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How to Build Strong Coach–Participant Relationships: Insights from Program Leaders, Coaches, and Participants

Introduction

Employment coaching involves a trained coach working collaboratively with a participant to set personalized employment goals and determine action steps to meet those goals. At the heart of employment coaching is the relationship between coach and participant.

This brief describes what we learned about the coach–participant relationship from talking with coaching program staff and participants as part of the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations. We discuss the benefits of strong coach–participant relationships, approaches to building them, program features that can affect them, and how program leaders can promote them.

Summary of lessons learned

- Coaches and participants from all four programs participating in the evaluation developed strong relationships. For some, meeting with their coach felt like “visiting a friend” or “being seen as a person, not a number.”
- A strong, trusting relationship is central to coaching. Coaches and participants reported that when the relationship was strong, participants were more likely to open up and share their true goals, motivations, and challenges. Coaches reported that having this information enabled them to coach participants more effectively.
- Strong and trusting relationships helped participants build confidence, be motivated to achieve goals, and lower their stress.
- Staff and participants commonly said the following practices were important ways that coaches built strong relationships: offering information and resources, withholding judgement, listening actively, cheering participants on, and self-disclosing to relate.

- Meeting frequently early in the relationship and in person with the same coach helped catalyze and strengthen the relationship. Short-term participant engagement in the program and coach turnover were barriers to relationship building.
- Program leaders should consider hiring coaches with strong interpersonal skills, create shadowing opportunities, and provide time to debrief with new coaches about the interactions they observe. Although some staff did not view it as a necessity, hiring coaches that have had similar experiences to participants might help build strong relationships.

About employment coaching

Employment coaching is increasingly considered an alternative to traditional case management in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other employment programs. In employment coaching, coaches work collaboratively with participants to set individualized goals. These goals could be directly related to finding, keeping, or advancing in a job, or could be indirectly related to employment, such as completing education or training programs. Coaches provide support and feedback as participants work toward their goals. A key difference between coaching and traditional case management is that coaches do not specify goals for participants, develop plans to achieve those goals, or tell them what to do next. Rather, coaches guide participants in a collaborative process, during which participants determine their own goals and develop plans to achieve them.

Employment coaching, for the purposes of this evaluation, is focused on setting and achieving goals that are related directly or indirectly to employment. We define coaching as an approach with six distinct features:

1. Involves setting goals and developing action steps for meeting the goals

2. Is not directive—the coach does not specify goals for participants, develop plans to achieve those goals, or tell participants what to do next, but instead works collaboratively with participants
3. Is individualized and depends on the participants’ needs and preferences
4. Helps participants learn the skills to set goals on their own and work toward meeting those goals
5. Attempts to reinforce participants’ motivation to meet goals
6. Holds participants accountable by regularly discussing with participants their progress toward reaching goals

Four employment coaching programs

The four programs participating in the evaluation all meet the definition of coaching summarized above, but they otherwise differ in eligibility criteria, location of coaching, frequency of coaching, length of program, and qualifications of coaches (Exhibit 1).

- **Family Development and Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS)** provides employment coaching to TANF participants and their families. The Iowa Department of Human Rights, separate from Iowa’s TANF agency, operates FaDSS statewide; seven of 17 offices participated in the study. FaDSS is separate from the state’s TANF work program;

as such, participants have a FaDSS coach and a TANF case manager. Participating in FaDSS is not a requirement to receive TANF benefits.

- **Goal4 It!**TM provides employment coaching to Jefferson County, Colorado, TANF recipients who are subject to work requirements. TANF case managers were trained to provide Goal4 It! coaching. Participating in Goal4 It! is mandatory to receive TANF benefits.
- **LIFT**, a nonprofit organization, operates a coaching program in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, DC; all offices except Washington, DC, participated in the evaluation. Participants are parents or other caregivers of children younger than age 8, or expectant parents who are not in crisis. Applicants must also demonstrate a level of stability in housing and work or education that the organization believes is critical to being able to focus on goal setting.
- **MyGoals for Employment Success (MyGoals)** is a demonstration program (that is, designed to be implemented on a temporary basis for a study), operated by the Baltimore, Maryland, and Houston, Texas, public housing authorities. MyGoals applicants must be an adult member of a household receiving federal housing assistance (through a housing choice voucher) or living in public housing and must be either unemployed or working fewer than 20 hours per month.

Exhibit 1. Selected features of coaching program design in the four coaching programs being evaluated

Program	TANF linkage?	Maximum length of intervention	Intended frequency of meetings	Format and location of meetings	Coach employment status
FaDSS	Yes, must receive TANF to participate	Time on TANF and up to seven months post TANF	Twice per month in first three months, monthly thereafter	One-on-one and with family in the participant’s home	Paid, full time
Goal4 It!	Yes, mandatory for TANF participants	Time on TANF	Monthly	One-on-one in TANF office	Paid, full time
LIFT	No	Two years	Twice in first month, monthly thereafter	One-on-one in LIFT offices or community partners	Unpaid, part-time MSW interns on nine-month field assignments
MyGoals	No	Three years	At least once per month	One-on-one in housing authority office or housing development-adjacent offices	Paid, full time

Note: FaDSS = Family Development and Self Sufficiency, MSW = Master of Social Work, TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

What is a strong coaching relationship?

According to participants and staff, strong coach-participant relationships were rooted in feelings of trust and respect, and were characterized as being nonjudgmental, caring, and supportive. Most participants reported having a strong, positive relationship with their coach. Many participants agreed that the relationship benefited when coaches showed genuine interest in their life and circumstances, expressed empathy, and actively helped participants set goals and solve problems. Participants who reported having a strong relationship with their coach described the connection as personal, involved, compassionate, and motivating.

She'd call and make sure you're going with your goals. To make sure you accomplish your goals.... If you need to do a résumé, she said, 'Hey if you need help doing the résumé, send me all your stuff, and I'll help you do a résumé.' She was helpful in everything that you need to do.

— A MyGoals participant

What are the benefits of a strong coaching relationship?

Coaches across all four programs shared that the quality of the coach-participant relationship affected participant success as well as their own experience as coaches. Participants agreed that a strong relationship with their coach resulted in a number of social and emotional benefits that also supported their personal and professional pursuits. The most commonly mentioned benefits included:

- **Social and emotional support**

Several participants shared that they lacked social support in their lives. The coaching relationship served as a source of support that participants might not get from other people or communities. Participants described this as a benefit of the relationship, and several said their coach was the only person they could turn to for advice, guidance, encouragement, and emotional support. Participants often used words like “advocate,” “therapist,” “mentor,” and “friend” to describe the roles their coach played in their life.

It's not like a cop ... or a judge, it's more like a mentor, a friend, not somebody that's going to persecute you ... I've developed a close relationship with [my coach], and that was important to me. And the fact that she had done the programs that I was in as well made it more comforting to me.

— A FaDSS participant

- **Greater sense of autonomy and self-confidence**

The social support that coaches provided helped participants cultivate a sense of security, independence, and self-confidence. Many participants shared that before coaching, they struggled with feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. The one-on-one, practical support they received from their coach helped them get organized, “take control of [their] life,” and develop a sense of self-confidence. As a result of this support, some participants described their coaching program experience as the first time in their life they could envision pursuing a goal or having autonomy over their future.

She [the coach] helped me have confidence. She helped me think, 'Hey, I can do this, I can get out, I can get a job,' you know, 'I can take care of my kids, I can get my own place. Like there's resources and people out there to help me. I am not by myself.'

— A Goal4 It! participant

- **Feeling motivated and inspired**

Participants who received support and encouragement from their coach also said they felt more motivated to achieve their goals. Some were motivated by feelings of pride when they impressed their coach and were eager to report new accomplishments each week. Others credited their coaches with helping them tap into their inspiration and pursue their personal and professional ambitions.

I had a goal of opening up a food truck. [My coach] was very uplifting and told me I should do it and was willing to support me. [My coach] just gave me that push that I needed to keep going.

— A MyGoals participant

- **Improved mental health**

Participants emphasized that the resources, information, and emotional support they received from their coach led to broader wellness benefits, such as feeling less stressed or depressed. Some participants shared that during times of the year that are especially stressful, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, the food bank and toy drive resources coaches shared alleviated major sources of stress and enabled them to provide meals and gifts for their children. They also said they felt an added boost in self-esteem and perception of their self-worth when they were able to pass those resources along to other friends or family members who were struggling.

- **More effective coaching because participants were more likely to disclose important information**

Coaches shared that after establishing rapport, participants were more likely to open up about challenges and turn to their coach for help. Conversations with participants corroborated this. Participants who felt their coach was caring and nonjudgmental described their coach-participant relationship as “trusting” and “safe,” and felt comfortable disclosing setbacks and challenges without fear of criticism.

I felt like, you know, having that connection with somebody finally and ... opening up to them. ... I was dealing with a lot of mental and emotional things, she would send me little quotes and things that I could look at. A little Bible verse, just different things that helped me get through my day. And I really enjoyed that.

— A MyGoals participant

- **Less burnout for coaches**

Coaches found that their work felt more meaningful when they could connect with participants. According to coaches, having a strong relationship with participants helped them feel more engaged in their role and in their participants’ development. Coaches also shared that having rapport and trust with a participant made coaching check-ins more pleasant and productive and helped alleviate workplace burnout.

So that’s part of what I want to do, is help [participants] get from point A to point B without me, whatever that looks like. And so I want them to have the hope that you are going to be okay, you are going to be self-reliant, because we’re trying to break generations of stuff. And so, I know that’s a big grandiose thing, but in the big picture, that’s why I do it and that’s why I care.

— A FaDSS coach

How do coaches build relationships during coaching sessions?

Coaches emphasized the importance of developing strong and trusting relationships from the first meeting. Coaches and participants agreed on several factors that promoted a strong relationship, including offering information and resources, withholding judgement, listening actively, cheering participants on, and coaches sharing their own experiences.

- **Offering information and resources**

Participants described supportive coaches as being knowledgeable on a variety of human services programs, often ones they would not have known about otherwise. Many participants shared that their coach provided information or resources to help them, such as food pantry locations, access to a printer, or parenting advice, which in turn helped to build their relationship.

Program staff also thought this was an important way for coaches to build relationships with their participants. One coach described providing resources and information as a way to show they were invested in the participant’s goals and to model what is possible.

Participants really need to feel that you care and that you’re there for support and that you have resources that would be valuable to them.

— A MyGoals Houston coach

- **Withholding judgment**

Many program staff said that withholding judgement of participants helped build a relationship because the participants felt safe to share things about themselves that might be sensitive or that they might be embarrassed to discuss, such as becoming homeless, not doing what they said they would, or sharing their private goals and ambitions.

One Goal4 It! program manager thought that not judging participants was crucial to having a positive relationship and said that after a participant felt judged, it was very hard to rebuild trust. A MyGoals Houston coach said participants needed to feel like they would not be judged to “really be themselves as they got to know you better.”

Participants appreciated being able to be honest and vulnerable with their coach without fear of judgement. Many considered this feeling of safety important to relationship growth. A few participants appreciated that their coach was not overly critical or disappointed when they did not fulfill an agreement or were unable to make progress toward a goal.

- **Active listening**

Many participants and staff thought coaches actively listening to participants and showing they were interested in what the participants had to say was key to relationship building. Coaches and participants described active listening as being present in a conversation, showing genuine interest in what participants were saying, and restating or confirming what a participant shared. When a coach is able to repeat or restate what the participant shared, it helps assure the participant that their coach was listening. It also helps the coach confirm that they understood what the participant shared.

Coaches felt practicing active listening was important so they could really hear what the participant was trying to convey and, as one Goal4 It! coach put it, allow the participants’ “voices to be heard.” Coaches also described active listening as giving participants the time and space to express their feelings, which helped participants feel more connected to their coach.

Participants valued their coach’s ability to actively listen. For some participants, coaches demonstrating active listening was a critical part of developing trust with their coach. Others shared that coaches who practiced active listening were able to offer more informed advice and help them find direction when they felt lost or overwhelmed. When one Goal4 It! participant admitted to her coach that she had no idea what goals she wanted to work on, her coach offered, “Well I’ve been listening, and based on what you shared in our last check-in, I think working out a consistent child care schedule would be a good goal for you.”

- **Celebrating success**

Cheering participants on and celebrating their successes was also a common technique to build strong relationships.

Some coaches explained that celebrating participants’ successes could be important because the coach might be the only person in the participant’s life that is currently, or who has ever, provided that type of support.

Celebrating participants’ successes also helped motivate participants to continue to make progress on their goals. One LIFT coach described keeping detailed notes so they could reflect with the participant at each three-month check-in and remind them of how much they had accomplished.

We might be that only person that’s cheering them on in that moment. And so, if they know they have somebody to celebrate the good times with and not just talk about the bad times, I feel like they’re more willing to move forward and get excited about things.

— A FaDSS coach

- **Coaches disclosing information about themselves**

Program staff and participants shared that when coaches offered insights into their own lives and experiences, it helped foster the relationship. Several coaches and participants described connecting over shared experiences, such as being single parents, growing up in the same neighborhood, or being first-generation college students.

I personally feel like self-disclosure will always strengthen our relationships and just create a deeper bond in connection.

— A LIFT program manager

Program leaders discussed appropriate self-disclosure boundaries with coaches and offered guidance about how to navigate the line between employment coaching and social work or therapy practices. However, coaches shared that the degree of self-disclosure often differed from participant-to-participant and that they adapted their level of openness based on a participant’s needs and preferences, as well as their own personal boundaries.

One participant expressed feeling better about her financial challenges after hearing her coach open up about her own history of financial hardships. She described feeling like her coach was no longer an outside observer but that she had “jumped into [my] problem with me.”

What program design features and challenges can affect coach-participant relationships?

Coaching relationships are influenced by more than just interpersonal dynamics; the program's design and the implementing organization's capacity set the stage for the relationship. For example, program staff and participants reported strong relationships in programs that built in frequent and consistent meetings, as well as in-person or in-home visits (as opposed to only virtual meetings). Both staff and participants voiced their frustration with programs that switched coaches or had high turnover.

Frequent and consistent meetings are foundational

Participants and staff valued frequent and consistent contact, especially at the beginning of a coaching relationship. For example, staff from LIFT and FaDSS reported intentionally building in more frequent contact at the beginning of a participant's time in the program to catalyze the coach-participant relationship. Specifically, LIFT and MyGoals coaches tried to meet twice with participants during their first month in the program, whereas FaDSS coaches aimed to meet twice per month during the first three months. After their relationships were more established, pairs met less regularly (see Exhibit 1).

Frequent and consistent contact was thought to be important because building a strong relationship takes time. Some participants described being shy, being slow to trust, or needing time to get to know their coach before opening up to them. More frequent meetings could accelerate the trust-building timeline for these participants.

[It] took me like 2–3 times 'cause I really had to feel him out and see, you know, what he was. I just can't dive [in]. I had to figure it out, feel them out ... Feel to see if he was genuine. Did he really just care about his job, or was he just doing it because it was just something to do? Did he really care? Was he judgmental?

— A MyGoals participant

Participants and coaches said it was challenging to build relationships when coaching sessions did not occur regularly as intended. Some participants described feeling like their coaches were unreliable due to canceling meetings or not making time for them. One participant took this as a sign that their coach did not like them; others just found it inconvenient. All of

Short-term coaching relationships can be a challenge in coaching programs that tie eligibility to TANF receipt

Participants in Goal4 It! had fewer meetings with their coach compared with participants from other programs, because Goal4 It! participants could only access the program while receiving TANF (see Exhibit 1). A Goal4 It! supervisor noted that short tenure in the TANF program could hinder the program's ability to build coach-participant relationships: "We may get three to four months with a [participant] from application to program exit. We may only get three [coaching] meetings."

According to program data collected for the evaluation, Goal4 It! participants were in contact with their coach on average four times in the first 12 months they were in the program, which limited the time available to build a relationship. Other programs had more than double, triple, and even quadruple this number of contacts: LIFT participants had eight contacts with their coach in the first 12 months, MyGoals participants had 12, and FaDSS participants had 18.

Although some Goal4 It! participants had more frequent contact with their coach, a few described only meeting with their coach a few times before they were removed from the TANF program because of sanctions or employment. Yet one Goal4 It! participant who met with her coach only a few times still described a positive relationship with her coach and feeling like she could trust her. She noted that her coach used active listening techniques and could relate to the participant as a mother.

these participants agreed this made it more difficult to build trust with their coach. Coaches similarly described challenges with not having enough time to meet with participants due to a high caseload or other obligations that did not leave enough time for meetings.

Meeting in person and in the participant's home provides added value

Coaches in all four programs described that meeting in person catalyzed and strengthened the coaching relationship. Coaches and participants described the importance of being able to observe each other's facial expressions and body language during in-person meetings to glean information about their emotional state and convey reassurance or understanding.

I think [being] in front of a person, you see their facial expressions, you can put a face to a name that opens up another level of intimacy.

— A LIFT coach

It was very important to see who you're talking to face-to-face and have that interaction while talking to [my coach]. Getting to see her expressions, her seeing my expressions, getting to know each other more personally.

— A LIFT participant

Meeting in the participant's home provided additional opportunities to fortify the coaching relationship. FaDSS coaches travelled to participants' homes, whereas coaches in the other three programs met with participants mainly in the program office but occasionally in community locations convenient to the participant.

Home visits, when possible, reportedly gave coaches and participants more opportunities to learn about each other and bond.¹ Participants and coaches agreed that home visits enabled coaches to learn more about the participant through observing their home environment and meeting their family members, children, or roommates. In addition, home visits have the potential to level the playing field between coach and participant, as participants reported feeling more comfortable and in control in their home than in a program office, and the burden of travelling for the meeting is on the coach instead of on the participant. Consequently, participants might be more forthcoming in sessions that take place in their own home.

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the importance of meeting in person for relationship building. Some coaches described how virtual coaching sessions during the pandemic (most often held over the phone, not via video) made fostering relationships more difficult. In the case of one participant who met her coach in person before the pandemic, she shared that it was helpful to have had that in-person connection before shifting to virtual meetings. (For more lessons learned from coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, see this [brief](#).)

I feel one of the biggest, I'm going to say cons, is that when we weren't in the home and I would enroll a new client, I didn't feel like I was as close to them.... I just didn't get to know them as well. I could hear the tone and the change of their voice if they were struggling with something [over the phone], but I didn't have those body languages to be able to go off of.

— A FaDSS coach

Coach turnover is inevitable but disruptive

Participants might have worked with more than one coach during their time in coaching programs because of staff turnover,² which had negative implications for both participants and coaches. Coach turnover can negatively affect relationship building because participants often need repeated interactions with the same coach to feel a strong connection and develop trust. Being assigned a new coach requires restarting the trust-building process and can negatively affect a participant's progress.

A LIFT program director shared the challenge of coach placements for short durations:

As with any relationship, some time has to go by before you get into your groove, know each other. It does take like four months in for coaches to break through with their [participant], and the placement is only nine months.

Some participants shared that getting a new coach can feel abrupt and disruptive to the progress they had been making with their current coach. Per one MyGoals participant:

Getting a new coach when you got this good flow going with the first coach, and then bam. He's gone. And then what? It's just ... flipping from coach to coach to coach [is] not good.

Other participants expressed frustration about having to familiarize a new person with their personal background and found rehashing their circumstances with a different coach tiring and potentially traumatizing. To address this challenge, some coaches said it was helpful to personally introduce the new coach before switching coaches.

Turnover was reportedly a challenge for program staff, too, and made it difficult for coaches to connect with participants. They said it also led to coach burnout, when coaches were not replaced and the caseloads of the remaining coaches increased as a result; this burnout negatively affected the coach-participant relationship.

How do program leaders facilitate strong coaching relationships?

Programs leaders described facilitating strong coach-participant relationships by hiring coaches with strong interpersonal skills and providing ongoing training and supervision to help coaches address challenging situations and strengthen their coaching skills.

Hiring coaches who can connect with participants

When hiring new coaches, program leaders said they looked for candidates who could connect to program participants. In screening and interviewing potential coaches, leaders from all programs sought coaches who could quickly build trust and rapport with participants, had a passion for working with people, and could address problems and conflicts that arose in the coaching relationship and in the participants' employment journey. To do this, one program coordinator observed how well candidates could engage him in a conversation, and another asked candidates for an example of how they built rapport with a client.

For LIFT, it was important that candidates demonstrated not just empathy for participants but also a conceptual understanding of the cycle of poverty and pathways to economic mobility. In addition, LIFT looked for multilingual and multicultural candidates to connect with Spanish-speaking participants.

In MyGoals, matching coaches and participants meant hiring coaches with lived experiences similar to that of participants, such as coaches who could speak to their personal experiences with poverty, living in the local community, or identifying as a racial or ethnic minority. A program designer said, "meeting folks where they are for real" enabled stronger and more authentic connections between coaches and participants, and it revealed "blind spots" in terms of "relating to and understanding [participants'] needs." A few participants echoed this sentiment and found it more difficult to relate to coaches who had different backgrounds or didn't experience the same systemic challenges:

No, I didn't trust her. I really think it's, kind of, hard for a Black woman to express to a White woman how she feels when a White woman probably has never experienced anything [the] Black woman [has]. Or this White woman's experiencing things that this Black woman probably never [has]. So, I really think it's all about matching them up correctly.

— A FaDSS participant

Although having the same background as a participant can indeed strengthen the coaching relationship, staff from other programs said it was not a necessity. They said coaches could effectively serve participants who came from different backgrounds so long as coaches demonstrated confidence in their coaching ability and cultural competency.

Training on how to create strong relationships

Program leaders can promote strong coaching relationships by formally and informally training staff on the skills and components of a strong relationship. For example, MyGoals and LIFT provided formal, multiday coach trainings before coaches started working with participants, including practices for fostering a strong coaching relationship. The other programs offered training as needed on relationship-building topics, such as motivational interviewing (that is, using open-ended questions and active listening to motivate change³) and conflict resolution. LIFT offered informal learning opportunities by hosting "lunch and learn" sessions during which coaches shared their strengths with one another, including tips on building relationships.

New coaches also built their coaching skills through on-the-job shadowing. Before coaching their first participants, all programs required new coaches to shadow experienced coaches to observe how coaches built relationships. After the shadowing, they debriefed about coaching methods and discussed challenging parts of the session. Coaches said they found these shadowing experiences especially valuable, as they are more hands-on:

I really learned to do what I do by job shadowing. So, when you first get hired on, I went on visits with my supervisor, and then after so long, it was like, okay, do you feel comfortable? And I'd say yes ... You can give me all the training in the world, but until you're in the home face-to-face with people and unique to their situation, it's not going to be the same.

— A FaDSS coach

Providing supervision to support relationship building

Supervisors supported coaches in developing relationship-building skills during one-on-one and group meetings by providing feedback and modeling effective coaching methods for building relationships. To do this, supervisors conducted role-plays, reviewed case notes, and shadowed coaches (“reverse shadowing”) to monitor the quality of the coaching relationship. In one-on-one meetings, supervisors debriefed about these activities with coaches to ensure that coaches remained nonjudgmental and worked collaboratively with participants to solve problems. When providing feedback to coaches, supervisors modeled coaching skills such as remaining nonjudgmental, reflective listening, and asking open-ended questions. In addition, many programs conducted regular staff meetings during which coaches could share challenges and successes with one another, including learning from their peers’ experiences creating relationships. For example, a LIFT supervisor described how they did this through peer group debriefs:

So, group debrief is more so about, it’s almost like a case consultation space.... It’s essentially a space ... for coaches to be able to share their successes as well as if there’s a member where they maybe need a bit more support and they want to get perspective from other coaches and see what they’re doing.

— A LIFT supervisor

Summary

Investing in building a strong coaching relationship can yield important benefits for the coaching process, participant, and coach. Participants and coaches said that having a strong relationship provided participants with important social and emotional support as well as a greater sense of autonomy, self-confidence, motivation, and inspiration, and improved mental health. For coaches, having a strong relationship meant they could have honest conversations about participants’ needs and challenges, which helped them provide more effective coaching; strong coach-participant relationships also reduced coach burnout. Furthermore, this strong relationship was the vehicle through which participants received social and emotional benefits that supported their personal and professional pursuits.

Strong coaching relationships don’t just happen, they are intentionally nurtured. To do this, programs can:

- Ensure that coaches provide something tangible to participants, such as information and resources, and that

coaches are nonjudgmental, good listeners, celebrate successes, and disclose information about themselves

- Consider having coaches meet more frequently with participants at the beginning of the program to accelerate the relationship, and encourage in-person meetings when possible
- Hire coaches with strong interpersonal skills; lived experience helps when possible, as does empathy
- Train and supervise coaches to support the development of their coaching skills

Although coaches and program leaders are responsible for creating the conditions for coach-participant relationships to develop and thrive, both coaches and participants acknowledged the role participants play in fostering these relationships. To help develop a positive coach-participant relationship, participants, with the support of their coach, can:

- Be open about their needs and challenges
- Be willing to identify and set goals
- Attend scheduled check-in meetings

About the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations

To learn more about employment coaching, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contracted with Mathematica and its partners, Abt Associates, MDRC, and The Adjacent Possible, to conduct the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations. This evaluation is assessing the implementation of four employment coaching programs and, using an experimental research design, the programs’ effects on participants’ self-regulation, employment, earnings, self-sufficiency, and other measures of well-being.

This brief was based on interviews with Goal4 It!, FaDSS, LIFT, and MyGoals program staff conducted in 2019 and again in 2022; a survey of program staff conducted in 2019; and in-depth interviews with Goal4 It!, FaDSS, LIFT, and MyGoals program participants in 2019 (eight to 11 participants per program) and 2022 (seven or eight participants per program).

Visit [this website](#) for additional information about the evaluation.

References

Rollnick, Stephen and Miller, William, R. "What is motivational interviewing? Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy" 23(4), 325–334, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S135246580001643X>

Endnotes

¹ Home visits may not be an option for programs that lack the necessary resources and staff capacity. Additionally, meeting at a participant's home might not be feasible for participants who are unhoused or experiencing intimate partner violence.

² Although an inevitable part of all programs, coach turnover happens more frequently and by design in LIFT. LIFT coaches are master of social work students completing a nine-month field placement as part of their coursework; after this time, their participants are assigned a new coach.

³ Rollnick and Miller 1995.

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