

Peer Coaching Groups: A State-of-the-Art Toolset for Continuous Experiential Learning

Roman Terekhin

Case Western Reserve University, USA

Abstract. Peer Coaching Groups (PCGs) are flexible, effective developmental tools commonly utilized by Fortune 500 companies and prestigious business schools. In response to the dearth of actionable PCG guidelines, this paper presents a structured blueprint for implementing PCGs in business school curricula, addressing meeting dynamics, objectives, participant roles, and potential pitfalls. Framed by Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, we provide adaptable guidelines for short-term and long-term PCGs in the organizational behavioral educational context. The paper highlights PCGs' potential to enrich students' educational experience through experimentation in applying organizational behavior, leadership, and other relevant materials, while fostering developmental relationships in the classroom. Educators can use this guideline to seamlessly incorporate PCGs into coursework, fortifying students with experiential learning and a holistic approach to personal and professional development.

Keywords: peer coaching groups, experiential learning, human resource development, coaching.

1. Introduction

Peer coaching groups (PCGs), wherein participants of relatively equal status meet regularly “to help each other with personal and professional development” (Boyatzis *et al.* 2019, p. 157), are a popular and relevant toolset for learning, knowledge exchange, and emotional support in both corporate and academic settings (Kets de Vries & Korotov 2007; Sarkar *et al.* 2019). Fortune 500 companies organize PCGs within their employee resource groups and leadership development programs, while prominent business schools embed PCGs in their core executive education and MBA courses (Terekhin 2023).

These developmental groups facilitate mutual benefit rooted in sharing personal experiences with peers while solving one of the participants' tasks or achieving a learning goal together. Rather than participants learning from external instruction in a receptive or passive mode, the active learning process in PCGs arises from the experience itself (Trinh *et al.* 2020). Researchers cite PCGs as a cost-efficient and accessible means of individual development and learning

This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.

Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JOBE/abstractjobe17terekhin.html>

Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2024.

(Kotlyar *et al.* 2015; Ladyshewsky 2007; Parker *et al.* 2008) that also nurture a culture of inclusivity, thanks to their psychologically safe and inclusive environment (Higgins *et al.* 2022).

That said, PCGs provide much more than mere group learning and support with ongoing challenges in the class. They also nurture students' self-reflection, mindfulness, and personal development (Kotlyar *et al.* 2015; Kutzhanova *et al.* 2009) while providing an arena to get feedback about one's ideas and approaches and to "try on" new learning through case studies and role-play. Moreover, PCGs create a safe space for students to better understand their personal learning goals and articulate actionable steps toward achieving them, following the learning plan, or addressing personal challenges (Terekhin 2022). Such support with learning goals and individual development is relevant in all contexts; thus, PCGs can be used in tandem with various courses, particularly those with significant content regarding organizational behavior topics such as motivation, negotiations, leadership, group dynamics, and diversity/inclusion.

PCGs have a rich history within university settings, specifically organizational behavior and management education (Kets de Vries & Korotov 2007; Parker *et al.* 2008; Foster & Carboni 2008; Passarelli, Boyatzis, & Wei 2018; Eriksen *et al.* 2020). Educators have found university-level PCGs to contribute to experiential learning (Eriksen *et al.* 2020), with many students implementing the tool later in their professional lives (Parker *et al.* 2014). PCGs function as a forum for students' reflection and experimentation that engenders leadership development (Kets de Vries 2005; Foster & Carboni 2009), preparation for crisis management (Powley & Taylor 2014), cultivating critical reflection (Tomkins & Ulus 2015), and advancing learning (Bolton 1999; Eriksen *et al.* 2020; Parker *et al.* 2014). Other advantages, such as reducing stress and increasing learning through student connections (Taylor & Boyatzis 2012), render PCGs a valuable tool for student retention and engagement.

Based on the previous research on diverse PCGs in academic and professional settings, the paper presents an effective implementation of PCGs in a business school course, including a step-by-step structure of meetings, timing, goals, and participant roles, along with considering possible pitfalls. It further explains opportunities to choose between designing a short-term PCG for one semester or a continuous long-term approach for several years.

2. Overview of the Exercise

A typical PCG meeting starts with choosing a topic to discuss (usually a challenge that one of the participants faces or a current shared goal for the group). This step is followed by a discussion and experience sharing, prompting self-reflection and implementation. The peers' similar experiences provide diverse perspectives and approaches, which broaden learning opportunities (Martins & Sohn 2022).

Essentially, PCGs are grounded in experience while generating an environment for learning together and supporting each other's goal achievement. Depending on the instructor's discretion, the proposed simple PCG model can be tailored toward various personal and professional development goals.

Learning Objectives

1. Help students grasp critical skills, such as self-reflection, group inquiry, problem-solving, and teamwork.
2. Facilitate learning of course materials and connecting the new skills and knowledge with addressing real-life challenges.
3. Support students with their challenges, both in learning and personal life.
4. Additionally, long-term groups can foster intimate resonant relationships (Boyatzis *et al.* 2019) to support enduring personal and professional growth.

PCGs as an Experiential Learning Exercise (Figure 1)

The process of learning in PCGs aligns with all levels of Kolb's experiential learning model (Gottschalk 2014), which considers learning to be a continuous process of knowledge creation through experience, reflection, and experimentation (Kolb 2014). By engaging participants at all levels of the model, PCGs are often used as the basis for experiential learning exercises in business schools (Black *et al.* 2021; Eriksen *et al.* 2019; Page *et al.* 2021). Through case studies and role-playing scenarios, participants begin with a **Concrete Experience**. The following discourse entails **Reflective Observation**, which is facilitated by peer feedback and discussion of the lessons learned from the experience. Peers further assist one another in **Abstract Conceptualization** through a process of sensemaking of their reflections and developing actionable applications and commitments. Finally, **Active Experimentation** is implemented when participants test these new applications and provide reports and updates in subsequent gatherings.