

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *The Importance of Coaching: A Brief Survey of Probation Officers*

Lowenkamp, M., Robinson, C., et al. (2012). "The Importance of Coaching: A Brief Survey of Probation Officers." *Federal Probation* 76(2).

**Key Words:** Coaching, Evidence Based Practices, Quality Assurance, CQI

### Summary/Conclusions

Implementation science has found that adding coaching and on the job training increases skill retention. Researchers sought to discover why coaching helped probation officers acquire and use new correctional practices with their clients. Coached probation officers from federal and county level probation departments received a short survey regarding their experience with coaching. Officers agreed or strongly agreed that: coaching allowed them to ask questions about the trained skills (93%) and offered a better understanding of how they can use the trained skills in their job (92%).

### Limitations of Information

One of the limitations in the current study was a small sample size. Only 185 officers completed the online survey of coaching. A small sample size will not represent a complete picture of probation officers across the United States. Due to the short length of the survey, the data does not adequately address all of the components that increase skill knowledge and retention. Lastly, the survey did not have a control group for comparison.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Coaching to Improve EBP Use

Evidence based practices have been shown to decrease recidivism up to 25% if utilized with fidelity to the models. In recent years, implementation science has identified that if ongoing coaching and on the job training is implemented with new practices, skill use increases to 95% as opposed to 5% with traditional classroom learning.

The current study sought to evaluate the coaching process on a group of 90 county level probation officers and a group of 95 federal level probation officers. Officers completed a three day training followed up with a one-on-one interaction for 20-30 minutes to cover any questions or to tailor skill use to a particular officer's needs. A direct observation session of 30-40 minutes was then completed by the officer using the new skills. The process was concluded with a 30 minute coaching session to give officers feedback on their skills.

Following the training and coaching process, officers were sent a brief survey to complete. The survey was designed to solicit feedback on their attitudes on the coaching process. The survey had a response rate of 70% (149 out of 185 officers completed the survey). Officers were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with five statements.

According to survey results, 93% of the surveyed officers agreed that the coaching sessions allowed them the opportunity to ask questions about the skills.

The officers also agreed that the coaching sessions helped them to better understand how they can use the skills in the job (92%). The lowest rated statement from the survey was 72% agreement that the coaching sessions made it more likely officers will use the skills compared to just classroom training alone. Officers (88%) agreed that after the coaching sessions they had a better understanding of how they could personally use the skills with clients and 83% of officers agreed the coaching allowed them to express concerns they could not in the class room training.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ Create coaches in house to improve newly acquired skills.
- ✓ Probation officers should take advantage of direct observation opportunities utilizing supervisors for coaching and performance feedback.
- ✓ Remember coaching is an ongoing process and some complex skills can take some time to master.
- ✓ Staffing cases can create opportunities to reinforce or ask about newly acquired skills.
- ✓ When coaching adhere to the 4 to 1 principle by identifying and affirming what a Probation Officer did correctly.
- ✓ Try the Elicit, Provide, Elicit method of coaching. This method is PO centered and asks what the Probation Officer would like to improve in regard to his or her skills.

State Court Administrator's Office  
Colorado Division of Probation Services, Evaluation Unit  
720.625.5760; www.courts.state.co.us  
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