

## **The Effectiveness of Individual Career Coaching for Low Wage Workers**

The intent of this study was to determine if coaching is effective for low wage workers, and what coaching issues are specific to low wage workers. By the end of the action research phase it was clear that coaching is indeed a powerful tool for facilitating both career and personal development for such workers. This discussion will focus on why that is so, and draw three primary conclusions that emerged from the experience of coaching seven cooks in Google's kitchens over a period of approximately three months:

- *Coaching is an effective way to facilitate career development and personal growth for low wage workers.*
- *While there are a few coaching focus areas specific to low wage workers, most fundamental issues at work are common to all employees, both blue collar and professional.*
- *Coaching programs can be quite brief and still stimulate real and positive change.*

The main themes that emerged in this study were primarily the need to develop both communication and leadership skills, and secondarily the need to focus on goal clarity, financial security, stress management and self-care, and organizational obstacles.

*Coaching is an effective way to facilitate career development for low wage workers.*

### ***Coaching Approach***

While there are many coaching schools, models, and styles, there are some basic principles that are consistent in the emergent coaching profession which were followed in this research. The coach's job is to facilitate the client's process in clarifying his or her goals and developing an action plan, but not to make decisions or find solutions for the client. This is to assure that the coaching process is one of self-discovery for the client, exhibits trust that the answers can be found only within the client, and honors the need

for the client to claim victory for his or her own progress. It is the researcher's opinion, however, that in career coaching it is beneficial for the coach to provide occasional guidance.

For coaching to be successful, especially when it is brief, it must be highly focused, so it is important to choose goals that are achievable and at the same time build confidence. In effective career coaching, and in this research, the coach works with the client to clearly articulate realistic, short-term goals and identifies the developmental steps that need to take place for the client to achieve them. The short-term goals can be discussed within the context of long-term aspirations, which may be quite different. At each coaching session, the coach assigns customized, incremental, real-world tasks that will help the client develop the strengths needed to progress at an appropriate pace. The coach and the client then discuss the outcome of these tasks, which may include activities, conversations, and observations, to further the client's understanding of what s/he needs to do to move to the next level. See Table 1 below for examples taken from this research.

Table 1.

***Participants' Work Goals, Developmental Goals, and Assignments***

Client	Work goal	Developmental goals	Example Assignments
PA	Find work more in synch with her taste and values	-Take responsibility for her career -Accept diversity in personalities and work styles -Manage stress	-Discuss transfer to work with vegan chef with her manager -Connect with those responsible for sustainability at Bon Appetite -Do yoga and meditation
PB	Promotion	-Perform consistently -Get organized -Pay attention to detail -Develop endurance	-Examine your cooking process and try different approaches -Create menus -Work out in the gym -Eat breakfast before coming to work
PC	Promotion	-Use communication channels effectively -Take the lead at work	-Network -Discuss moving up or moving on with executive chef -Function as if you already have the promotion
PD	Promotion	-Develop management skills -Exercise emotional control	-Notice what motivates your individual direct reports -Train and delegate rather than micromanaging -When you are about to lose your temper, take one deep breath first
PE	Promotion	-Be more assertive with direct reports -Get clear about goals -Communicate needs and desires -Learn to say no	-Find a female mentor -Gather information on hierarchy and roles and decide on your goal -Tell your manager what job you want next -Delegate effectively -Drop some hours from your second job
PF	Pay increase	-Manage time effectively -Speak up more -Build confidence	-Observe various management styles -Do informational interviews -Create menus -Ask for help when needed -Ask for a raise
PG	Promotion	-Interact with colleagues and clients -Find a way to stay creative, engaged -Show leadership	-Interact through work by helping, teaching, learning -Create new menus with ingredients you've never used before -Take the lead in your interactive online warrior game and notice the leadership skills you also need for work

The coach's task is to stimulate the client to shift perspective in the area where he or she feels stuck so that s/he can see more possibilities. This is done chiefly by asking thought-provoking questions and making clear and honest observations about the client's actions and thought processes, using powerful images and metaphors when possible. Naturally this must always be done with generosity and compassion, and without judgment.

Perhaps the most important service a good coach provides is to reflect an image back to the client of the best the client has to offer, a vision of the potential of the client's strengths waiting to be fully realized. Everyone wants to be truly seen and heard, but this may have even greater significance for low wage workers who have perhaps had few opportunities to experience this kind of focused attention and faith in their abilities from another person. Clients frequently report that their new ways of seeing and doing things reverberate through all aspects of their lives. Pam McDonnell, Executive Director of A Hand Up, which provides coaching to low wage women and women in transition, said in a telephone interview "It's the human touch – it's basically about the connection. These conversations are valuable."

### ***Conditions Supporting the Coaching Process***

There were conditions in place for this project that the researcher believes contributed significantly to its success. The Springboard Forward model has a clear, supportive structure, and yet is flexible enough to allow coaching that is tailored uniquely for the client by the coach. The program is launched with a "Career Mapping" workshop that introduces the idea of career planning, stimulates the clients to begin creating their own map of the future, and explains the coaching process. As a result, the clients have given thought to their goals and plans before the first coaching session, although the workshop is not sufficient for most people to gain clarity about what they want to achieve, and certainly not how to achieve it. Mark Guterman, who designed the Springboard Forward training and coaching program, says that the workshop is important "to help the clients become comfortable with the program, and to establish rapport."

The Springboard Forward model accommodates different coaching styles while requiring that the basic ethical tenets of coaching be observed. Importantly, it is the individual who has been selected by management to participate in the program who is the

client, and not the company. Springboard Forward insists on respecting coach/client confidentiality, critical to developing the trust necessary for a successful coaching engagement. Any client must be assured that the coaching is primarily for his or her personal benefit to be able to make real changes.

The program requires that the client's manager be present at the first, final, and follow-up sessions to assure adequate communication and support between the employee and his or her manager. One of the revelations for the researcher was the value of these three meetings with the participant, the manager, and the coach present together. With a coach facilitating the discussion, it was easier for the participant and the manager to have important conversations that might otherwise have been avoided. These sessions encouraged the manager to take a longer view of the participant's future, and automatically placed the manager in a supportive role. The managers provided valuable information for the coach and the employee on what s/he believed were the employee's strengths and areas that needed development. The coach could introduce topics previously approved in private by the client, easing the path for communication with the manager.

The clear program structure, the involvement of management, and the confidentiality of the coaching sessions create an optimal environment for the coaching to be effective. The coach and client together document the client's goals, and this document is presented and discussed in the client/manager sessions and signed by both, validating the process. The fact that the client has been selected for the program as an employee with high potential and receives support for his or her professional development by both the coach and his or her manager creates an inspiring and positive environment in which the client can strive to achieve. Also, when agreement is reached between the manager, the client, and the coach about what s/he needs to work on, and others are watching to see improvement, generally employees make a real effort, and managers, who know they are being observed as well, try to help.

***Most fundamental work issues are common to all employees.***

The researcher has five years of experience coaching professionals functioning as executives, managers, and individual contributors in corporations, and so was curious as to what issues might emerge in this study that are unique to low wage workers. Upon

discovering that the need to develop communication and leadership skills (as defined below in Table 2 below) emerged as most prevalent in this study, it seems clear that all employees share the same fundamental challenges. The secondary themes that were revealed – the need to focus on goal clarity, stress management and self-care, and organizational obstacles also impact both groups. Financial security is the single issue most specific to low wage workers, and because they are more vulnerable economically, some of the other issues noted affect them more forcefully.

Table 2.  
*Definition of Primary Focus Areas*

<b>Communication Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiating important and/or difficult conversations</li> <li>• Managing conflict</li> <li>• Exercising emotional control</li> <li>• Developing and managing relationships</li> <li>• Networking</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrating courage</li> <li>• Taking initiative</li> <li>• Acting with confidence</li> <li>• Looking at the big picture</li> <li>• Taking responsibility</li> <li>• Identifying management models and mentors</li> <li>• Managing time and processes</li> <li>• Managing others</li> <li>• Teaching</li> </ul>
<b>Goal Clarity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting clear achievable goals</li> <li>• Developing an action plan</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining stable employment</li> <li>• Working second jobs</li> <li>• Seeking financial independence</li> <li>• Finding solutions with inadequate resources</li> <li>• Managing debt</li> </ul>
<b>Stress management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing deadlines</li> <li>• Building physical endurance</li> <li>• Responding to aggression</li> </ul>
<b>Self-care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building strength</li> <li>• Recuperating</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational Obstacles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of information</li> <li>• Unclear review process</li> <li>• Unclear promotion process</li> <li>• Unclear pay scale</li> <li>• Lack of internal job postings</li> <li>• Perception of fairness</li> </ul>

### *Communication Skills*

Certain conversations are critical to success at work, and both professionals and blue collar workers struggle without the necessary skills to initiate and manage these conversations. Those that arose most consistently in this study are in Table 3 below:

Table 3.

#### *Important Conversations at Work*

<b>Conversations</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Making requests</b>	-support from one's manager -assistance from a co-worker -a promotion -a raise
<b>Clarifying expectations</b>	-job responsibilities -career path -employment options
<b>Disagreeing</b>	-conflicts with co-workers -differences of opinion with manager
<b>Asserting authority</b>	-delegating to direct reports -communicating standards
<b>Giving instructions</b>	-to direct reports -to peers
<b>Giving critical feedback</b>	-to direct reports -to peers
<b>Developing relationships</b>	-establishing trust with co-workers - networking
<b>Seeking information</b>	-informational interviews -networking

Fear is the strongest obstacle to skillfully managing (or even having) these conversations, and is a potent force for both low wage workers and professionals at work. Employees fear that if they say what they really think there may be negative repercussions from their managers and conflict with their co-workers. They fear that they will not be able to contain their emotions and will reveal undesirable personal traits causing them to lose the respect of others in the workplace. Much of this fear is based on the fact that most employees have never consciously developed the necessary communication skills to manage important and/or difficult conversations successfully, and lack the confidence that comes from the experience of doing so. By far the most

feared and most frequently avoided conversations are “crucial conversations,” discussions “where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler, 2002).

Coaching to improve communication skills must address these fears by acknowledging them as natural and powerful, and attempt to help the client see the potential benefits of having these conversations and managing them more skillfully. It can be very helpful to employees to explore different approaches to such conversations with a coach, discuss best and worst possible outcomes, and even to rehearse what they want to say. Most important, however, is the experience of having the conversations, surviving them, and in some cases getting results that are better than anticipated; and then discussing new insights with the coach.

In this study the coach (the researcher) gave assignments for specific conversations to all participants, and in all cases the participants had the conversations and reported back the results. This often led to additional conversation assignments. In fact, the most frequent and prevalent assignments overall for all participants involved conversations. The participants’ willingness to accept and carry out these assignments indicated their recognition of the importance to their careers (and their lives) of developing the courage and ability to communicate effectively when it counts. It also revealed the importance of coaching to facilitate this truly significant learning, allowing the client to build confidence through experience while having the coach’s support and guidance.

Networking is perhaps the one type of communication in which low wage workers are at a disadvantage compared to more highly educated professionals. Although many employees in both categories share some misconceptions about networking and do not have the skills or the desire to do it, low wage workers often do not even know what networking is, as the concept has never been introduced to them through school or work. Pam McConnell confirms that this is also true for the low income women served by A Hand Up; she says “They don’t understand networking.” She emphasizes the importance of networking in the workshops she conducts, and asks clients to focus on what they can offer to others, rather than what they need.

Since a sense of powerlessness is a common experience among low wage workers, due perhaps to the belief that their options are limited by lack of education and influential connections, networking can be a positive and confidence-building activity. Making contact with others who have more experience, and perhaps success, can be both informative and inspiring, and when workers take the initiative to connect with others, it allows them to pro-actively expand their horizons, and begin to see more avenues toward achieving their goals.

The coach presented networking to the participants as a way to gather information, and to learn more about the culinary profession in general and the cafes at Google specifically, so they could clarify their goals and create action plans. Most people think of networking as meeting strangers and asking them for a favor, hence the abhorrence for the process. However, when it is viewed as a social and informational exchange, a way to get to know someone with common interests better, and to expand one's network of contacts and perhaps employment possibilities, it is considerably more palatable. For the participants who actively networked, all felt less trapped in their current position and more confident that they could make changes if they wanted to.

### ***Leadership Skills***

An unanticipated result of this study was that the need to develop leadership skills was one of the two top focus areas for coaching for virtually every participant. Much is written and taught about the importance of leadership for professional executives, and in fact when we use the word leader, we assume it refers to those holding political and/or economic power. However, it is clear from this research that everyone needs to lead in their own way, and within their own context, to succeed in any endeavor. If leadership is having the courage to be authentic, taking responsibility for one's actions, career and life, taking initiative to try to do things right, to make things better, and helping others do the same, then clearly we all need to lead.

This was especially evident with these participants, perhaps influenced by both the nature of culinary work and the Google cultural context. Every participant's manager encouraged their employee to take on responsibility beyond their current role to prove that they were ready to be promoted. Each was given permission to act as if s/he were already promoted and to simply begin to instruct and correct co-workers, and make extra

efforts to assure that the café as a whole succeeded in its mission. There seemed to be a degree of fluidity in the roles, which were interpreted differently at different cafes, and flexibility in the coordination of work. Nevertheless, the executive chef in all cases retained absolute authority, much as the director of a play has the final word on all aspects of a production.

An image that arose from several conversations with participants and their chefs was that of looking at their work and the café itself through an ever widening lens, or seeing “the big picture.” This was a way of describing an incremental shift in consciousness that requires seeing more of what is needed for all the pieces to fit together to meet deadlines, while simultaneously and voluntarily taking on more personal responsibility for the overall outcome.

Since cooks learn most of what they know on the job, learning and teaching are critical activities in any kitchen. Those who are alert and learn quickly are considered to have high potential, and everyone is encouraged to teach what they know to someone who needs to learn it, since teaching is a necessary and respected skill in this work.

Skills for managing people appeared to be weak throughout the organization, at all levels. While this is also true in many professional organizations, it is possible that in industries with low wage workers there are fewer opportunities to receive management training. In the culinary field, where most training simply happens on the job, the relatively young participants in this study were learning how to manage people from those who managed them. In some cases, this was detrimental to their ability to develop best practices, since many of the management techniques that pass down through the culinary tradition are authoritarian and aggressive.

Management skills were important, since all of the participants wished to be promoted, and in some cases this meant managing people for the first time, or managing more people. The coaching provided some basic management training in the sessions, and asked several of the participants to observe the various management styles around them to find leadership elements they could use to construct a model for themselves. In addition, since it is important to learn quickly and to be able to teach effectively in the kitchen, all participants were encouraged by both their managers and their coach to begin to actively teach both direct reports and, when appropriate, peers. A good teacher

automatically has leadership role in the kitchen, and makes a visible and valuable contribution to the team.

There were two management challenges specific to the environment of Google in California. First, while the employee population was quite diverse, there were many Spanish speakers, most on the lower rungs. These employees spoke English with varying degrees of proficiency, ranging from fluent to none. Managers in this environment either needed to learn some basic Spanish or identify a trusted bi-lingual employee to interpret when needed.

Second, women made up a small percentage of the employees, and only a two or three had reached the level of sous chef. There were no female executive chefs during the course of this study. In this “macho” culinary culture, the two women the researcher coached had issues with establishing their authority, and getting themselves into a position to be promoted. PE, an exceptionally talented and hard-working woman originally from El Salvador, was a lead cook, and was having difficulty managing the Hispanic male cooks reporting to her. The coach asked her to find a woman who had succeeded at Google and ask for her advice, so she found a female sous chef who agreed to mentor her. The first thing her mentor told her was “You need to be strong, look them in the eyes, act confident. Tell them what to do and walk away.”

### ***Goal Clarity***

The heart of any coaching program is to identify clear, achievable, and aspirational goals, and then create an incremental action plan to achieve them. Low wage workers may often be frustrated and unclear about their goals, since they may believe that their options are limited. The participants knew that in the culinary field there is a relatively low income ceiling even for those who are promoted. In working with the coach, virtually all participants became significantly more certain about what they wanted to do next, what steps they needed to take to make it possible, and more confident that it was possible. This was the most concrete and verifiable result of the study, and successful beyond the researcher’s expectation. Table 4 below shows what they achieved within the three-month span of the program:

Table 4.  
*Short-term Goals and Results*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Goals July 2007</b>	<b>Results September 2007</b>
<b>PA</b>	29	F	Caucasian American	Lead Cook	Transfer to different cafe	Transferred
<b>PB</b>	25	M	African American	Cook	Promotion to Lead Cook and pay increase	Pay increase
<b>PC</b>	32	M	African American	Cook	Promotion to Lead Cook & pay increase	Promotion to Lead Cook and pay increase
<b>PD</b>	23	M	Hispanic American	Lead Cook	Promotion to Kitchen Manager and pay increase	Promotion to Kitchen Manager and pay increase
<b>PE</b>	29	F	Native of El Salvador	Lead Cook	Promotion to Kitchen Manager and pay increase	Pay increase, transfer and promise of promotion
<b>PF</b>	23	M	Filipino American	Cook	Pay increase	Pay increase
<b>PG</b>	22	M	Chinese American	Cook	Promotion to Lead Cook and pay increase	Pay increase and promise of promotion

In addition, the long-term goals chosen by the participants in Table 5 below show evidence for the Springboard Forward premise that individualized coaching leads to increased employee engagement. Six of the seven participants chose long-term goals at Google, and five of them chose the highest available level of executive chef. This indicates both satisfaction with the opportunities available to them at Google, and the ambition to excel. This is important, because employee engagement creates benefit for both employers, who gain employees who are more ambitious, dedicated, and loyal who are willing to take leadership roles, and for employees, who feel more valued and recognized, and so better about both themselves and their work.

Table 5.

*Long-Term Goals at Beginning and End of Coaching Program*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>First Session Long-term Goals</b>	<b>Final Session Long-term Goals</b>
<b>PA</b>	Find a non-culinary job outside Google	Participate administratively in a vegetarian venture focused on nutrition and sustainability
<b>PB</b>	Become a Google executive chef	Become a Google executive chef
<b>PC</b>	Become an executive chef	Become a Google executive chef
<b>PD</b>	Travel and cook internationally	Become a Google executive chef
<b>PE</b>	Unsure	Become a Google executive chef
<b>PF</b>	Become a executive chef	Become a Google executive chef
<b>PG</b>	Unclear, not necessarily culinary	Become an executive chef

*Financial Security*

The only coaching theme unique to these low wage workers, or at least profoundly more significant for these employees than for professionals in better paying jobs, was their lack of financial security. The participants were all hourly employees, and while they were fortunate to have benefits, unlike many hourly employees, they could be dismissed at any time with no notice or severance. Cooks are understood to be on trial for an undefined period after hire, since they are evaluated by their work and not their resumes. Consequently, there is a general underlying feeling that they could lose their jobs at any time. As in most low wage work, frequent job changes and sudden disappearances are the norm for culinary employees. All participants expressed unease during the course of the program over personnel changes occurring around them.

This was intensified by the overarching Google environment, since Google has consistently grown at a highly accelerated pace. In January of 2001 there were 200 Google employees (<http://www.swivel.com>) and by the end of 2007 there were around 16,000 (<http://www.searchengineworld.com/google>). The executive chefs told the researcher that a new café opens every few months at Google worldwide, and on the central Mt. View, Ca. campus. The general atmosphere of intensity and continuous rapid change can be chaotic and stressful for employees.

It is challenging for those earning low wages to live independently, and most of the participants were living with their parents or others out of necessity. This can be a

psychological barrier to becoming a self-sufficient, mature adult, especially for those who stay with their mothers. For PF this was further complicated by the fact that his mother needed his contribution to be able to pay her rent. Of the seven participants, six had extremely long commutes because they could not afford to live in the Silicon Valley near Google where most needed to start work at 6:00 a.m.

Lack of resources was a continual problem that surfaced in small but important ways throughout the program for several of the participants. PB missed a session and a day of work because his car broke down and he had to borrow money from his mother to get it fixed. PD never returned any of the coach's calls to his cell phone (the only way to contact any of the cooks), and his executive chef finally told his frustrated coach that PD could not afford enough cell minutes to check his messages. PD had an old car, but couldn't drive it because he couldn't afford the insurance or pay his past due traffic tickets. PC had a car, but refused to drive it to work because the mileage would devalue and wear out the car, so instead had a two-hour commute starting at 4:00 a.m. each morning.

For at least two of the participants, debt was a problem. PD and PF had attended culinary school, and had both borrowed the \$55,000 tuition required for the one-year program. For people earning \$12-16 an hour in the Bay Area, this amounted to a nearly insurmountable burden. Neither knew how or when they would ever be able to pay it off. There is currently an effort to mount a class action lawsuit against the culinary school, which has been accused of overcharging and taking advantage of naive people of little means.

Three of the seven participants had second jobs, which in some cases meant no days off, and in all cases represented working sixty or seventy hours a week. Although, as previously mentioned, their wages were well above the national average for low wage workers, they work in one of the most expensive areas in the country, and so needed to supplement their wages. The remaining four participants all toyed with the idea of getting second jobs throughout the coaching program for the same reasons.

The coaching approach to these basic financial problems was straight-forward and practical. The coach spent time with those clients for whom financial security was a significant issue helping them to think analytically about what was needed to improve the

situation. PB, PD and PF began plans to improve their living situations. PD had detailed coaching discussions about ways he might become more financially solvent, and PB actually consolidated his debt and set some financial goals. All participants stated that they wanted wage increases, and five of the seven were overdue for performance reviews. Six participants were given the assignment of requesting an increase, and did so. All six received wage increases during the course of the program.

### ***Stress Management and Self-Care***

While many employees, both professional and low wage, experience high stress levels at work in our society, low wage workers often experience a combination of powerful stresses, psychological, physical, and financial. This was true of all participants, and appears to be endemic to the culinary profession. All were preparing three gourmet meals for hundreds of people every day, so responding to intensive and relentless deadlines was inherent in the job. Learning was supposed to happen on the job, but there was not much room for error. Moreover, any real failure would result in not only a failed delivery, but wasted food. In addition, kitchen culture engenders an aggressive communication and management style, which can lead to conflict and finger-pointing when something goes wrong.

Culinary work is extremely demanding physically, and all participants were on their feet for at least eight hours a day, as well as the additional hours required by their second jobs, all of which also consisted of physical labor. While breaks are permitted, they are not encouraged, and are carefully timed. The kitchen is often a tight space filled with several cooks working quickly with knives and fire, which can add to the stress. Several participants arrived at their coaching sessions regularly with fresh cuts and burns.

None of the participants had a well-developed sense of the need for self-care that the researcher has found in professional clients. Even professionals who are not adept at self-care have an idea that they should be doing something to compensate for stress, and usually have the resources to be able to do so if they choose to. Low wage workers often don't see any way they can build recuperative and restorative activities into their schedules or budgets, and tend to take pride in being able to "take it" without that benefit. However, several of the participants were so exhausted that when they sat down for the first time all day for their coaching session, they had a hard time staying awake.

The researcher is trained in integral coaching, in which the client is addressed as a whole person, so while career coaching focuses on work, the overall well-being of the client is always part of the coaching effort. Various assignments were given to reduce stress and build physical endurance to enable the participants to develop the strength and discipline needed to succeed at work. All assignments were carefully chosen through a collaborative process with the client to determine his or her interests, experience, schedule and resources. The coaching metaphor that emerged was that one's career, and indeed life, is a marathon, not a sprint. Some chose to work fewer hours, go to the Google gym, which is free for them, and/or to try to find time to socialize more. PA did yoga and meditation, which were activities in which she had participated in the past, and which she reported were hugely beneficial to her during the program.

### ***Organizational Obstacles***

While there are obstacles to career development and in all organizations, those experienced by the participants were notable, possibly due to the unique circumstances of the contracted company employing the cooks at Google. The employees lacked basic information about training and employment opportunities available to them. The contracting company has a widely dispersed employee population at many different sites both at and beyond Google, and only sous chefs and kitchen managers have access to computers, so the dispersal of information is more difficult than in a corporation where everyone is in front of a computer.

Employees had no way of knowing if there was an opening at any of the cafes, and the only way to get a promotion was if a position at the next level became available because someone left or was promoted, or a new café opened up. Internal positions were not posted anywhere, and moreover, there was no formal process in place to apply for another position, or to request a transfer. Because Google is growing so rapidly, every few months another new café is added, and cooks are often shuffled to staff them, but it is all managed by the executive chefs who are actually Google employees. (All kitchen workers below the executive chef level are employed by the contracting company.) The chefs meet to discuss staffing and apparently move the employees around at will, like chess pieces. Perhaps more than any other single factor, this led to a feeling of helplessness on the part of the cooks, and the sense that their careers were not in their

control. There was also a general belief that the only way to succeed was through relationships, and that it was vital to find an executive chef as a mentor and to follow him wherever he might go.

The participants did not know of any documented job descriptions, and there did not seem to be any standardization across cafes, as roles were interpreted differently by each executive chef. Until the coaching program, most participants had no information about what was required of them in order to be promoted. In several cases they had never had a review, and did not know what their managers considered their strengths and weaknesses to be. Reviews did not seem to be managed in a standard fashion, and often the employee's supervisor was not responsible for the review, but gave input to someone at a higher level. In some cases there was no conversation involved in the review at all, but the employee was told that it had been done in writing. The participants had no information regarding pay scale, or the pay range for different positions beyond gossip. The researcher is limited to information reported by the participants, so it is possible that there are policies and procedures documented somewhere, but importantly, none of the participants had that information or knew if it existed.

Clear policies and processes and effective access to information are necessary for employees to experience the workplace as fair, which is a primary factor in allowing them to remain engaged and hopeful. It is also the most fundamental way that an organization can show respect for its employees, and thereby stimulate loyalty. This is critical to employee engagement, since people are willing to work hard and stay with a company where they feel they have the conditions they need to be successful.

***Effective coaching programs can be brief.***

A key finding of this study is that although the coaching program was quite brief, it produced impressive and immediate results for all the participants. Since the first and last of the six coaching sessions, as well as the follow-up session, were conducted with the employee, the manager and the coach all present, there were only four sixty-minute private, individual sessions. At the end of the program, six of the seven participants received pay increases, two received promotions, and two others received promises of imminent promotions (see Table 4). Five participants expressed that they had experienced increased goal clarity and understanding of themselves, and one said that the coaching

had encouraged him to do what he knew he needed to do to move forward, but had not done (see Table 6 below). Evidently, real learning occurred that had a practical application in their daily work life.

Table 6.

*Final Session Comments by Participants and their Managers*

<b>PA</b>	Coaching gave me the time and support to get clear, to focus. I had some important personal realizations.
<b>Mgr</b>	She is more harmonious, working better with the team, and more accepting of other eating styles
<b>PB</b>	Coaching opened my eyes. I feel lucky, because now I know there are people who want to see me succeed.
<b>Mgr</b>	You have the gift of gab and charm and the ability to pull people together. I see a change in you, but I still want to see more consistency in your time and process management.
<b>PC</b>	I want to be a kitchen manager within six months, and sous chef within a year.
<b>Mgr</b>	Coaching helped him to organize his natural talents. There's no doubt that you can get those promotions, but you might have to transfer to another café where there's an opening. I will help you either way.
<b>PD</b>	Coaching helped me to step back and see the big picture. I'm thinking clearer. I'm evolving really fast and looking outside of myself.
<b>Mgr</b>	He is managing his time better and instead of micromanaging his team is now training them. You're looking at a picture all the time and suddenly it clicks and you get it.
<b>PE</b>	Coaching was really good for me. I have a better, clearer direction now. I see things differently than before.
<b>Mgr</b>	Keep working hard. I'll take care of you. If I could make you my kitchen manager now, I would.
<b>PF</b>	My work seems important now. I found out a lot about myself.
<b>Mgr</b>	Now he is faster and always delivers on time. He has taken ownership and initiative, and that's good leadership. I see a marked improvement in the way he carries himself in the kitchen.
<b>PG</b>	Coaching gave me the little push I needed to do what I knew I had to do. I liked that the assignments were in small steps.
<b>Mgr</b>	I've seen big changes in you and I'm so excited to see that because you are one of the most talented cooks I've ever worked with. Now you're talking to people and smiling at people. If you want to start a restaurant one day, I will invest in it.

These results have important implications, since perhaps the greatest challenge in providing career coaching to low wage workers is how to make it available to many workers, and to create a financial model to reasonably support such efforts. While brevity is only one piece to this puzzle, this study illustrates that under the right conditions, i.e. within a well-defined structure and with management support, a handful of individual coaching sessions can make a real difference to both the employee and the employer, and does not need to be time-consuming or expensive.

In fact, there are arguments to support the idea that often a short coaching program can be more effective than a long one, if done correctly. While some executive coaching programs last a year and even longer, it is not clear that this is always most beneficial to the executive. An important ethical and psychological tenet of high-quality coaching is that the client become “self-correcting and self-generating” (Flaherty, 1999). This means they are able to take their new ways of looking at their environment and themselves back into the work place and continue to improve without dependence on a coach. In this way they can take full ownership of a new way of acting and the success it may bring, and gain the confidence that real change has indeed occurred. James Flaherty, the founder of the coaching school New Ventures West, says:

Well-coached clients can observe when they are performing well and when they are not, and will make any necessary adjustments independently of the coach. By keeping this criterion in mind, coaches can avoid the big temptation of becoming indispensable and, instead, work to build the competence of their client. We can always improve, and well-coached people know this and will continually find ways on their own to do so (Flaherty, 1999).

Since coaching is a relatively new profession still struggling to establish standards and develop research, the researcher could find no studies on the relative benefits of short or long-term coaching programs. However, research has been done on Brief Therapy, which has been evolving since 1946, and shares many common characteristics with coaching. Certainly coaching is not therapy; they are fundamentally distinguished by the types of issues they each address. Therapy tends to be applied to highly personal

psychological issues, sometimes with seriously troubled patients, whereas coaching focuses on the developmental growth of a relatively psychologically healthy person. Nevertheless, Brief Therapy, in order to live up to its name, must move efficiently and quickly and focus on the present going forward rather than delving into the past as longer forms of therapy do. Today nearly all forms of therapy include a brief version, if for no other reason than current health insurance restrictions. Brief therapy “has challenged traditional therapies to become more goal oriented, clearly focused, and centered on the development of the patient’s existing strengths and abilities” (Carlson & Sperry, 2000).

Perhaps implications for the viability of short coaching programs can be drawn from the research done on the effectiveness of Brief Therapy. Steve de Shazer, one of the founders of Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) states that “Fisher (1980, 1984) compared therapy with a six-session limit, therapy with a 12-session limit, and unlimited treatment and found no consistent differences either at termination or follow-up... There were (statistical) trends for *improvement* from termination to follow-up” (de Shazer, 1985).

While it is clear from this study that a single brief coaching program can be effective and benefit both the employee and the employer, it is the researcher’s opinion that it might be even more dynamic to do multiple, short-term coaching programs that build on each other developmentally, each with highly focused goals, separated by a span of time that allows the client to function autonomously with new awareness, and see for themselves how others in their world respond.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher believes that the key to success for coaching programs for low wage workers lies primarily in clarity of structure, appropriate expectations and goals, and close coordination between the organization providing the coaching, the company providing the coaching to its employees, and the coaches.

#### **Recommendations for the organization providing coaching:**

- Develop a clear program structure.
  - An introductory workshop that lasts no longer than four hours.
  - Any supplemental training classes should be offered in one-hour sessions.
- Set the participants’ expectation about the coaching process.

- Explain the potential, realistic results.
- Emphasize that they must take responsibility for their own coaching results.
- Try to give a picture of what coaching looks and feels like.
  - Have past clients speak about their experience.
  - Do a live demo, or show a video of a coaching conversation.
- Coordinate as much as possible with both the participants' managers and their employer's Human Resources department.
  - Include the participants' managers for the second thirty minutes of the first and last coaching sessions to get their input and facilitate employee/manager communication.
  - The goals developed in the coaching process should be discussed with and approved by their managers and go in their HR files if possible.
- Screen the coaches you will employ, whether they are paid or volunteer
  - Determine how much experience is required
  - Assess each coach's commitment to coaching low wage workers
  - Orient the coaches to any issues specific to the industry in which the participants are employed when possible.
  - Inform coaches about any of the employer's organizational issues that may affect the participants.
    - With a new employer client, some information might be gathered with a simple questionnaire about relevant policies and procedures.
- Offer the employer the additional service of providing feedback gathered from the coaching sessions about organizational issues.
  - Ultimately, making positive and sometimes simple organizational changes is critical to create lasting positive change for employees.
- Create a coaching "support group" for coaches to share information and techniques.
- Consider offering multiple, short-term coaching programs that build on each other developmentally, each with highly focused goals, separated by a span of time in which the client functions autonomously.

- Gather data, both short and long-term
  - Employees' progress
    - Promotions, wage increases, improvements noted in reviews
    - Job and company changes
    - Continuing education
  - Survey employees' and managers' impressions of the effectiveness of the coaching

**Recommendations for companies providing career coaching for their employees:**

- Set and communicate clear and fair selection criteria for participation
  - Eligibility should be potentially available to all who meet the criteria over time
    - Eligibility requirements should be clearly defined and communicated.
    - The process for selecting participants should be fair and communicated effectively.
    - Employees should be able to apply to be considered for the program.
      - Employees should also be able to decline participation without repercussions.
- Set expectations carefully
  - Participation is not necessarily a guarantee of an imminent promotion or wage increase.
  - Selection for the program is regarded as an honor and a benefit, and not a need for correction.
- Assure a strong connection between Human Resources and the organization providing the coaching services.
  - HR should facilitate the logistics of the program
  - HR should work with the coaching organization on any employee issues that arise during the program, such as non-attendance.
  - Employees' coaching goals should be documented and placed in their HR files.

- Include participants' supervisors and managers in the process to assure communication and support for the employees' goals.
- Schedule training and coaching during the employee's work shift when possible.
- Track long-term data on employee participants to enable eventual calculation of the return on investment
  - Retention, promotions, reviews

**Recommendations for coaches providing services to low wage workers:**

- Work with the client to set clear, practical, achievable goals that build confidence.
- Identify and focus on the developmental goals that underlie their career goals.
- Collaboratively design simple, incremental assignments at every session.
  - These should provide a stretch, but be non-threatening to the individual.
  - When assignments are not complete, examine the reasons thoughtfully.
- Don't be afraid to talk about money with low wage workers.
  - Even in difficult financial circumstances, it can be a relief to examine the situation with a coach
  - Sometimes discussing basic money management skills is useful.
- Remember that small goals can be significant
  - Changing behavior is difficult
  - Any step forward – a new understanding, perception, learning – can change someone's life.

## **Bio**

Kathleen Marvin is a career development coach for professionals who want to improve their leadership and communication skills, as well as people in transition and those seeking more balance in their lives. She is a Professional Certified Coach trained at New Ventures West, which is accredited by the International Coaching Federation.

Kathleen has coached professionals from Sun Microsystems, Adobe Systems, Autodesk, and IBM, as well as those in small businesses and non-profit organizations. She has worked for technology start-ups, was director at Adobe Systems, Apple, and Autodesk, and a senior manager at Sun Microsystems. She has lived and worked in Europe and Latin America, worked in Asia, and is conversational in French, Portuguese and Spanish.

Kathleen has a B.A. in Psychology from Antioch University and an M.A. in Organizational Psychology from John F. Kennedy University. She is an Associate Right Management Career Counselor, a New Ventures West Adjunct Mentor Coach, and coaches for Springboard Forward and the Center for Excellence in Non-Profits.  
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