



Geographical focus: *United States (USA)*

CASE STUDY ?

NASA, USA

Company: *National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)*
(U.S. Government aerospace agency engaging in space travel, scientific discovery, aeronautical advances and breakthrough technology development)
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How NASA Integrated Coaching Throughout the Learning Process

NASA, like many organizations, faces the challenge of ensuring a steady stream of qualified leaders ready and able to take on the challenges of the future. For NASA a key skill necessary for mission success is the chief systems engineer who works with thousands of complex technical and people variables and brings them together to achieve mission success.

In 2008, NASA leadership saw a number of factors shaping the Agency's ability to fill critical systems engineering leadership positions and decided to develop the Systems Engineering Leadership Development Program (SELDP) to accelerate the development of high-potential mid-level systems engineers. First-year results revealed an unprecedented 80 percent of participants transitioning into challenging positions that utilized their learning within four months of returning to their home centers. Within six months, 33 percent were promoted.

In studying the factors that led to this program's success a number of items were identified including the use of a variety of coaching methodologies. In SELDP coaching was ubiquitous and methodologies included:

- **One-On-One Coaching:** Each participant received one-on-one coaching from a master certified coach. As part of

this process coaches held discussions with participant's supervisors and mentors to ensure participants were in sync with their management's needs and goals.

- **Group Coaching:** Coaches facilitated group coaching sessions during workshops where participants learned by observing each others' coaching interactions. One participant explained it this way: "Watching how others used their coach and how they were being coached, helped me see how I could more effectively improve my own coaching experience."
- **Classroom Coaching:** During program events and workshops consultants, coaches and program leaders provided in-the-moment observations and coaching.
- **Peer Coaching:** Participants were encouraged to observe each other and trained to give each other one-on-one peer coaching. This became an essential part of every class-wide event which not only improved their feedback skills but caused some of the greatest shifts for participants. One participant noted: "Hearing the same feedback from my peers, really hit home. I realized that this was something I needed to act on."



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- Transition Coaching: Finally, participants were provided with an additional twelve hours of one-on-one coaching after they graduated from the program to help them effectively transition back to their organizations.

Great care was taken to develop a trusting and safe environment because in many cases coaching was performed in the classroom in front of the other participants so that the entire class could learn from the individual's experience and insight.

The coaching framework for SELDP was based on the results of a 360 degree assessment instrument that was specifically designed for NASA systems engineers by studying the behaviors that made highly skilled chief engineers successful. Because SELDP coaching was based on behaviors that were proven to work in the NASA culture, it gave the coaching process an added element of credibility with the participants, which led them to be more open to the coaching process. Along with creating this connection to the specific skills needed to be an effective systems engineering leader, another key cultural connection was made by selecting coaches who

understood and had experience working in the NASA environment. These alignments made participants more receptive to the coaching process. Participants were more willing to learn about themselves and make the changes necessary to achieve their goals. One participant who was highly skeptical about the coaching process in the beginning said, "I 'drank the Kool-Aid' and found out I liked it. Coaching has been a very beneficial learning experience."

In NASA we have found that coaching is more effective when it is not implemented as a standalone activity hidden behind closed doors, but actually becomes a way of communicating that is shared by all. Coaching is fully leveraged when it is an integrated part of the larger learning system.

Our key learning/Recommendation:

Coaching is more effective when it aligns with the culture and becomes a way of communicating that is shared by all. Coaching is fully leveraged when it is an integrated part of the larger learning system and organizational culture.

Questions and exercises for further reflection and to integrate practice and theory:

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