Coaching and Social Work: A Strategy for Developing Leadership and the Workforce

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Abstract: *There is increasing recognition of the merits of coaching in social work, yet gaps in knowledge persist about the use and effectiveness of coaching in social work settings. This article bridges concepts and findings from the literature on coaching to provide readers with the information needed for decision-making about whether and how to integrate coaching into practice. Coaching is currently being used in a number of social work fields of practice to support the transfer of learning, practice implementation efforts, leadership development, and organizational processes. The evolution of coaching from the corporate world into service delivery settings is reviewed, with special attention to the commonalities and distinctions between coaching and social work practice. Knowing more about the background, purpose and value of coaching can equip the profession with further insights about the appropriate application of coaching in the world of social work. Moreover, the reader is invited to assess the potential of coaching as a method for enhancing workforce and leadership competencies and practice behaviors in service of improving client outcomes.*

Keywords: *Coaching; practice implementation; workforce development; leadership development; organizational learning*

Coaching evolved from the fields of higher education, management, and organizational development in the 1980s and has been largely used to support the performance and professional development of leaders in corporate settings and large organizations. Since its emergence, the popularity of coaching has expanded beyond the business realm into other professional and personal arenas. Too little is currently known about the appropriateness of coaching in social work settings. However, there is evidence that coaching is being used to support social workers as a strategy to improve the transfer of learning and implementation of evidence-based practices in social service organizations. In addition to coaching for professional development, it is also being taught as a competency to enhance practice, both externally with clients and internally for leadership and managerial purposes.

Coaching holds great promise as both a professional development tool and as a core competency for improving social work practice at practitioner, leadership, and organizational levels. Strategically, it behooves the social work community to carefully consider the potential influence, benefits, and challenges of this growing, yet distinct profession. To support informed decisions about integrating coaching into social work practice, this paper briefly reviews the history, purpose, and methods of the coaching profession. Commonalities and differences between social work and coaching practice are then addressed before reviewing the current state of coaching as both a support for and a

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competency in social work practice. This is followed by a consideration of implications and recommendations for further use and future research in social work.

What Is Coaching?

Though there are varying definitions of coaching (Paul & Myers, 2021), the one being used for this article is "…partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (International Coaching Federation [ICF], 2021c, para. 5). Historically, the profession of coaching has been informed by the fields of business, management, higher education, leadership development, and organizational development. The theoretical bases of coaching draw from developmental psychology, adult learning theory, cognitive-behavioral theory, social systems thinking, and organizational development (Edelson, 2010; Hudson, 1999; Rofuth & Piepenbring, 2019; University of California, Davis [UCD], 2013; Williams, 2015). More recently, the field of implementation science has influenced and helped popularize coaching in social work-related fields. Along with staff selection and training, staff coaching has been identified as a core component in the successful implementation of evidence-based practices in human services (Fixsen et al., 2005). Coaching is also described as a practice competency driver (Fixsen et al., 2015) and an implementation support factor in organizational capacity-building (Metz et al., 2021).

As defined in the literature, coaching is differentiated from other professional development supports such as mentoring, leading by example, facilitation, supervision, or consultation (Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014; Paul & Myers, 2021; Ross-Sheriff & Orme, 2017; Tompson et al., 2008; Tropman, 2022). Specifically, the role of a coach is not to advise or give recommendations about job performance, which is often the case with mentors, facilitators, supervisees, and consultants. Rather, coaching is a purposeful and intentional method designed to empower individuals to learn more about themselves, assess how others perceive them, explore questions related to their professional competency, and define goals that support their professional and personal development (Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014; Ross-Sheriff & Orme, 2017). Although, coaching and supervision does involve the exchange of information about job performance between a knowledgeable source and a less knowledgeable one, it is not considered a form of supervision in social work settings (Tropman, 2022), rather an activity that is conducted by either a coach external to the agency or an internal coach whose primary focus is on employee development (Paul & Myers, 2021).

Coaching is also different from therapy. While both may focus on the here and now, therapy typically deals with emotional or behavioral issues and mental health disorders. In contrast, coaching is focused on goal attainment related to greater satisfaction in one's professional and/or personal life (Burroughs et al., 2017; UCD 2013; Williams, 2015). Coaching for management can focus on remedial or developmental purposes (Whetten & Cameron, 2019). Remedial coaching is intended to ameliorate a deficit or problem for performance improvement and is typically behaviorally focused. In contrast, developmental coaching is much more proactive and often provided in preparation for promotion or future roles.

Hudson (1999) was one of the first to clearly define executive coaching. His experiences in higher education, corporate leadership, and organizational development led him to conclude that executives needed highly trained "coaches" to develop their leadership potential and effectiveness. Hudson's (1999) seminal text, *Handbook of Coaching* aptly describes the cultural shifts affecting society at that time and the need for organizations and leaders to move from a "command and control" mentality to one that embraced the notions that change is cyclical and continuous, that leaders lead with their values, and that constant learning was in order. Hudson argued that coaching was the preferred method for supporting executives in managing change and developing dynamic teams and organizational processes with the end user in mind.

Coaching as defined by Hudson (1999) was an ideal "high touch" vehicle to support leaders in developing individual and interpersonal skills, which were emerging as leadership competencies.

For example, Stephen Covey's 1992 book, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, applied his seven "habits" of highly effective people developed in the 1980s, to the business world. He described a form of leadership effectiveness that extended beyond strategic thinking and technical excellence in one's field to include people-oriented skills such as the ability to build relationships, the willingness to help others succeed, the desire to learn continuously, and the ability to communicate (Covey, 1992).

Since then, the study of leadership effectiveness has expanded exponentially and with it the discovery that the effectiveness of leaders and organizations is grounded in the people-oriented skills or "habits" Covey defined in 1992. This skill set now stretches beyond the "soft skills" of self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and leadership defined by Levasseur (2013) and includes emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2004; Goleman et al., 2013), influence (Robin & Bradford, 2004), authenticity (George & Sims, 2007), trust (Feltman, 2021), empathy (Zaki, 2019), compassion (Boyatzis et al., 2019), credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), and vulnerability (Edmondson & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020).

Fast forward, coaching has been adopted by corporate, public, and non-profit organizations and continues to evolve. We are currently in a "third generation" of coaching that was initiated in the 2010s. Coaching now focuses on assessing the talents and strengths of leaders and has incorporated "a more humanistic, goal-focused version of performance management conversations" (Grant, 2017, p. 41), as opposed to the command-and-control model and a hyper-focus on job performance. Further, to better integrate coaching into everyday organizational change processes, Grant (2017) suggests that coaching shift from scheduled meetings to quality conversations that can happen spontaneously in the hallways. A useful structure for a coaching conversation is the GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward) model, which offers a simple way to support someone in identifying a goal, raise awareness of the current context and brainstorm possibilities for moving towards the goal with a clear action plan (Fine & Merrill, 2010). Another helpful model is the Auerbach GOOD™ Model of Coaching (Goal, Options, Obstacles, Do), which builds on the GROW model with a strengths-based perspective (Auerbach, 2014). Coaching theories, methodologies and models like these are currently being used in social

work settings today to support the performance and well-being of those being coached (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017; Rofuth & Piepenbring, 2019; UCD 2013). In addition, coaching is currently responding to the demand for support around hard and necessary conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in the workplace and adapting current methodologies and models to help build the capacity of individuals and organizations to respond accordingly (Wood, 2021).

Evidence for Coaching Effectiveness

Leadership development is a strategic priority for organizations and an estimated $366 billion industry (Westfall, 2019). Hudson's (1999) conclusion that executives could benefit from the services of highly trained "coaches" to develop their leadership potential and effectiveness was spot on. The evidence for coaching is strong, with three recent meta-analyses indicating positive effects on organizational and individual outcomes including goal attainment (Jones et al., 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014). Google conducted an internal study exploring the characteristics of effective managers, with coaching identified as the number one quality of their best managers (Bock, 2015; Garvin, 2013). While social work settings may differ from corporate settings (like Google), an empowering leadership style has been found to be associated with job satisfaction among social workers (Elpers & Westhuis, 2008). Recent literature reviews of leadership in social work suggest that the type of leadership exemplified by person-centered development and resourcing, which is consistent with a coaching approach, is well aligned with social work values (Peters, 2018; Sullivan, 2016). A recent meta-analysis found that leadership training programs that focus on interpersonal and leadership skills, and provide feedback over multiple sessions, such as that provided in coaching, are more effective across industries (Lacerenza et al., 2017).

As the science of coaching has grown, so too has the coaching profession. The estimated market size of the global coaching industry is $20 billion by 2022 (Willis, 2021). In its most recent 2021 membership fact sheet, the ICF reported a total of 36,680 accredited coaches in 134 countries and territories, a 19% increase from the previous year (ICF, 2021a). In a 2020 survey of coaching across allied business and professional organizations and professional coaching bodies, an estimated 71,000 coaches were practicing around the globe, a 33% increase over previous survey in 2015 (ICF, 2020). The growing popularity of coaching for leadership development and performance improvement in health and human service sectors (Burroughs et al., 2017; Capacity Building Center for States, 2017) has increased visibility and interest in coaching as a professional competency for social workers.

Type of Coaching by Format, Focus, and Coach Placement

There have been numerous types of coaching identified in the literature including executive, life, personal, business, career, leadership, managerial, workplace, team, organizational, financial, and health and well-being (Beattie et al., 2014; Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014; Edelson, 2010; Grant, 2017; Moore et al., 2016; Ross-Sheriff & Orme, 2017). However, trying to classify coaching by type can be misleading, since these areas

may overlap. To sort through the confusion, it may be helpful to consider three aspects of coaching: the format, the focus, and whether the coach is internal or external to the organization. As shown in Table 1, the format of coaching can range from working with an individual in one-to-one coaching to working with a group of people in a team or unit. These can be virtual (i.e., remote through telephone or videoconference) or in person. The focus of coaching ranges from the personal to the professional, and even includes specific functional areas such as business development in professional settings, financial goal setting or career development for individuals or groups, or health and wellness in healthcare settings. It is important to note that while some functional areas may require specific knowledge (e.g., business coaching) and even additional accreditation (e.g., health and wellness), coaching may span multiple focus areas across a single engagement.

Coaching services may be funded by organizations or individuals may secure coaching services on their own. Coaches may be external to the organization, although increasingly organizations are employing internal coaches (ICF, 2021c). While both internal and external coaching has been found to be effective at influencing organizational outcomes, a recent meta-analysis found a stronger effect for internal coaches, with their greater knowledge of the organizational climate and culture, compared to external coaches (Jones et al., 2016).

Table 1. *Types of coaching categorized by format and purpose, and coach placement*

Coaching Aspect	**Category**	**Examples**
Format	One-to-one	Life, executive
	Group	Team, group, leadership, organizational
	Unscheduled conversations	Workplace
Focus	Personal	Life, personal
	Specific functional area	Business, career, financial, health & well-being, leadership, organizational
	General performance	Managerial, executive
	Development	Managerial, executive
Placement	Internal	Managerial, executive, organizational
	External	Executive, leadership, organizational

Two types of coaching that may be particularly relevant to social work practice are executive and team coaching. Executive coaching, which focuses on improving leadership abilities and managing organizational change and employee performance, has been the predominant model of coaching since the 1980s (Hart et al., 2001). Team coaching, which is a team-based learning and development intervention, has become increasingly relevant as organizations shift to doing more work in teams (Clutterbuck, 2020; Hawkins, 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Widdowson et al., 2020). In team coaching, the focus is on the team, which may entail a variety of activities, such as one-to-one coaching with the team leader, observing and intervening in business-as-usual team meetings, facilitating team building activities, etc. Peter Hawkins (2021), a founding leader in the field of team coaching, emphasizes that effective team coaching means not just attending to interpersonal and group dynamics, but also task performance and continuous learning. Regardless of the type of coaching, a growing number of individuals and organizations, including social workers

and social work agencies, have embraced coaching as a method for strengthening workforce development efforts, social work practice behaviors, one's career, and preparing for leadership opportunities.

Evolution of Social Work Perspectives on Coaching from Competency to Competitor

As personal and executive coaching rose in prominence as a viable strategy for individual behavior change and organizational improvement in the 1980's and 1990's (Whitmore, 2017), early discussions of coaching in the social work literature focused on the benefit of integrating coaching methods and competencies into social work practice. Coaching was described as a transfer technology intervention that held promise for increasing practitioner effectiveness, supporting rapid dissemination of evidence-based interventions, and improving client outcomes (Scheyett et al., 2001). Shafer and colleagues (2003) described coaching as an innovative method for helping clients recover from addiction and maintain sobriety. Perrault and Coleman (2004) considered coaching an innovative approach that could be used effectively during social work field supervision. These authors encouraged field educators to integrate and employ coaching strategies (i.e., effective communication, powerful questioning, and direct communication) to facilitate student awareness and transfer of learning. They cited a number of examples, largely from the discipline of education, to demonstrate that coaching was a "good fit for educational supervision" (p. 51) and argued that three particular components of coaching—building trusting relationships, leveraging one's inner motivation and autonomy, and reflecting on past efforts to inform future responses and behaviors—could be used by social work field educators to support the professional development and practice of their students.

In 1995, the International Coach Federation (ICF) was formed to bring greater professionalism to the field of coaching, with the development of an ethics code and a credentialing process within a few years (ICF, 2022). In the social work literature, a corresponding shift can be seen where the fields of coaching and social work are differentiated from one another. Caspi's (2005) seminal work described the challenges and concerns that the coaching profession posed to the social work profession. Although he acknowledged the similarities between coaching and social work practice behaviors and even endorsed the notion that "…social workers are well-suited to become coaches" (p. 360), he suggested that coaching may pose a threat to the social work profession. Caspi's concerns were related to: 1) the potential encroachment of coaching on social work's scope of practice; 2) licensing and ethical issues in the unregulated coaching industry; 3) the need for empirical evidence about the effectiveness of coaching in social work settings; 4) the appropriateness of using coaching interventions that were designed for corporate structures, rather than the social services organizations social workers typically experience on a daily basis; and, finally, 5) the need to include and critique coaching in social work educational curriculums, especially at the graduate level.

Commonalities and Distinctions Between Coaching and Social Work Practice

In 2010, Edelson published a seminal book acknowledging that while its roots are in corporate settings, coaching has characteristics in common with social work that transfer well to social service settings. A former chief psychiatric social worker and private practitioner, Edelson described "values-based coaching," as a strengths-based method informed by the core values of the profession and tailored to support the needs and aspirations of practitioners and leaders working in social service settings. She suggested that coaching supports practitioner, leadership, and organizational development, and can help an organization activate its mission more fully and thus serve its clients more effectively (Edelson, 2010). The common characteristics of both coaching and social work practice are a defined mission, core values, ethical standards and principles and practice competencies.

Though their missions differ, both coaches and social workers abide by a set of core values (Edelson, 2010; Lasky, 2021; Reardon, 2016). The social work values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence serve to operationalize its mission "to enhance human well-being, help meet the basic human needs of all people…with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2020, para. 1). The International Coaching Federation core values of integrity, excellence, collaboration, and respect are also anchored in its mission to "lead the global advancement of the coaching profession and empower the world through coaching" (ICF, 2021b, para. 3).

Though their clientele, workplace, and work activities may differ, both social workers and coaches are guided by a set of ethical principles that describe practice behaviors that are aligned with their professions' core values. Likewise, both social workers and coaches are expected to adhere to standards that define their ethical responsibilities to clients, colleagues, the profession, and greater society. Social workers and coaches must adhere to these standards or risk the consequences of review by the profession for ethical violations. In contrast, coaching remains a largely unregulated profession. Even though guilds such as the ICF monitor their members' ethical behaviors, violations are not regulated or enforced as they are for state licensed social workers (Lasky, 2021; Martinez, 2016).

Finally, social workers and coaches are expected to demonstrate specific competencies. The practice competencies expected of a social worker and a coach align when it comes to adhering to ethical practice, partnering with clients on agreed upon goals, building a trustworthy relationship with the client, communicating effectively, and supporting and empowering the client as they move toward goal completion (Edelson, 2010; ICF, 2019; Lasky, 2021).

At first glance, a social worker might reject these comparisons, erring on the side that coaching interventions are not appropriate for social work settings. It is true that the mission of the ICF and most coaching certification bodies do not necessarily serve the same populations that social workers do. However, the ICF definition of coaching—"partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize

their personal and professional potential" (ICF, 2021c, para. 5)—aligns with the spirit of social work, which is to engage clients in an effective and authentic manner, work with the client to assess their personal needs, with the goal of enhancing human functioning and well-being in ways that produce positive outcomes for the client (NASW, 2021).

Even though coaching has primarily been used in the corporate sector, the early social work literature forecasted its potential for improving practice and reinforcing knowledge gained through formal training. More recently, coaching has been cited as a method to enhance organizational and team processes, employee performance, and professional development at all levels of an organization (Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014; ICF, 2021c; Tompson et al., 2008). For these reasons, the social work community needs to know more about coaching and how it can equip the profession with insights about how to apply it to activate practitioner, leadership, and organizational efforts more fully to better serve our clients.

Coaching in Practice Settings

The discourse about coaching in health and human services sectors—where social workers are often employed—has grown over the last decade. It is generally discussed in the social work literature as an agency-based intervention intended to improve practice and build the capacity of an organization to better serve its clients. Here are some examples from the literature.

Coaching as a Practice Improvement Strategy for Social Workers

Peterson (2012) introduced decisional coaching which focuses on engaging patients in shared decision-making processes related to health care treatment and end-of-life decisions. Peterson argued that social workers possessed the knowledge, values, and skills needed to engage patients in this process, effectively placing patient concerns at the center of decision-making. Burroughs et al. (2017) affirm the relevance of decisional coaching in their article on coaching in social work practice. They also cite several studies where coaching strategies and techniques were successfully used by social workers in wraparound programs for at-risk youth exposed to parental substance abuse, with court-mandated and voluntary clients, during family visits with parents involved in child welfare systems, and with homeless populations to encourage greater use of social services and reduce substance abuse relapse. Henwood et al. (2020) report on the results of a clinic-based study on "practitioner coaching," where physician coaches were paired with behavioral health coaches (some of whom were licensed social workers) to address complex patient care needs with positive outcomes for the physician practitioners and patients. In the field of child welfare, Hatton-Bowers et al. (2015) examined social workers' perspectives on the role of coaching in safety and risk assessment training on the Safety Organized Practice model. Results showed that social workers reported positive learning gains when classroom training was combined with follow up coaching sessions. In addition, social workers reported stronger critical thinking skills and increased confidence in making risk and safety decisions and engaging families in shared decision-making (Hatton-Bowers et al., 2015). Although more empirical research is needed to assess the effectiveness of coaching in

practice settings, the studies described here indicate coaching may be a viable strategy for strengthening practitioner skills and has the potential to influence agency practice and client outcomes, especially in behavioral health, child welfare and wraparound services.

Coaching as a Strategy for Workforce Development and Organizational Capacity-Building

Coaching can play a key role in workforce development (Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014) and organization capacity-building for service delivery improvement and innovation (Fixsen et al., 2005). The benefits of coaching in these activities are maximized when organizations strive to develop a coaching culture across the workforce (Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014; Clutterbuck et al., 2016; Hawkins, 2012). More than the provision of coaching to develop individuals and organizational capacity, building a coaching culture requires the promotion of coaching as a core competency for managers and leaders. Coaching is a complex skill, which involves a mindset shift towards learning and growth and development of a facilitative interactional style (Cannon et al., 2021).

The Coaching Toolkit for Child Welfare Practice (UCD, 2013) uses the metaphor of the "coaching puzzle" to explain how coaching supports organizational capacity-building by strengthening the integration of best practices into child welfare agencies and discusses how agency leaders, practitioners, coaches and supervisors can use coaching to promote active learning at all levels of the organization. The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (n.d.) features several reports on coaching as a strategy for addressing secondary trauma to improve retention in the child welfare workforce and promote resilience for greater social worker self-efficacy, well-being, and job performance. Finally, the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI; n.d.) has organized a repository of resources in the form of monographs, infographics, recorded webinars, videos, and reference lists on coaching. There is also an interactive course for individuals wanting to learn more about coaching through the NCWWI Online Training Portal.

Coaching for Leadership Development

The social work literature on coaching in leadership development is less abundant than that for social work practice. However, the existing literature does provide information on how coaching is being used to support the leadership development of social work supervisors and managers. It also offers some indication of the direction coaching for leadership development may be going in our profession.

Coaching is currently being used reinforce and deepen the leadership learning gains of middle managers and executives within child welfare structures. The NCWWI has developed two leadership academies for child welfare supervisors and managers where participants learn foundational principles of leadership, including how to lead within the organizational context, how to lead people, and how to lead for change and results. Coaching is explicitly addressed as a method for leadership development with information and downloadable materials available in the curricula and training materials section of the website. In addition, child welfare managers may attend in-person trainings and receive

coaching for up to six months to enhance their coaching behaviors (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2018). In California, the Child & Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC) has developed the New Child Welfare Directors Development Program (NCWDDP) to support new leaders in county child welfare structures (CFPIC, 2022). The NCWDDP pairs a self-paced, guided study approach with coaching and online workforce development resources (California Social Work Education Center, 2021).

Rofuth and Piepenbring (2019) refer to coaching in social work settings in several significant ways. They introduce the coaching style of leadership, which can leverage "the kind of resonance that boosts performance" (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 53) and offer many examples of how leaders and managers can coach their managers and teams with beneficial results. They emphasize that the "core ingredients" of effective leadership and management are reflected in the four domains of emotional intelligence (EI)—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Many executive and leadership coaches incorporate EI into their practice for this very reason. Rofuth and Piepenbring also refer to the human services competencies and practice behaviors defined by the Network of Social Work Management (NSWM) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) throughout their book to demonstrate how the leadership and management strategies, including coaching, can be applied to enhance professional behavior and employee performance.

There is also evidence that coaching is being incorporated into leadership development efforts in higher education. The American Council on Education (2021) described a sample of higher education leadership development programs and the use of coaching in mentoring and fellowship programs. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (n.d.) offers an array of leadership development programs to member organizations that include coaching. The National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (n.d.) contracts with subscribing higher education institutions for coaching and other professional development services for faculty members from various disciplines. Cruz and Rosemond (2017) report on the types of university leadership development models that integrate coaching into their programs. These models include coaching department chairs and other leaders in the academe and teaching leaders to coach, as opposed to giving directives. Another example of a campus coaching program designed for campus supervisors, managers, and team leaders is the "Growing as a Coach" course that teaches participants coaching tools and techniques they can utilize with direct reports (University of California, Berkeley, 2021).

Social Workers as Coaches

Coaching appears to offer a promising career path for social workers. Reardon (2016) described coaching as a way for social workers to "…diversify their practices, generate additional revenue, and assist clients who would not be candidates for traditional therapeutic services" (p. 18). Pace (2016) interviewed several social worker-coaches who indicated that they were able to transfer their strengths-based orientations, practice skills and client experiences into coaching with great success. Their social work education and practice experiences, along with coach training and certification helped these social workers to integrate coaching into their clinical practices more fully. In some instances,

they were able to launch their own life coaching or executive coaching businesses. Martinez (2016) described the "draw of coaching" reported by clinical social workers who engaged in the dual practice of therapy and coaching. This "draw" included reduced client stigma attached to coaching vs. therapy, not having to deal with insurance reimbursement systems, working with higher functioning clients, and decreased emotional burden for the practitioner-coach. In summary, the social workers interviewed indicated "…private, dual practice allowed them the flexibility to work with a broader range of clients" (Martinez, 2016, pp. 25-30).

Currently, there are several ways social workers can pursue formal coach training and equip themselves to bring coaching into their practice settings. Social workers are among the professional groups that qualify for a national Board Certified Coaching Credential (Center for Credentialing and Education, 2021). Social workers can also obtain coach training and a coaching credential through the International Coaching Federation (ICF) by attending an accredited coach training program, acquiring coaching experience, and passing a coach knowledge assessment (ICF, 2021a). Although, there is no published number of social workers who are ICF-certified, they are included in the count of its 71,000 plus coach practitioner membership (ICF, 2021d).

Social work's focus on a person's strengths, coaching the person as opposed to the problem, a person-in-environment perspective and practice skills in engaging clients, assessing their strengths, collaborating with clients on intervention planning, and evaluating their progress compliment the ICF definition of coaching cited earlier (ICF, 2021c). If it indeed is the case that interest in coaching continues to grow, it also is incumbent upon social workers to consider enrolling in an accredited coach training program and pursuing coaching certification. A majority of respondents who participated in the 2020 ICF Global Coaching Study reported that 55% of their clients expected their coach to be certified or credentialed (ICF, 2020). Also holding a coaching certificate or coaching credential can strengthen a social worker's ability to ferret out the distinctions and commonalities of coaching and social work and help to advance knowledge in this area.

What Else Does Social Work Needs to Know About Coaching?

Caspi (2005) was the first to identify specific steps that social work should take with regard to coaching. They included 1) actively discussing the role of coaching in social work; 2) organizing the social work community to examine the regulatory aspect of coaching in order to protect clients; 3), assessing the current state of coaching in the social work profession; 4) testing the effectiveness of coaching; 5) studying coaching approaches to determine its appropriateness for social work practice; 6) including and critiquing coaching in social work curriculum; 7) raising public awareness about the differences between social workers who are coaches and those with no mental health training; and 8) investigating how social work coaching presence can be expanded and strengthened in corporate settings (pp. 360-361). While some of these recommendations have been addressed, as described below, there continue to be knowledge and practice gaps about coaching for the social work profession.

Edelson (2010) addressed the first step of actively discussing the role of coaching in social work and specifically addressed Caspi's concerns about clinical and ethical issues. Others have contributed to this discussion, as well as the third step of assessing the current state of coaching in social work (Jost, 2013; Lasky, 2021; Martinez, 2016; Reardon, 2016). Burroughs et al. (2017) and the UCD (2013) Northern Training Academy have taken the lead in addressing the fifth step, clearly demonstrating the appropriateness of coaching in social work settings. The seventh step of including and critiquing coaching in social work has been recently addressed by several authors (Jost, 2013; Lasky, 2021; Reardon, 2016). Pecora et al. (2018) identify staff coaching by supervisors as key to building the capacity of child welfare staff to implement practice models and recommends more rigorous study of coaching to assess its effectiveness. Rofuth and Piepenbring (2019) identified management and social work education competencies that can guide agency leaders in the use of coaching to support the performance and professional development of employees and teams. Das et al. (2021) assessed the viability of coaching with social work interns to support their learning in field and identified the processes and dynamics associated with coaching that affect the implementation of best practices by social work interns in a child and family services setting. The common theme that emerges from these sources is that we theoretically know coaching works, but we need more evidence about the extent of its presence and use in social work settings and its effectiveness at practice, leadership, and organizational levels.

Implications for Social Work

As this article reflects, there is growing recognition of the potential merits of coaching in social work, but there are knowledge gaps about the extent of its presence, use, and effectiveness in social work settings. What we do know is promising and there is convincing evidence outside of our discipline to affirm coaching works at the individual, team, and organizational levels. The increased interest in coaching in the social work literature aligns with the trajectory of public interest in coaching among social work practitioners, managers, and leaders, as well as university and college leadership development programs that more than likely include social work professionals. In this sense, it is incumbent upon the profession to advance knowledge about coaching further to fill the gaps of what we still need to know.

Recommendations

In order to address the knowledge gaps that currently exist, the following is recommended:

1. Launch survey research studies on coaching in various fields of social work practice. Participants could be recruited from membership organizations of NASW, CSWE, and NSWM and their membership branches. An effort could also be made to reach out to social workers in corporate, private and non-profit settings to assess the extent coaching is being used in these settings. It is imperative that surveying participants go beyond the simple gathering of demographics and inquire about the value of coaching as it specifically relates to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging issues in the workforce.

2. Develop social work standards for coaching. There is enough evidence that more social workers are pursuing coaching, either as an adjunct to their practice or as a career beyond social work. Some are even seeking credential or certification status with organizations such as the ICF or the Center for Credentialing and Education. This would help to address Caspi's concerns about the regulatory aspect of coaching and public awareness about the distinctions between coaching and social work, especially as it relates to mental health training.
3. Conduct more rigorous research on the effectiveness of coaching in health and human services settings where social workers are likely employed. Despite the challenges of adopting and sustaining evidence-based practices, implementation and training interventions that feature coaching have been found to be more effective. Likewise, more research is needed on the type of leadership strategies needed to guide health and human services organizations as they implement new models and evidence-based practices. This type of research is nascent in the social work literature, but highly needed to catch up with increased level of interest in coaching in social work settings.
4. Explore and question how coaching might be a helpful strategy for yourself, your clients, or your organization. Since coaching and social work both use strengths-based and solution-focused perspectives and share more commonalities than differences, should we not add more coaching content to social work practice courses at the micro, mezzo, and macro level? Should it not be a role for the profession? Since the literature demonstrates coaching is a method that augments the transfer of learning and increases the likelihood of successfully implementing evidence-base practice and organizational change, should it not be used in field practicums, as well as the workplace? And if evidence-based interventions are implemented consistently and with fidelity, resulting in positive client outcomes, would it not be healthy for our organizations and workforce to learn more about the science of implementing practices that are known to produce evidence? If leadership is a critical component of system improvement and implementation of practice changes, ought not leaders, managers, and supervisors learn to coach to support the workforce in this regard? And if universities, colleges, and agencies are intent on developing leaders and expect them to contribute to the organizational development of their institutions, might coaching be a component of leadership programs to facilitate this process?

If these recommendations and powerful questions intrigue you, if they pique your curiosity and provoke a different way of looking at current circumstances and what social work practice and leadership might look in the future, then you may have just experienced a coachable moment, and hopefully, some inspiration for advancing knowledge about coaching in social work forward.

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