

A FEW NOTES ABOUT COACHING AND MENTORING

John Pielemeier

Delivered to UAA Mentor training program, Dec. 12, 2017

I have been “coaching” new Foreign Service Officers on a part-time basis for almost 15 years. I have also served as a UAA mentor. Other coaches have been Jonathan Sperling (mostly DG and program), Linda Whitlock-Brown (EXO, Controller, Contracts) and Bob Dakan (Priv Sector, Ed. Econ), Jinnie Sewell (Health), and Larry Hausman (Envir). I mostly coach Program/Program Development and Agriculture officers.

What is the difference between a coach and a mentor? As a first-time coach, I was trained to “coach” using the following techniques. Many of these techniques are also appropriate as you develop your mentoring relationship with a new person.

- a) Mostly listen; encourage openness; do NOT provide answers; open doors for the officer to find and assess new information (e.g. suggest you talk to Joe Smith – here is contact info; suggest relevant readings, make a list of info to be gathered before making a decision, etc);
- b) Suggest issues that the officer isn’t bringing up (e.g. how is USAID’s operational style different than where you last worked? What do you need to do differently in your work style)?
- c) Encourage officer to play the role of anthropologist for a while when moving into a new post or job: Study power structure, relationships, decision-making processes, hierarchy, culture but do not be judgmental about the system until you understand it well.
- d) Encourage the officer to broaden his/her contacts, attend brown bags and presentations inside USAID and with DC area think tanks (Wilson Center, Center for Global Development, World Bank, etc.).

Issues addressed by coaches for new FSOs:

- Adapting to the foreign service, and (in DC) to a large bureaucracy;
- Reviewing and commenting on their Individual Development Plan (IDP),
- How to fill gaps in their knowledge/skill base,
- How to choose between on-the-job work rotations and TDY options during year in USAID/W,
- How to deal with difficult or uncommunicative supervisors; how to best participate in the first tour “directed assignment” process.

Coaches work with new FSOs beginning with their 5-week orientation course and then until they move to their first overseas post, normally about one year. Coaches are available “on call” and we meet only when an officer asks to meet. Once the officer transfers to a mission, we then encourage the FSO to try to resolve issues/gain information through the mission structure, using his/her supervisor, the EXO and other mission staff. Perhaps 15-25% of new FSOs continue episodic

contact with their coach, often via phone calls or emails regarding sensitive issues the FSO does not want to discuss at post or via meetings when the officer is in Washington on TDY, home leave or training. The “turnover” point with a “mentor” would be when the new officer transfers overseas.

Questions to ask your mentee:

I try to get to know my “coachee” very well. My first meeting with him/her, usually an hour long, has the officer talking almost exclusively. I ask questions related to how the individual became interested in international affairs/development: where she grew up, family travels overseas, foreign student home stays, high school and college experiences, influential professors and classes, thesis/dissertation topics, early work experience (often Peace Corps) and what led the person to consider applying to USAID’s foreign service.

I ask other questions such as:

- “When and why did you apply to USAID? Did you apply to more than one backstop? Were you accepted in your preferred backstop?
- What tasks in your backstop do you know best and do you feel most comfortable with; what tasks are you less comfortable with and that you probably need to learn?
- Family situation: if married or with a partner, how does he/she feel about your entering the foreign service and living overseas? What job and language skills does she have that can be helpful in acculturation and job searching.

For officers now in the field, a mentor might also ask:

- What do you enjoy about your career thus far? What don’t you enjoy? Is this what you expected from a USAID career? Why or why not?
- What training have you received? What training do you think you need to advance your career?
- What would you like to accomplish at your present post, in your next post, in your career?
- Is your family happy with your/their foreign service life thus far? Why or why not? Ask about adequacy of spousal employment and schools for children.

What are some key issues that young FSOs bring to coaches?

- a) Poor or inattentive supervision; not getting any or any useful feedback on performance. Officers need to learn how to “manage up”, develop work or out-of-office relationships with supervisors and senior staff; ask supervisors (in private) why they made certain decisions (what info do they have that the young FSO doesn’t have). How to get your supervisor and other senior staff to be “invested” in you and your career.
- b) How USAID teams are supposed to work? How do you “build a successful team”?
- c) How to work with and supervise FSNs (especially senior FSNs);

- d) Why do we spend so much (often useless) time in meetings?
- e) What to do if Mission senior management is failing? (answer: mostly “this isn’t your job to correct”, but find ways to work around it).
- f) Selecting Work Objectives and writing employee comments for AEFs.
- g) How do I find and get my next assignment? Can I get a break such as long-term training, secondment to State, the Hill or another agency.

Skills that young FSOs need to develop:

- a) Conflict resolution;
- b) Negotiation skills;
- c) How to run a meeting;
- d) Managing Up;
- e) Team building and participation;
- f) Supervision and managing down;
- g) Working with FSNs.

Key Contacts for USAID officers:

- a) HTCM Career Counselor for his/her backstop;
- b) Technical Bureau Backstop Coordinator;
- c) HTCM assignment team –I used to say “Cecelia Pitas”, alas.
- d) C3 Coordinator for new C3s.
- e) Coach