

Coaching Entrepreneurs the Supercoach® Way

by Sharon Ballard and Jonathan Levie, Ph.D.

Introduction

It is very difficult for entrepreneurs to rapidly develop their ideas into feasible business plans and compelling business stories. Typically, they face two challenges: how to explain the idea clearly and how to convince others that the idea is viable.

While a lot of help is available to entrepreneurs, the quality of the help varies widely due to a lack of process, thinking tools, helper availability, process discipline and the venture's ability to pay for assistance. People who help start-up entrepreneurs call themselves different things: advisor, consultant, mentor, and coach are the typical labels. This paper explains the difference between these categories of helper, why we think that start-up entrepreneurs need coaching before they need the other types of help, and what the Supercoach® system entails.

Types of help for entrepreneurs

Here is how we describe the different types of helper that entrepreneurs may come across.

1. **Advisors** tell entrepreneurs what they think the entrepreneur should do in a specific situation, and indeed research shows that interventions that provide customized vs. general assistance tend to be of much more value to entrepreneurs (Raffo, Lovatt, Banks and O'Connor, 2000). Giving context-specific advice is fine if you are an expert in the entrepreneur's industry or in the specific domain that sets the rules for the issue facing the entrepreneur. But what if you're not? Many helpers of entrepreneurs fall into the trap of thinking they have to give context-specific advice because they are, well, advisors. We assert that it is impossible to be a successful generalist advisor to all entrepreneurs who come in the door, because they all face such different contexts. The advisors are placed in impossible positions, and can even open themselves to being sued if their advice is mistaken. This is why some of these advisors have to retreat to a box-ticking approach to dealing with clients. It is not surprising then that many startup entrepreneurs end up dissatisfied with small business advisors.

2. **Consultants** are experts (or purport to be experts) in specific domains, and their business model relies on learning from their clients and retaining the core skills themselves. In short, consultants tell you just enough so you need to keep coming back for more (Ashford, 1998). In our view, this creates a dependency rather than a strengthening of skills, although it may be justified if the skills required are rarely needed by the entrepreneur.

3. **Mentors** tell you what they did, when they were your age (if you've had a mentor, you'll know what we mean). Mentors, in other words, use their personal experience in business to suggest a specific solution to the mentee's problem. That's fine if the context is the same, but often it is not, and we are back to the same problem that advisors face. Mentoring can also be

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intensely personal, with the mentor taking on some of the emotional baggage that rightly belongs to the entrepreneur, and, often unintentionally, creating a dependency without the core skills to back it up.

4. **Coaches**, in a nutshell, show you how to do it for yourself. Thus coaching squares the circle of providing customized assistance without having to be expert in everything. D'Abate, Eddy and Tannenbaum (2003) have conducted a detailed review of the literature on “developmental interactions” such as mentoring, coaching and action learning. Their review of 182 articles, books and conference proceedings revealed that mentoring and coaching were distinct constructs. They conclude (p.376):

“Traditional mentoring has a general object of development, whereas coaching is more strongly associated with a more specific one. The time frame for coaching is short-term performance, whereas traditional mentoring tends to relate to long-term development. Traditional mentoring is more concerned with modeling, counseling, supporting, advocating, introducing and sheltering as exhibited behaviors, and coaching is more concerned with goal-setting, providing practical application, providing feedback, and teaching”.

Coaching, then, is about stepping in temporarily, in a structured way, to show entrepreneurs what questions they need to ask and to show them how to find the answers to these questions. It is not about suggesting or finding the answers for them. In the specific domain of entrepreneurship, coaching imparts a gift of skill in viable business creation that entrepreneurs can repeatedly use themselves and pass on to others.

While one-on-one coaching is very effective in helping to grow early-stage entrepreneurs, the consistency of this coaching varies across programs as communities adopt this form of assistance. Although there are several programs that offer materials and content for performing such one-to-one coaching, there is little in the way of formal training to develop coaching skills for this important form of assistance (Markley and Macke 2004).

Background

Supercoach® Workshops by EnableVentures, Inc. were developed to specifically address the development of coaches for early stage entrepreneurs. Supercoach® Workshops have been taught nationally and globally, since 2001. The Supercoach® content is the basis for several entrepreneurial assistance programs that combine one-to-one coaching with custom-tailored assistance designed to meet each venture’s unique needs, such as Launch Pad Program at Arizona State University Technopolis. Further, the methodology supports networking into the community’s assets and networking with other entrepreneurs.

EnableVentures’ Sharon Ballard and long-time collaborator Dr. Jonathan Levie, director of the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, have been delivering Supercoach® training globally; the Supercoach® Workshops teach structured



facilitation of early stage entrepreneurs, including coaching techniques that have proven to work best in practice.

Ballard was inspired to create the original training after she served a 10-month Management Fellowship for the Springboard Program of CONNECT, an entrepreneurial assistance program from the University of California, San Diego. Over a 10-month period, Ballard provided one-to-one coaching to over 60 early stage high technology and life sciences entrepreneurs. The centerpiece of this technique was a “springboard” where each entrepreneur presented a 15-minute briefing of their business plan to a ‘dream’ panel tailored for their unique needs. The entrepreneur then received an hour of feedback and advice from this dream panel. Springboard became the most supported and popular program at UCSD CONNECT. With Ballard’s help, similar Launch Pad programs have been established at ASU Technopolis, New Jersey Institute of Technology, in Europe and Asia. The Supercoach® system of entrepreneurial development is also the basis for undergraduate, graduate and MBA level studies in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial assistance programs at the University of Strathclyde’s Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship and at ASU. At the University of Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute (KECI), 90+ volunteer coaching Fellows have received the 4-day, 24-hour Supercoach® Workshop since 2004. Another 30 Fellows are planned to be trained in 2010.

The Supercoach® Approach

When people think of the word “coach”, several types of coach come to mind. Some people think of (American) football coaches, while other people think of athletics coaches. We think that Supercoach® coaches are closer to athletics coaches. Athletics coaches impart skills to their athletes that enable the athletes to run the race with skill and confidence. They don’t micro-manage their athletes. The Supercoach® approach of assisting entrepreneurs can be summarized as follows:

Respect – the coach must command respect from the entrepreneurs by having “been there/done that” or relevant business or management experience, or recognized coaching training.

Tough love – Coaches do whatever is best for the entrepreneur. The entrepreneur must perform within a set of ground rules. If the entrepreneur breaks those ground rules, then there are consequences, i.e., a broken agreement. This mirrors the transaction-based world of business that entrepreneurs must operate within.

Accountability – Coaches hold entrepreneurs accountable for what the entrepreneur says he or she wants to do with the venture. For example, they check business plans for inconsistencies.

Connectivity – Coaches must be well connected within the community or at least have the ability to tap a variety of resources.

A good coach holds the entrepreneur accountable to what the entrepreneur says she wants to accomplish and checks for consistencies using the one-to-one facilitation efforts. The coaches



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are taught to ask questions and to guide business-planning efforts by the entrepreneurs and to offer specific advice only when asked! The coaches are taught to avoid creating a dependency with the entrepreneurs. Rather, the coach provides ways of accessing the training, information and resources the entrepreneur requires for business planning and execution. Coaches can connect entrepreneurs to others who can be of value to them, for example to Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) and other technical and financial assistance. In this way, coaches act as resource facilitators. However, this is only incidental to their larger role in the community (Scorsone, Hustedde and Jones, 2003).

Here is our Supercoach® checklist of attributes a successful coach must have:

- Be an enabler, not an evaluator
- Emphasize self-development and self-discovery
- Offer constructive ways to improve, not negative criticism
- Conduct regular coaching interviews to maintain discipline and momentum
- Listen and look for signs of inconsistency in the entrepreneur's story
- Delegate and challenge performance; don't take their monkey onto your shoulder
- Set realistic i.e. professional business standards

Summary of the Supercoach® Approach

- ✓ Hold entrepreneur accountable to what they say they want to accomplish
- ✓ Do not judge
- ✓ Point out inconsistencies
- ✓ Serve as coach not expert advisor or consultant

Who can be a coach?

Our experience has shown that effective coaches can be found in the local community (although they do require effective training). The coaches can be Chamber of Commerce directors, professional services providers (lawyers, accountants, marketing and sales experts), bankers and investors, high school teachers, extension agents, retirees, experienced business people, or anyone else interested in the process of counseling and assisting local entrepreneurs and desires to contribute to their communities. On first glance, it might appear that an effective coach must have previous education and acquired pedagogical skills. However, we are finding that this is not the case.

Successful entrepreneurial communities develop civic entrepreneurs and civic capacity. These civic entrepreneurs have the ability to direct positive change through their involvement and leadership. They can provide assistance with the development of leadership skills within the entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) in their communities. One-to-one



facilitation or coaching with entrepreneurs is a key element of successful ESOs. Additional lessons learned include recognition that entrepreneurial facilitation or coaching requires experience and training to enable new coaches and facilitators to develop skills and keep growing (Emery, Fisher et al. 2003).

At the end of one of our workshops, we were asked to facilitate the creation of a Code of Good Practice. This is what the coaches we trained came up with:

The Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches' Code of Good Practice

- Coaches encourage small business people to fulfill their dreams
- Coaches listen attentively
- Coaches maintain confidentiality with those whom they coach
- Coaches ask probing questions to help the entrepreneur articulate his/her business concept and to save time and money for the entrepreneur
- The entrepreneur is responsible for doing homework between coaching sessions in order for the coaching relationship to be successful
- Coaches do not coach entrepreneurs in which there is a conflict of interest
- Coaches do not provide technical or financial advice or answers or make judgments about individuals or businesses

Source: "Your Coach is Ready", Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute, Department of Community and Leadership Development, University of Kentucky.

We realize that this Code is hard to follow. It is hard not to judge when someone new comes in the door. Research shows that bankers make virtually instant judgments about the character of a potential customer on a first meeting, well before they are in possession of the pertinent facts. We are all guilty of this (and could, but won't, share some funny coaching stories about this with you at our expense). Our experience with hundreds of entrepreneurs has taught us never, ever, to judge someone who wants to be coached. It is far safer to always and ever assume that they have what it takes to be highly successful, even if on the face of it they just don't, in your view, have a chance. It is the market that will pick the winners, not you. And the market picks some strange ones, we can tell you!



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How Supercoach® workshops change the way people think of themselves as coaches

In 2004 and 2005, we trained 70 people, all members of the University of Kentucky Entrepreneurship Coaches Institute, in the application of Supercoach® same tools and techniques. Some excerpts from the external reviewers interim report (Markley, Gruidl, Bradshaw and Calvin, 2005) on the Supercoach® workshop are given below.

‘There is clear evidence that the Fellows have developed the fundamental skills to be effective coaches. There was general consensus that the Supercoaching workshop was the most useful in giving Fellows the specific coaching skills they need to work effectively with entrepreneurs. After the coaching seminars, there seemed to be a shift in the coaches’ attitudes from one of ‘what have I gotten myself into’ to one of ‘I’ve learned more than I could have imagined when I started the program.’

The coaches generally report that they have built up their skill and knowledge levels over the course of the seminars and that they feel confident in their abilities to coach entrepreneurs. Specifically, the coaches recognize now that the ultimately responsibility for business success rests with the entrepreneur and that their role is to ‘ask relevant questions and perhaps steer the entrepreneur in the direction that will best suit his/her needs.’ A number of comments from the Fellows testify to this enhanced capacity:

‘The content has empowered us and we can now overcome stumbling blocks in our communities.’

‘There are two or three defining moments in a career and this is one of them for me.’

‘This was our best experience to date. I actually got to work through some step by step procedures that you could use in coaching. I feel more comfortable with the process.’

‘I am also feeling more confident working one on one with entrepreneurs. I have also been more comfortable with the Socratic method of asking questions, rather than being the “expert” all the time.’

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. I’ve been asked to volunteer coach in a course, but I believe I bring domain-specific knowledge that would be of use to start-up entrepreneurs. What should I do?

A. If you have been asked to volunteer coach in a classroom, workshop or course, congratulations! How do you reconcile your role as a volunteer coach with that of being an expert in a particular area of interest? Quite easily, actually, **provided** you recognize the difference between being an expert and serving as a coach. Look again at our definitions of advisor, consultant, mentor and coach. The first three helpers are, or try to be, experts in finding solutions to context-specific problems. Coaches do not. They try instead to impart the skill of finding one’s own solution.



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How can coaches impart this skill? By training the entrepreneur how to operate a set of tools that enable them to create a solution on their own. Entrepreneurial coaches need a set of tools that can be used in any new venture context. That releases them from the pressures of being an expert in every domain. We have found the Supercoach® toolset to work with new ventures as diverse as Kinetic Muscles Inc and Farmer Bill's Pumk'n Patch.

As a coach, it is important to encourage the entrepreneurs to actually struggle with the exercise or assignment given because that is the best form of learning. As a domain-specific expert, you can question whether the entrepreneur's answer reflects domain-specific common knowledge or would be acceptable in that particular industry, technology or peer group. This informed questioning trains the entrepreneur to always prepare defensible assertions, rather than wait for you to tell them the answer. Using your expertise in this way creates learning, not dependency.

Q. What if the entrepreneur wants me to sign a non-disclosure agreement before speaking with me?

A. If someone insists on you signing a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), try telling them you don't want to and don't need to know how it works, just what it does for people. Therefore there is no need for you to sign one. This is absolutely true, not just of you as a coach but also of their future customers and investors. You don't need to know what the inventive step is. If their worry is that you will go off and replicate their business idea, then, if they are right to worry about that possibility, they have no distinctive competence and should not start it anyway.

According to Rhonda Adams in her book The Successful Business Plan, "many professional investors – particularly venture capitalists – do not sign NDA's. This is standard policy with venture capitalists, and asking a venture capitalist to sign an NDA is viewed as a sign of inexperience. They see so many plans in so many related industries that they would inevitably have the possibility of a conflict." If they won't sign them, why should you sign them as a coach?

Q. Should I coach the entrepreneur or the entrepreneurial team?

A. Our view is that the buck always stops with someone, especially in a new business. Someone has to take the lead in shaping and communicating the new business. That is the person you as coach should be spending time with. The leader needs coaching most of all.

Last word

Finally, to be a great coach, you have to want **them** to run the race with skill and confidence. If you believe you are a better decision-maker and therefore it is legitimate to just tell them what to do, you should become an advisor, mentor, or consultant instead. It takes humility to be a coach.



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Dr Jonathan Levie is an Academic Researcher and former Director of the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Strathclyde. He has been researching and teaching entrepreneurship for over 20 years and has managed both new and growing firms. He has held research and teaching posts at the London Business School; INSEAD, France; Babson College, US; and University College Cork, Ireland. He created the Technology Entrepreneurship for Postgraduates Programme at the Hunter Centre and an innovative and highly successful MBA course based around Supercoach® techniques.



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