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Kempe Center: Individual Leadership Coaching

Alumni Interview Report Summary

The Evaluation Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

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HIGHLIGHTS

All alumni felt positive about their coaching experiences. They described an engaging and individualistic process in which they were able to set their own agenda and goals, and coaches provided the supports and resources to help them reach those goals.

All alumni expressed satisfaction with their coach and reported they formed a positive and engaging relationship. Coaches helped alumni to reframe specific situations, engage in personal reflection, and define success in different ways.

Most alumni felt that coaching allowed them to engage in self-reflection and personal growth, increase their professional skills, and reignite their passion for the work. In addition, alumni shared that the confidential and objective nature of the coaching sessions allowed them to feel comfortable to openly discuss a variety of difficult topics.

Alumni reported that engaging in the coaching model led to an increased level of confidence, provided new perspectives and insights, and developed better skills related to teamwork, leadership, and decision making.

Leaders were excited to see how the alumni's coaching experiences provided clarity for the coaching program. For instance, one leader stated, "These are all different people and they are all saying the same thing, it really shows what we are trying to do within the program." Leaders also reflected that many alumni provided information about themselves, not about their coach. This supports the coaching model of alumni being in charge of their own success, not the coach.

Alumni shared how they were implementing new behaviors after engaging in the coaching program. This includes behaviors related to making courageous decisions; supporting learning, reflection, and growth; reacting differently to teammates and clients; and recognizing other's voices.
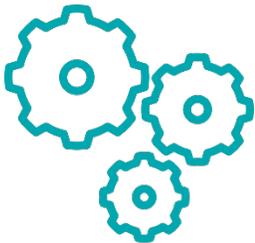
Alumni provided many examples of the ways their engagement with coaching has led to work and systems change. This includes improvements in team functioning, professional development, and being better able to manage stress.

Leaders shared additional insights to the organizational barriers that alumni may face. They reported there are issues of power and control throughout the whole system which can allow leaders to resist change and improvement. One leader shared, "Often, wires get crossed and organizations and agencies have power and people do not know how to use this. We need people to understand and recognize that they have power and how to use it."

INTRODUCTION

The Kempe Center at the University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus, is an organization committed to finding innovative ways to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect. They implement Colorado's Child Welfare Training System – an advanced adult learning system for child welfare workers and other professionals. As part of this work, Kempe provides a menu of coaching opportunities for those who serve as leaders in local organizations.

The Evaluation Center, School of Education and Human Development, University of Colorado Denver, has been contracted by the Kempe Center to conduct a study of the impact of their model of coaching. The specific aim is to describe the nature of the Kempe leadership coaching model and investigate the impact of this professional development on participants as leaders.

Six research questions guide this study.

1. What is the content/curriculum of coaching?
2. To what extent are participants satisfied with leadership coaching?
3. To what extent do leadership-coaching participants gain knowledge or skills?
4. To what extent are participants supported by their organizations in the implementation of new leadership practices?
5. To what extent do participants use new knowledge or skills?
6. How effective are teams led by participants?

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The practice of coaching has garnered much attention in studies for its correlation with improved skills and increased adherence (e.g., Leake et al., 2020, Dickinson, 2014, Miller et al., 2004, Sholomskas et al., 2005). In addition, coaching has been shown to have advantages for certain outcomes, including reductions in staff turnover (Leake et al., 2020, Aarons et al., 2009) and improvements in staff morale (Aarons et al., 2009). These indicators are increasingly important in the field of child welfare due to the demanding and sensitive nature of the work to ensure children are safe and together with their families.

Coaching is a relatively new concept and practice for the field of child welfare. In particular, child welfare practice does not extensively include coaching as a routine strategy with leaders/supervisors (Akin et al., 2016, Dickinson, 2014). It is only in recent years that the field has begun to develop and disseminate information on coaching. Therefore, this study is significant as it intends to define the Kempe model and begin to explore its impact on professional practice thus contributing to the understanding of effective ways to support and train leaders in this demanding field.
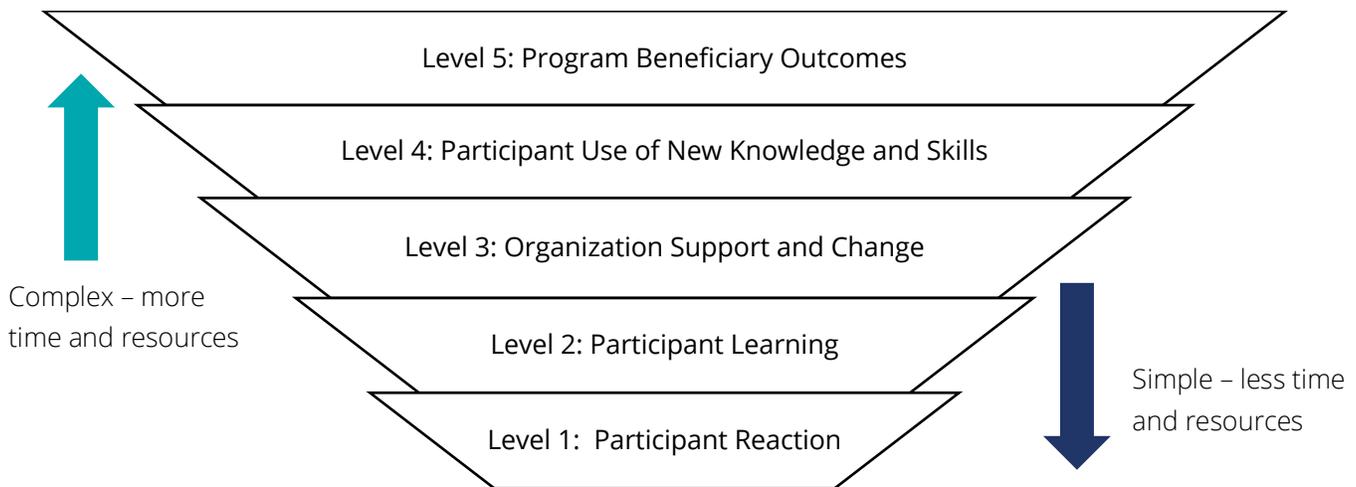
METHODS

LEADERSHIP COACHING ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

Evaluators interviewed 19 alumni who participated in individual leadership coaching through the Kempe Center. The interviews were part of a comprehensive research design that was approved as an exempt study by Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board (protocol #20-1687).

The theoretical framework for this study is Guskey's model of evaluation of professional development (2000), which includes five levels as shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: Evaluation framework

Level 5: Program Beneficiary Outcomes

Level 4: Participant Use of New Knowledge and Skills

Level 3: Organization Support and Change

Level 2: Participant Learning

Level 1: Participant Reaction

Complex – more time and resources

Simple – less time and resources

The purpose of the interviews was to understand the nature of the Kempe Center's leadership coaching model and investigate the impact of this professional development. Interview questions were developed collaboratively by Kempe Center leaders and evaluators. The questions asked about participants' experiences engaging in the coaching model and about ways they have grown or implemented changes in their professional roles since completing coaching. (See the interview protocol in Appendix A.)

As a further analysis step, evaluators facilitated a data interpretation session with program leaders. Leaders provided insights to assure meaning was considered within the context and intended outcomes of the program. Interview results are presented in this report along with insights shared by program leaders. References are presented in Appendix B and additional quotes sorted by key themes are presented in Appendix C

FINDINGS

COACHING EXPERIENCE

Alumni described their coaching engagement as lasting from nine weeks to a full year. The coaching schedule was set by the individual and varied from bi-weekly to monthly. Meetings generally lasted 30 minutes to one hour and occurred by phone or Zoom, though some sessions were done in person.

All alumni felt positive about their coaching experiences. They described an engaging and individualistic process in which they were able to set their own agenda and goals, and coaches provided the supports and resources to help them reach those goals.

I developed some goals that were important to me to work on throughout my coaching sessions with her... and then, based on those goals, I would bring up some issues or things that I was struggling with or things that had gone really well over the last couple of weeks. Then it got brought back to those goals. [My coach would say,] 'How does what we're talking about now help you with your goals?'"

[My coach] did a really good job of asking me what I needed rather than just prescribing what we were going to do. That was great to be able to self-direct."

LEADER REFLECTIONS

During data interpretation sessions, Kempe leaders agreed that these responses align with program goals. Leaders appreciated that alumni said that their training was self-directed and not prescribed, as this is "exactly [our] intention."

MOTIVATION FOR COACHING

Overall, child welfare leaders engaged in individual coaching for a number of reasons, but most commonly it was because they wanted additional support in their new role as a supervisor (*n*=8) or to develop and grow in their current position (*n*=7).

Exhibit 2: Interview themes related to motivation for coaching

Beginning a new role as a supervisor (*n*=8)

- "I was a newer manager with my department. ... I was having issues with one of my teams. I wasn't sure how to properly manage them, and I was not getting the direction I needed from my leadership. That's why I decided to take on coaching to see how I could get some new skills or figure out how to manage that better."
- "When I became a supervisor, I was just interested in pursuing an additional avenue of support for myself and just developing my skills as a leader."

Professional Development (*n*=7)

- "I felt that I was at a place where I was just plateaued in growth, professionally. I had been looked over for a few lead positions. Somebody ... had participated in the leadership coaching and recommended it."
- "I just wanted some additional supports in targeting some areas of growth and development."

Becoming a coach themselves (*n*=3)

- "I became a coach myself ... and had not been aware before then that coaching was available, and so I figured, if I was going to be a coach myself, I should probably get some coaching."

Recommended by supervisor (*n*=1)

- "I had interviewed a couple of times for a supervisor position [unsuccessfully], and my manager said, "Why don't you sign up for coaching and see if that helps?"

LEADER REFLECTIONS

Kempe leaders reviewed these themes and noted they appreciated that many alumni reported they were self-motivated to initiate coaching. They explained that coaching is sometimes viewed as a way to remediate deficiencies and assigned as a response to a poor evaluation, a stigma Kempe is working to eliminate. Therefore, leaders were pleased that only one individual reported coaching was recommended by their supervisor.

In addition, leaders were interested in learning more about the level of experience for those who engaged with coaching because they noted there were both "new supervisors" or more experienced leaders who noted they were seeking "professional development."

RELATIONSHIP WITH COACH

All alumni expressed satisfaction with their coach and reported they formed a positive and engaging relationship. Coaches helped alumni to reframe specific situations, engage in personal reflection, and define success in different ways.

> *It was super positive. [My coach] was so encouraging, so creative. I did really feel like I could be vulnerable with her and share the different things that were going on in my job that I didn't really feel like I felt comfortable sharing with other people."*

> *[My coach] had a really great way of being able to help me see the reasons why I was struggling … by putting it into a different perspective for me or really trying to get me to look inward as to why was I having such a particular response. What was being challenged within my own morals and values that's causing me to have such a visceral response? Once I knew what was triggering for me, then I could do something about it."*

> *[My coach] would help me set some attainable next steps, and she would also help me debrief from situations where I did have an opportunity, and talk about what went well, what areas I could improve on, or some different things I could try for the next time I'm in a similar situation."*

LEADER REFLECTIONS

During data interpretation, Kempe leaders agreed that these responses indicated alignment with the program goals as they relate to the coaching relationship. They mentioned how all coaches have their own personalities and approach, but they are all fostering a safe and effective relationship. In addition, one leader valued how goals were tied to action.

CHALLENGES OF COACHING

Alumni expressed various challenges of participating in the coaching process. The most mentioned challenge was the discomfort of engaging in self-reflection. Four alumni reported they had no challenges related to coaching.

Exhibit 3: Interview themes related to coaching challenges

Discomfort from engaging in self-reflection (n=6)

- "I think just the general challenges of growth and learning. At times, it was a little uncomfortable, some of the things that [my coach] prompted me to reflect on. I just had to sit with that."

Other challenges

- Lack of a clear definition for coaching (*n*=2)
- Connecting virtually with coach (*n*=2)
- Systemic barriers (*n*=2)
- Intimidating application process (*n*=1)
- Defining success (*n*=1)
- COVID 19 (*n*=1)
- Conflict of interest (*n*=1)

There were really hard conversations sometimes. … It is hard to look within yourself, to hold yourself accountable and to look at some of those things that … you can be doing differently and then move forward with actually making those changes."

LEADER REFLECTIONS

As Kempe leaders reviewed these challenges, they noted that experiencing discomfort during coaching and self-reflection is often a positive outcome. Engaging with coaching is intended to be challenging for the individual. The Kempe Center's model of coaching focuses on transformational change and within that transformation there will often be discomfort.

BENEFITS OF COACHING

Most alumni felt that coaching allowed them to engage in self-reflection and personal growth, increase their professional skills, and reignite their passion for the work. In addition, alumni shared that the confidential and objective nature of the coaching sessions allowed them to feel comfortable to openly discuss a variety of difficult topics.

Exhibit 4: Interview themes and quotes related to coaching benefits

Promotes personal reflection and growth (*n*=9)

- "The biggest benefits for me were just offering me some insight into myself and figuring out what's important to me and how I do my job and why I do my job. ... I feel like so often in the role that we play, we don't look inwards at our self very often, and we don't take time to do that. It forced me to, and it was helpful."

Increases professional development (*n=7*)

- "For me, I think the benefit really was focusing on the thematic structure of my leadership, how I show up, how I engage. There were definitely ... tangible ideas around writing notes or keeping a list of visions. One of the assignments I had was to write my vision statement. That was incredibly helpful."

Reignites passion and positivity about their job (*n*=7)

- "At the time that I was doing my coaching, I just felt really kind of bored with my job because I've been in this business for a long time. [My coach] just kind of asked me the right questions, and I was able to get out of that. I was able to enjoy my job again."

Supports confidential and objective sessions (*n*=4)

- "One of the biggest pieces was the fact that my coach was not at my agency. The fact that there was confidentiality, and the fact that there was this separation between my workplace. It felt much safer to have those conversations, whereas I feel like within my own agency, I don't think it feels as safe to try some of those things out and to talk through some of those pieces."

LEADER REFELCTIONS

During data review, leaders were excited to see how the alumni's responses clearly and consistently aligned with the intent of the coaching program. For instance, one leader stated, "These are all different people, and they are all saying the same thing; it really shows what we are trying to do within the program." Leaders also reflected that many alumni described their coaching experience by providing information about themselves, rather than talking about the contribution of the coach. This supports their efforts to implement a coaching model where individuals are in charge of their own success, not the coach.

When alumni stated that they "were able to enjoy [their] jobs again", leaders felt this was a huge success. One leader stated, "This connects to retention and feeling meaningfulness and engagement [in their job]. If we can impact this through our coaching intervention, then we can make an impact on retention."

Leaders valued the reports from alumni of the importance of confidential and objective nature of the coaching. They indicated they sometimes need to dispel the thinking that organizations can offer internal coaching. It was clear to the leaders that alumni felt they could benefit more through work with an external coach.

GROWTH AND LEARNING

Alumni reported that engaging in the coaching model led to an increased level of confidence, provided new perspectives and insights, and developed better skills related to teamwork, leadership, and decision making.

Exhibit 5: Interview themes related to growth and learning

Increase in confidence (*n*=17)

- "I think the coaching experience demonstrated to me that I have everything that I need. Maybe I went into it with this idea of, 'Oh good, someone can kind of help me through how to deal with a conflict or difficulties at work.' I think the coach definitely showed me that I don't need that. I really just need the time and space to reflect. I have everything that I need."
- "I think the biggest pieces were redefining [what a leader is], being able to figure out those opportunities when I do have the ability to 'shine,' and also really focusing on being authentically me … and not being some sort of prescribed definition of what many of the leaders or people look like. … I think it was helpful for me to redefine what it means to be authentically me."

New perspectives and positivity (*n=9)*

- "I think it just gave me a new outlook on things. I feel like it really helped me in moving forward with things that I was holding on to in a negative way and taking accountability for placing blame on others for my plateau. It was very helpful in that sense. Obviously, going into that, that was not what I expected, but it helped me in so many ways."

Better Teamwork (*n*=5)

- "It helped me be more mindful of when I am getting too withdrawn from my group and how that affects my group. Or when I'm getting to a place where I'm being negative, … when I'm minimizing things. … Also … being more present and mindful of when my teammates are struggling or, when they're doing really well, to make sure to recognize that."

Developing leadership Skills (*n*=5)

- "The timing was really helpful in being able to grow, build back up that confidence, figure out different ways I could re-channel my leadership, help redefine entirely what that looks like, and not needing an official title to be a leader."

Better decision making (*n*=4)

- "I'm better at stepping back and looking at actions that I'd taken or slowing down my thought process and considering options for a future decision."

LEADER REFLECTIONS

The themes that emerged related to areas of growth and learning resonated with all of the leaders. One leader stated, "I get so proud of the work we are doing. We are a small group of people putting ourselves out there, to be able to see that what our team is doing is meaningful; it makes me want to cry." Leaders felt that these responses supported the Kempe coaching model that supports individuals to transform into their authentic selves. One leader shared:

> *This resonates with me—It makes me think, who were we before we were White? Who was I before I was Black? This slide reminds me of authenticity, who were these people before they were told they had to be a certain way. What I could see happening is that the transformation is taking place in them and then we have a system that fights back against them. We either must conform to what that system wants from us or we have to leave that system. The children and families do not have the opportunities to leave the system. Alumni may not find the opportunities to implement their transitioned leadership. We have to keep all this in mind.*

Leaders were also left with some additional questions. Specifically, they would like to explore how "better decision making" and other areas of growth are affecting outcomes for children and families engaged with these individuals.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND SYSTEMIC SUPPORT

Fifteen alumni said their organizations and supervisors support them engaging in coaching either by introducing them to coaching or ensuring they had the time and space to complete the coaching process. Alumni also mentioned they were encouraged to use new leadership practices learned from coaching.

However, some alumni (*n*=5) mentioned their supervisors or managers were unsure about their trying new leadership approaches because they were not familiar with the content of coaching. Alumni also mentioned occasional pushback when they were "speaking their truth" or "stirring the pot." Others mentioned It is difficult to implement what they learned in coaching in the field of child welfare due to overarching systemic barriers.

LEADERSHIP REFLECTIONS

Leaders shared additional insights to the organizational barriers that alumni may be facing. They reported there are issues of power and control throughout the whole system which can allow leaders to resist change and improvement. One leader shared, "Often, wires get crossed and organizations and agencies have power and people do not know how to use this. We need people to understand and recognize that they have power and how to use it."

NEW BEHAVIORS

Alumni shared how they were implementing new behaviors after engaging in the coaching program. They were asked to describe how coaching supported them in a) making courageous decision; b) supporting learning, reflection, and growth; c) reacting differently to teammates and clients; and d) recognizing other's voices.

Courageous decision making (*n*=16)

Alumni reported they are making courageous decisions as a result of their coaching experience. They reported:

- Engaging in difficult and vulnerable conversations with coworkers and supervisors
- Speaking up when they may have previously stayed silent
- Leading their teams in new ways that may be uncomfortable at first but ultimately promote growth, trust, and connectivity

> *I told my manager about my concerns about People of Color and how they are being ... treated, and I wanted to talk with management. I sat down with two of the big-wigs virtually, and we had a conversation about the concerns and things that I was seeing and I never—I probably wouldn't have done that otherwise."*

Supporting learning and reflection (*n*=12)

Alumni in leadership roles mentioned that instead of personally taking on every task, they are delegating tasks and promoting growth within their teams. As a result, they believe their teams are learning and developing because they are taking the time to learn about their teams' strengths and to provide the space and resources for their team to develop those strengths. Alumni also reported they were mentoring newer co-workers to ensure they are connected to their teams and being successful.

> *I go into things asking more questions, helping other people come to their own answers and their own solutions, and continuing to be encouraging. I'm really big on worker retention, so I'm trying very hard to support people who may be struggling to be able to continue to be successful. I've definitely shifted and supported my team in new and different ways ... and just worked a lot on relationship building."*

Recognizing other's voices (*n*=10)

Alumni expressed that they have learned to take the time to really listen to their teammates. Some report they use specific activities and tools they learned through coaching to ensure everyone on their team can voice their thoughts and opinions. Alumni also mentioned they work to ensure their clients' voices and opinions are heard and considered.

Reacting differently to teammates and clients (*n*=8)

Alumni reported they are reacting differently in situations and moments with teammates and clients by being:

- Patient
- Non-reactive
- Skilled at taking negative moments and turning them into a lesson
- Open and communicative
- Appreciative of teammates
- Successful at engaging in conflict resolution with supervisors and teammates

LEADER REFLECTIONS

In reviewing these results, Kempe leaders expressed appreciation for ways alumni were modeling their coaching experience in work with their own teams.

WORK AND/OR SYSTEM CHANGES

Alumni provided many examples of how their engagement with coaching has led to work and systems change. This includes improvements in team functioning, professional development, and being better able to manage stress.

Exhibit 6: Interview themes related to system changes

Better functioning team (*n*=9)

- "My team is a whole different team. They're so connected to each other. I think even after we did the retreat, I think I got some pretty positive feedback from people around just being able to have some really deep, connected time with each other."

Professional development of team members (*n=6)*

- "Having some questions and evidence in my toolbox that I didn't have before to help [my teammates] critically think and resolve some things on their own, rather than me taking it on and trying to resolve it and give answers. In that regard, [I was] helping their professional growth as well."

Less stressful (*n*=3)

- "Because I'm more relaxed and less upset, less tense, I'm able to just say no to things when I'm feeling busy. ... My supervisor has really supported me in that so that I can actually get my own work done. I'm noticing that some of my peers are starting to do the same thing, so it's awesome."

APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What was your reason or motivation for becoming a coachee?

2. How would you describe your coaching experience?

3. What was your relationship with your coach? (prompts below)
    a. How did you and your coach work together to identify goals? What is an example of a goal you set?
    b. How did your coach support you in reaching that goal?

4. What are the benefits of being a coachee?

5. In what ways have you grown through your coaching experience? (prompts below)
    a. How has the coaching experience helped build your confidence?
    b. What have you learned through your coaching experience?

6. What have been some challenges of your personal growth or of achieving your goals from your coaching experience? (prompts below)
    a. How have you worked through those challenges?

7. To what extent is your organization (or your supervisor) supportive in your implementation of what you learned through coaching? (prompts below)
    a. What examples can you share of organizational support?
    b. Of organizational challenges or systemic barriers?

8. What example can you share of a time your behavior or actions reflected your personal growth or your goals that resulted from your coaching experience? (prompts below)
    a. A time you recognized and valued everyone's voice?
    b. A time you supported reflection, learning, and growth?
    c. A time you made a courageous decision?

9. How would your team/your supervisor describe your growth or behavior now as a result of your coachee experience? What example can you share?

10. How is your system/work environment different as a result of your coaching experience?

APPENDIX B – REFERENCES

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