

WHAT IS DIALOGIC COACHING TRAINING?

You may have heard people talking about the Dialogic Coaching Training (DCT) and wondered what it is. This article explains the key features of the training, why it has been introduced into the Department of Corrections and how it works.

The DCT came about because self-assessment surveys of team strengths and weaknesses (based on *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni) in the Operations Executive and others showed that people were not challenging one another or holding colleagues to account regarding their behavior or failure to deliver what they said they would do.

The DCT gives essential skills for team building, line management and supervisory roles.

The DCT uses the **Serving the Commonwealth of Virginia** graphic to define the four key accountabilities of all employees of the Department in its role of enhancing public safety – namely the fiscal (value for money), operational (secure and safe incarceration), community (lasting public safety) and moral (respectful) accountabilities. A four-level **Accountability Progression** is provided to determine how best to support or challenge your colleagues' and staff's behavior and delivery (as well as your own!). There are two reactive levels, **Disciplining** and **Holding-to-Account**, that may be used correctively after an instance of poor performance or compliance. Then there are two proactive levels, **Coaching** and **Dialogue**, that can be used beforehand to help colleagues to develop their skills and not get into difficulty. All four levels are necessary for public safety, but the more proactive (and less reactive) leadership will always be more successful in the long term. This means more dialogue (larger groups openly considering collective expectations of one another) and more coaching (taking the time one-on-one to help colleagues develop their skills and understanding) - and thereby less fire-fighting, reprimanding and disciplinary procedures.

Disciplinary procedures are already well defined processes, but there has been less guidance on holding to account. The DCT includes role plays where participants practice holding colleagues and staff to account. Findings to date show that people generally leave holding to account conversations too late because they don't like having 'difficult conversations' and so end up instead with disciplinary procedures. Developing the skills to have these conversations is essential for all good leaders and supervisors. There is a set pattern called Reciprocal Coaching that is used to develop these skills in the safe container of the DCT. By practicing real holding to account conversations that participants will need to have in the near future, and being coached on better ways to manage these conversations, they quickly improve the skills they need in everyday work situations.

Successful holding to account conversations will always use the Dialogic Practices, namely Voice (raising concerns openly and genuinely), Listening (to understand what the other person thinks and feels), Respect (appreciating how their situation is different from your own) and Suspension (revealing what you have seen or heard, what you make of that and what you want to happen in future).

The Reciprocal Coaching Pattern has four roles, as shown in the diagram. The Coachee (blue) is the person practicing a holding-to-account conversation, and the Actor (red) plays the role of the person with whom the Coachee intends to have this conversation. Although the Actor is not the real person, it is surprising how helpful their responses and reactions can prove to be to the understanding of the Coachee about the impact of their communication style and skills. The third role is the Coach (blue) who is there to support (affirm) and challenge (question) the Coachee's preparation, logic, simplicity of communication, clarity regarding accountability and their use of the Dialogic Practices (Voice, Listening, Respect and Suspension).

The fourth role is the Bystander (gray) who observes the dynamics between the other three participants and describes these at the end of the role play for additional learning. (This Reciprocal Coaching Pattern is also in use in some Learning Teams).

Coaching conversations are different from holding-to-account conversations. They identify areas of growth and anticipate potential areas of difficulty proactively. They require additional skills.

Firstly, you have to be interested in your colleagues and observe the way they respond to different situations. This will enable you to make well formed (data-based) observations about where they can develop and where they sometimes cause themselves and others problems.

Secondly, the DCT introduces the Leading Energies, which are a further set of Dialogue Skills. **The Leading Energies** (Visionary, Citizen, Performance and Wisdom) are the way people focus their energy to get the things done that they want and need to do. Strength in a Leading Energy is always a great asset for which others will be grateful. But staying in one energy too much of the time will result in counter-productivity that people will resent. Performance Energy ensures people deliver what they committed to do, on time and within budget. Staying only in Performance Energy, however, will result in overload, stress and eventual burn-out.

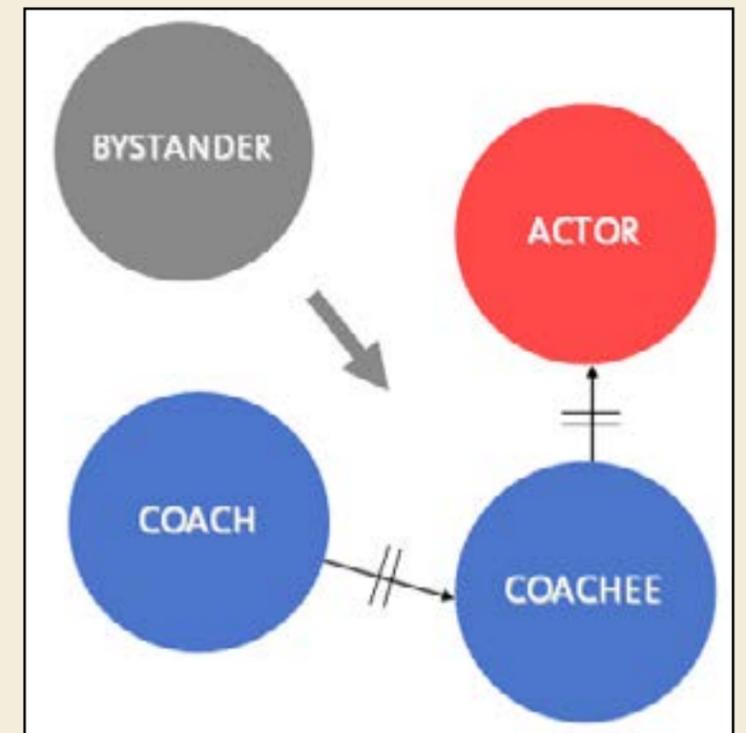
Coaching someone who is too preoccupied with Performance Energy would involve helping them to draw on more Citizen Energy (working with people, where each has an essential contribution), Visionary Energy (developing the guiding direction and desired outcome that aligns disparate activities) and Wisdom Energy (recognizing the vital processes and decisions, and prioritizing accordingly).

In the DCT coaching skills are developed using the same Reciprocal Coaching Pattern and the same four roles. Experience to date shows that people often have not been as perceptive of their colleagues as they might be, and therefore have less to offer in their coaching - so in the DCT more attention is given to preparing for the coaching conversation than the role play itself.

The final section of the DCT concentrates on Dialogue. Dialogue is the top level of the Accountability Progression (the four levels being Dialogue, Coaching, Holding to Account and Disciplining). It is through Dialogue that we can create or recreate accountabilities by together talking and thinking about our expectations of each other. Behavior which may have been commonplace when you joined the Department may no longer be acceptable or even compliant. Fiscal decisions that were acceptable before the recent budget cuts may now be overturned. What was considered good humoured joking or banter may now constitute moral offence.

Supporting and challenging ourselves and each other in open Dialogue is the way we re-evaluate things and improve the way we serve the Department, the Commonwealth of Virginia and enhance public safety for the community at large.

Please refer to earlier articles in *Around Corrections* for more information on references made in this article - in particular *Serving the Commonwealth of Virginia, Who is Accountable for the Healing Environment?*, *What are the Dialogic Practices?*, *What Are the Leading Energies?* and *What is Dialogue?*



Submitted by Peter Garrett