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A Sustainable and Scalable Mentorship Program for Women Coaches

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The Female Coach Mentorship Program discussed in this article is the outcome of a two-year pilot project aimed at developing a sustainable model of mentorship for women coaches who are interested in enhancing their skill set and optimizing their potential. The project was unique in its scope and collaboration and the results are promising not only because of the depth and scope of the research, but for its wide applicability from grassroots sport clubs to national sport organizations. Of particular importance are three Guides that emerged from the project — for mentees, mentors, and sport administrators — all available on the website of the Coaching Association of Canada (details below). These, and the resulting knowledge sharing may, the authors suggest, “have a significant impact on the advancement of women in coaching beyond the life of the project.” From the *Journal’s* perspective, this project is indeed a major step forward. - Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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A Sustainable and Scalable Mentorship Program for Women Coaches

By Jenessa Banwell, Gretchen Kerr, and Ashley Stirling

It is well-accepted that women are underrepresented within coaching in Canada. Women coaches represent no more than 25% of all coaches and as the competitive level of sport increases, the number of women coaches decreases. For example, at the Canadian university level, USport data reveal that women comprise only 17% of head coaches. At the national level, women represent only 16% of head coaches, and at the international level, across the last six winter and summer Olympic Games, women head and assistant coaches comprised 10% in Pyeongchang (2018), 17% in Rio (2016), 13% in Sochi (2014), 20% in London (2012), 13% in Vancouver (2010), and 12% in Beijing (2008). In addition to the alarming nature of these statistics on their own, they stand in sharp contrast to the advancements in gender parity seen in other domains such as medicine, business, politics, law, engineering, and academia.

Several strategies have been suggested to support women’s development and advancement in coaching, including increasing social and institutional support, establishing communities of practice, offering women-only coaching conferences, enacting gender equity policies, creating new paradigms of coaching that address common barriers for women coaches, and implementing mentorship initiatives. Given the widespread success of mentorship for women professionals in non-sport domains, it is not surprising that mentorship has become a targeted development strategy for supporting women in the sport domain.

Recently, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), and the University of Toronto collaborated to develop, implement, and evaluate a formal mentorship pilot program specifically for Canadian women coaches. This initiative was unique as it

focused on piloting a theoretically grounded model of mentorship that could be sustainable and scalable. More specifically, the intent was to draw upon mentorship research to design and implement a mentorship program that could be adopted and implemented after the pilot by small clubs and large national sport organizations (NSOs) alike. A summary of the program and some of its notable features are highlighted in this article.

Female Coach Pilot Mentorship Program

Funded by Status of Women Canada, the female coach mentorship pilot program was a formal mentorship initiative developed specifically for women and involved the participation of numerous partners and sport organizations across Canada. In addition to CAAWS, the CAC, and the University of Toronto, an independently hired project manager as well as four NSOs – Tennis Canada, Wrestling Canada, Hockey Canada, and Canada Basketball – participated. Each NSO appointed a representative to provide advice on the program’s development and implementation, as well as to identify and select mentor and mentee coaches to participate. Male and female coaches with extensive experience and expertise in their respective sport were selected by each NSO to participate as mentor coaches and high-potential women coaches who were believed to have a promising future in their respective national program were selected to participate as mentee coaches. In total, seven mentor coaches (three male and four female) and eight female mentee coaches participated in the program. In addition, two lead mentors were selected from the participating NSOs to serve as a supplemental source of support for mentor coaches.

The formal portion of the program began in the spring of 2016 with a training weekend in Ottawa. Mentor and mentee coaches, NSO representatives, lead mentors, and program administrators and developers were in attendance. The first afternoon involved the mentor coaches only and focused on what a mentor is and the various mentoring functions that mentors might provide to their mentee coaches. The mentees attended the remainder of the weekend alongside the mentor coaches and the focus of training was on facilitating opportunities for each mentor and mentee pairing to meet and work together to establish goals for the mentoring relationship, develop a mentoring work plan, and negotiate boundaries, ground rules, means and frequency of communication, and expectations around confidentiality. Each mentor and mentee pair then worked together over the course of 12 months to carry out the work plan. Throughout this time, mentoring pairs agreed to communicate at least once per month, participate in online webinar sessions devoted to topics of mutual interest, and take advantage of funding provided to each mentee coach to pursue a professional development opportunity of her choice. Program administrators, lead mentors, the project manager, and NSO representatives worked collaboratively to establish the minimum expectation for mentor and mentee pairs’ communication; the professional development topics were determined by polling the mentee participants on areas they were most interested in learning about to enhance their growth and development as a coach.

A formal evaluation of the program was conducted with data collected at all stages, including development, implementation, and conclusion. Specifically, a pragmatic program evaluation was conducted using Daniel Stufflebeam’s CIPP (context, inputs, process, products) model. Interviews with program stakeholders and mentor and mentee coaches were conducted at the beginning and end of the program. Survey data was collected throughout and mentor and mentee workbook data were collected at its conclusion.

The evaluation resulted in the development of a sustainable and scalable model of mentorship through the production of three Guides – a *Mentor Guide*, a *Mentee Guide*, and a *Sport Administrator’s Guide*. The Guides are intended to be used as a resource for informing the advancement of women in coaching through mentorship. Each Guide includes information specific to either the mentor, mentee, or sport administrator’s role in the mentorship process, and can be accessed through the CAC’s website in [ENGLISH](#) and [FRENCH](#).

In addition to the development of the Guides, key aspects of the program itself were valuable for participating women coaches. The benefits, in turn, provide important insights into helping to improve the landscape of coaching for future women coaches in Canada more broadly.

Value of NSO involvement

A unique element was the voluntary participation of NSOs at various levels throughout the program. Perceived institutional support is reported by women coaches as a key facilitator and form of support in their growth, development, and advancement. Notable examples of such institutional support include, but are not limited to, the

provision and backing of mentoring opportunities, recognition of coach efforts, and the establishment of a supportive environment for the growth and development of women coaches – all of which were evident in the program.

By participating, each NSO demonstrated the perceived value each organization placed on developing and advancing women coaches within its sport system. Further, the strategic selection of a woman mentee coach from each NSO demonstrated that the NSO was interested in the advancement of that particular coach and saw her as having high potential for growing within their national system. Finally, having a representative from each NSO participate in the development and ongoing implementation of the program provided its mentor and mentee coaches with a sense of support and institutional backing they may not otherwise have felt if their NSO had not been involved in this capacity.

The participation of those in leadership positions from each NSO may also have facilitated a deeper understanding of the barriers women coaches face in pursuing a career in coaching, as well as the benefits of formal mentorship for the development and advancement of women coaches, and the intricacies of institutionalizing such a program in their sport organization, all of which are important for advancing more women in coaching in the future.

Value of Creating a Group Mentoring Relationship

Another important element was the informal establishment of a group mentoring relationship for participating coaches, but especially for the female mentee coaches. A group mentoring relationship describes bringing together a group of multiple experts (mentors) and multiple learners (mentees) who are looking to learn from one another. Group mentoring relationships play an important role in the development of women coaches specifically because they provide access to expertise and experience of multiple mentor and mentee coaches, facilitate support in dealing with challenges, and provide coaches with a sense of belonging.

Although the primary focus of the training weekend held at the beginning of the program was to allow each mentor and mentee pairing the time to get to know each other and work together to develop a mentoring work plan and establish goals for the mentoring relationship, the weekend also facilitated opportunities to connect and socialize with coaches from sports outside of their own. For the mentee coaches specifically, this weekend offered numerous opportunities to meet, connect with, listen to, learn from, and benefit from peers (for example, various other female mentee coaches) and role models (for example, multiple mentor coaches and lead mentor coaches). Such opportunities were facilitated through group dinners and socials, ice breaker and group learning activities, and speeches from the lead mentors.

Throughout the program, mentor and mentee coaches were invited to attend online webinar sessions whereby they could learn about topics pertinent to women in coaching and engage in online conversations with one another about the material. In addition, the coaches were provided access to the [Female Coaching Network](#), a multi-sport online community for connecting women coaches locally and internationally, and to the lead mentor coaches.

We suggest that the informal establishment of a group mentoring relationship in the program aligns well with recommendations posed by researchers for supporting women coaches' development and career advancement in coaching. Specifically, the establishment of mentorship opportunities, connecting young women coaches with senior coaches, providing women coaches with opportunities to interact with other women coaches, and facilitating opportunities for women coaches to share their career stories and hear the stories of others are all important elements in supporting women coaches' growth and advancement.

Projected Impact on Women Coaches' Career Advancement

While the program was a short-term, two-year pilot project, the resulting Guides and the knowledge-sharing from those who participated in the program may have a significant impact on the advancement of women in coaching beyond the life of the project.

Specifically, the Guides were designed to be a resource for future applications of mentorship for women coaches across any and all levels of sport in Canada and to provide the main stakeholders, namely mentors, mentees, and sport administrators, with a theoretically grounded and practical step-by-step process to follow. The Guides streamline the development and implementation of the mentorship process by outlining practical, easy-to-follow steps that are accessible online, and by providing practical tools and fillable templates that can be used and adapted to fit the specific needs of any sport organization or mentoring relationship. The Guides serve as important sustainable and scalable resources in the advancement of women in coaching because they are flexible and adaptable to various sport

contexts and coaches, accessible to anyone across the country and beyond, and vetted through the experiences of Canadian women coaches.

In addition, mentor and mentee coaches have already begun to share their experiences and perceived outcomes from their participation in the program with the broader coaching community. Mentee coaches have given oral presentations at conference workshops as well as within their NSOs and have shared their experiences informally with women coach colleagues about the value of mentorship in their career development. Mentor coaches and lead mentor coaches have also used some of the materials for the development of other women coaches in their respective NSOs. The impact of the program is also reaching international coaching communities as lead mentors and the researchers have shared knowledge and activities learned from the project at international presentations and workshops.

The creation of the Guides and the forms of knowledge sharing in which participants have engaged demonstrate the impact of this pilot project on the continuous development, implementation, and value of mentorship for advancing more women coaches across the country.

In summary, the female coach mentorship program has yielded three valuable documents that represent a theoretically grounded, participant vetted, and practical model of mentorship to follow when designing and implementing future mentoring initiatives for advancing women in coaching. With the hope of having an impact on the growth and advancement of women coaches at all levels of sport participation, the mentorship model is accessible online and is adaptable for all sport clubs, organizations, and administrators to employ, ranging from community sport clubs to university athletic departments, to provincial sport organizations and NSOs.

While mentorship is but one piece of a multifaceted puzzle in increasing opportunities for the advancement of women in coaching across Canada, the program has imparted value on the participating coaches and NSOs and is expected to have a similar impact on future sport organizations and participants who utilize the mentorship *Guides*.

About the Authors

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