shared between the two peers and one dissimilarity. The similarity helps enable ease of conversation and lower walls of resistance, while the dissimilarity helps ensure diversity of perspective. We consider professional specialty (e.g., pilot, special operations, medical officer), homogeneity or diversity of prior career experiences, and personality type and predispositions (e.g., decision-making preferences, rule following proclivities, and how leaders function under pressure). Participants are blind to our pairing process.

The feedback we receive from participants consistently affirms the effectiveness of the deliberate and opaque pairings. For example, one admiral offered this insight:

I think it was very helpful to chat with someone who is likely going through similar challenges in scale and complexity at the same time (as opposed to the past)—I think that sets conditions for a great degree of empathy on both sides. I also suspect conversation of equals allows one to show more vulnerability without the fear of “disappointing” a senior mentor you admire for example.

A Naval War College student in a yearlong leader development program reflected on the value of diversity in the pairings:

Peer coaching was particularly difficult because I didn’t have a natural connection with my peer. In the end, it created one of the best relationships I have with another peer and someone I hope to work with closely again in the future. He pushed me and really forced me to expand my thinking since we were so different. So powerful.

The intentionality with which we create the pairs helps foster the trust, rapport, and psychological safety necessary for peers to be vulnerable with each other, and essential for learning and growth.

Crafting Classroom Culture

Similarly, deliberately crafting the classroom culture further sets the conditions for effectively leveraging peer coaching for learning and development. Our application employs the following elements in the learning environment to enable candor and vulnerability, while mitigating skepticism and resistance.

- Institute the “Chatham House Rule” or “nonattribution,” prohibiting the attribution of comments to any specific individual.
- Create intimacy by arranging participants in small groups with active facilitator interaction.
- Introduce the practice through an interactive conversation rather than a didactic presentation.
- Distinguish peer coaching from typical solution-focused counseling and mentoring.
- Frame peer coaching as an opportunity to practice collaboration, jointly think through professional challenges, seek support and outside perspectives, and gain from peers’ experience and insights.
- Prepare participants for a counterintuitive, one-directional conversation that requires active listening without interrupting (versus one that naturally goes back and forth).

Establishing the proper classroom culture sets the tone for psychological safety, reduces inhibitions, and opens the aperture for learning through an atypical process. Participants are often pleasantly surprised by the experience, as indicated by these examples of feedback from our flag course: “I found the peer coaching conversation refreshing.” “[I was surprised by] The willingness of my peers to engage in the process.” “Best part of the day was the peer coaching exercise. The opportunity to open up and be vulnerable in a one-on-one setting was revealing and allow[ed] a level of connection that could not have existed otherwise.”

We have successfully overcome the skepticism and resistance to peer coaching among junior officers and senior naval leaders alike.

Peer Coaching Guidelines and Instructions

What sets our approach to peer coaching apart from mentoring and counseling are the strict guidelines for facilitating the counterintuitive coaching dialogue (see Table 3). The guidelines focus attention on the coachee rather than the coach while providing parameters for the person acting as coach. Moreover, because peer coaching encourages introspection and self-examination—placing emphasis on the person, not just the problem—we structure our process to help military leaders set aside the natural tendency toward fixing problems.

Table 3*Peer Coaching Guidelines*

Guideline	Description
<i>Ask open-ended questions only.</i>	Ask curious questions that cannot be answered with a yes/no.
<i>Use silence as a coaching tool.</i>	Ask one question at a time and wait for them to respond; set the conditions for them to think and process.
<i>Use active listening.</i>	Listen attentively; don't interject; affirm that you understand; repeat back for clarification.
<i>No advice.</i> <i>Facilitate, don't fix.</i>	Facilitate dialogue to work through the challenge; don't jump to solutions; don't share your own examples; don't provide suggestions, guidance, or advice.
<i>Stay in role, maintain focus.</i>	Focus entirely on the coachee; don't break coach character; don't talk about yourself or your own challenges; fully inhabit coach role.

Notably, two guidelines tend to be particularly challenging but also the most important: (1) ask only open-ended questions and (2) provide no advice. Asking open-ended questions encourages the coachee to respond with a full explanation, rather than a quick one-word answer. Holding back advice keeps the coachee talking without interrupting the flow of thinking, prompting deeper processing and the surfacing of insights. We acknowledge upfront with the participants that adhering to these guidelines will be challenging. We provide a handout for reference.

To further assist the process, we provide examples of open-ended questions that coaches might use to help their coachee think and process (see Table 4). Closed-ended questions tend to shut down the conversation and can sound like advice (e.g., "Have you tried this?"), which violates the "facilitate, don't fix" guideline.

Feedback evidence suggests that participants attempt to follow the guidelines, while also acknowledging the difficulty. An appreciation for the structured process also emerges. For example, "Peer coaching caused me to really focus on being a good active listener, staying in the role and asking open-ended questions. I can see me utilizing this coaching technique in the future." "Quit focusing on fixing as much as I do, but instead make first response facilitation."

In addition to structuring the peer-coaching process, the guidelines set the stage for practicing important leadership competencies—active listening and asking probing questions.

Table 4

Open-Ended Questions

INSTRUCTIONS	
Questions must be open-ended, requiring descriptive and explanatory responses, rather than closed-ended (i.e., can answer with “yes” or “no”).	
THIS (Open-ended)	NOT THIS (Closed-ended)
Why is this important to you?	Is this important to you?
EXAMPLES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you most want to achieve? • Why is this important to you? • What are the barriers or obstacles to overcome? • What are the opportunities or options to leverage? • What are the possible outcomes? • What could or would success look like? • How could you think about this differently? 	

Peer Coaching Conversation

Generally, within any course, peer coaching will be practiced multiple times. The first peer-coaching conversation is usually brief, for example, 30 minutes—with each peer serving as coach for 15 minutes and then exchanging roles. This allows peers to get comfortable with each other and the structured process. We instruct the coach to start with the discussion prompt, and then follow up with relevant open-ended questions. In later peer-coaching sessions (which may last an hour), we encourage coaching pairs to return to prior conversations to further explore challenges. By continually unpacking a topic, the coachee can go deeper, exploring multiple layers of an issue. Once participants learn the practice, they can identify their own discussion points and engage in more self-directed conversations.

Reflective Debrief

A reflective debrief with the entire class or group occurs after the first peer-coaching interaction. The debrief utilizes experience- and emotion-based questioning versus content-focused exploration. Debrief questions might include the following:

- What did that conversation feel like?
- What was most challenging?
- Which guidelines did you fail to meet?

- What was the best part of the experience?
- What benefit did you get out of getting coached? Being the coach?
- How else could you use this process or these questions?

The collective reflection helps identify and process learning while drawing out the usefulness of the peer-coaching experience. It is important to emphasize that participants are not asked to reveal the content of their conversation but rather to examine the experience and illuminate the unique value of engaging in the peer process.

Here are two examples of reflections on the beneficial impact of peer-coaching experience: “[Peer] coaching got me to think about my wicked problems with a wider lens.” “The [peer coaching] experience has been of great value, not only in problem solving, but also in the peer-to-peer connection that is so precious and not always easy to maintain due to the incredible demands on our time.”

To sum, the process for the educator to build peer coaching into their curriculum or learning plan requires six steps. First, context-specific topic selection and discussion prompts center the coaching dialogue on a relevant issue or area of focus. Second, thoughtfully assigning coaching pairs minimizes the potential for peers to choose a too similar partner who approaches problems in the same fashion. Third, crafting the classroom culture sets the conditions for a psychologically safe learning environment that minimizes skepticism while enabling introspection and self-disclosure. Fourth, specific guidelines condition peer-coaching behavior. Absent the structure, peer coaching can easily devolve into general rather than targeted conversation. Fifth, engaging in the reciprocal peer-coaching conversations strengthens peer relationships, facilitates growth, and increases learning. Finally, asking participants to collectively reflect on their peer-coaching experiences draws out nuances that establish the value of the process, enhancing their motivation to continue.

Learning and Development Outcomes

Providing additional opportunities to reflect on the peer-coaching experience—for example, through feedback, written assignments, journaling—helps further assess the outcomes. Here are a few examples from participants of how our approach has served to further their growth, development, and leadership.

I’m picking up an insight in every one of these conversations. In many cases, my peer coach is part of a different organization so I am learning about the Navy more broadly while also picking up techniques they specifically use in their leadership walk (that would also be applicable where I am heading).

By listening to some of my Peer Coach's issue/challenges it has helped me think of solutions just by listening to their responses to my open-ended questions. I did not expect that their questions on their issues would help me look at different solutions.

Others note: "Peer coaching forced me to take a hard look at my own strengths and weaknesses as I did the same for my peer mentee." "Appreciated the validation that we can ask for help and we can reach out to each other."

Notably, we have also received post-course feedback from military leaders who continue the peer-coaching practice in their operational environments. "[Peer coaching has been] most invaluable. We will be continuing our discussions on a periodic basis for the remainder of our time in the Navy."

Thanks to [peer's] coaching I have ... outbriefed each coaching session with my deputies and division leads who are helping me with the priorities we set together. Biggest benefit is by talking to him about the biggest issues within [leader's broad area of responsibility] he energized me to be bold and address them with the entire command.

In all, our peer-coaching approach has the potential to serve as a useful education and leader development practice within the military arena and beyond.

Applicability to Other PME Audiences


Peer coaching is an impactful experiential learning activity for any PME course, particularly those with a leadership effectiveness focus or leadership component. The peer-coaching practice is applicable to leader development within every rank and professional specialty. The practice is backed by research in adult learning, adult development, education, leadership, and organizational studies (Caporale-Berkowitz & Friedman, 2018; Cholli et al., 2016; Garvey-Berger, 2012; Goysberg & Russman Halperin, 2022; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Knowles et al., 2020; Kolb, 2014; Parker et al., 2018). We have utilized our peer-coaching approach with Navy, Army, Air Force, and Department of Defense civilian audiences ranging in rank from O-1 to O-8. What we have learned about overcoming obstacles to peer coaching with flag officers highlights the utility and applicability of peer coaching for broader audiences. Moreover, our effectiveness in dismantling skepticism among our senior leaders—likely the most resistant to these types of learning activities—points to even greater potential for engaging peer coaching with more junior audiences.

Additionally, the reflective debrief can be leveraged by educators and leader development practitioners to deliberately connect peer coaching to leader effectiveness. Discussion points might include the following:

- the value of improving active listening, open-ended questions, and rapport-building;
- the applicability of these skills for leaders to engage in mentorship, team development, situational leadership, and self-coaching;
- the value of honesty, transparency, and open communication to enhance team effectiveness;
- the benefits of connection, community, and seeking support to build resilience;
- the utility of addressing difficult or sensitive topics with a trusted colleague, especially as leaders become more senior and more isolated;
- the importance of leaders' willingness to be open, candid, and vulnerable, which enhances authenticity, promotes quality feedback, and is essential for learning from complex adaptive challenges;
- the need for trust, supportiveness, empathy, and psychological safety as colleagues help each other uncover underlying assumptions or disrupt entrenched thinking; and
- the imperative for leaders to display intellectual humility, engage a growth mindset, and overcome the natural tendency for heroic leadership.

Through our structured peer-coaching process, PME educators can build on these leader development ideas. The peer-coaching discussions give students the opportunity to think about and apply their learning to their own leadership. By drawing out their own insights, aha moments, surprises, and struggles through peer coaching, students will be more receptive to related developmental imperatives in their leadership courses and leader-development opportunities.

Conclusion

In recent guidance, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020a) issued a charge to reenvision PME, asserting a requirement for more focused leader development. Peer coaching as an experiential learning and development practice meets this charge. As military leaders continue to employ peer coaching in their operational environment, it shores up their leader effectiveness by providing a vital source of peer support for addressing their leadership challenges. 

References

- Bell, A. E., Meyer, H. S., & Maggio, L. A. (2020). Getting better together: A website review of peer coaching initiatives for medical educators. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 32(1), 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2019.1614448>

- Berg, M. E. & Karlsen, J. T. (2012). An evaluation of management training and coaching. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 24(3), 177–199. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13665621211209267>
- Bialek, T. K., & Hagen, M. S. (2022). Cohort-based leadership development for high-potential employees: A model for programmatic design. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 33(4), 361–382. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21459>
- Caporale-Berkowitz, N., & Friedman, S. D. (2018, October 12). How peer coaching can make work less lonely. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2018/10/how-peer-coaching-can-make-work-less-lonely>
- Chesley, J. A., Egan, T., & Jones, H. E. (2020). Elevating leadership development practices to meet emerging needs. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 19(4), 180–191. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V19/I4/T3>
- Cholli, C., Sreeraj, P. S., & Kaur, R. (2016). Peer coaching: A tool for career development. *International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management*, 7(11), 54–56.
- Fey, N., Nordbäck, E., Ehrnrooth, M., & Mikkonen, K. (2022). How peer coaching fosters employee proactivity and well-being within a self-managing Finnish digital engineering company. *Organizational Dynamics*, 51(3), Article 100864. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2021.100864>
- Garvey-Berger, J. (2012). *Changing on the job: Developing leaders for a complex world*. Stanford University Press.
- Goldman, E., Wesner, M., & Karnchanomai, O. (2013). Reciprocal peer coaching: A critical contributor to implementing individual leadership plans. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 24(1), 63–87. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21153>
- Goytsberg, B., & Russman Halperin, R. (2022, May-June). How to get the most out of peer support groups: A guide to the benefits and best practices. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2022/05/how-to-get-the-most-out-of-peer-support-groups>
- Joint Chiefs of Staff. (2020a). *Developing today's joint officers for tomorrow's ways of war: The joint chiefs of staff vision and guidance for professional military education and talent management*. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf
- Joint Chiefs of Staff. (2020b). *Officer professional military education policy* (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01F). https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/cjcsi_1800_01f.pdf
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, III, E. F., Swanson, R. A., & Robinson, P. A. (2020). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (9th ed.). Routledge.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson FT Press.
- Parker, P., Hall, D. T., & Kram, K. E. (2008). Peer coaching: A relational process for accelerating career learning. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 7(4), 487–503. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMLE.2008.35882189>
- Parker, P., Hall, D. T., Kram, K. E., & Wasserman, I. C. (2018). *Peer coaching at work*. Stanford University Press.
- Schweltnus, H., & Carnahan, H. (2014). Peer-coaching with health care professionals: What is the current status of the literature and what are the key components necessary in peer-coaching? A scoping review. *Medical Teacher*, 36(1), 38–46. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2013.836269>