Training the Coaches of First-Time Entrepreneurs: A Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

We present a method of training coaches of first time startup entrepreneurs which appears to resolve predicaments of entrepreneurs – how to shape and communicate a viable business idea, and predicaments of people who wish to help entrepreneurs – how to offer tailor-made help without having to be an expert in everything. We differentiate between advisors, consultants, mentors and coaches and briefly describe the Supercoach™ method of coaching startup entrepreneurs. Eighty-four Participant feedback forms from six workshops in three countries: Finland, US and UK, are analysed and main themes identified. Finally, we discuss how this coaching method might be further disseminated.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses two different but related predicaments. One affects first time pre-start entrepreneurs and the other affects those who try to help them. It describes a training solution to these predicaments that has been tested in three different countries: Finland, United Kingdom, and United States, with over 1,000 coaches and entrepreneurs. Results suggest that, when implemented as intended, the training changes the nature of the relationship between entrepreneur and helper and resolves both predicaments.

The first time, pre-startup entrepreneur’s predicament

It is very difficult for someone with a business idea to rapidly develop their idea into a feasible business plan and a compelling business story when this is the first time they have ever done it. Typically, they face two blockages: how to explain the idea clearly and how to convince others that the idea is viable (Kawasaki, 2004; Ryan, 2002). While a lot of help is available to entrepreneurs, the quality of the help varies widely due to a lack of process, thinking tools, helper availability, process discipline and the venture’s ability to pay for assistance.

The entrepreneurial advisor’s predicament

Research shows that interventions that provide customized rather than general assistance tend to be of much more value to entrepreneurs (Raffo, Lovatt, Banks and O’Connor, 2000). This provides people who work in entrepreneurial support agencies, and entrepreneurs who want to give back by helping others, with a quandary. How can they provide customized help to everyone? How can someone be an expert in every firm in every industry? In practice, this dilemma can result in inconsistencies in advice across agencies and advisory initiatives, and a drift to signposting rather than direct help, while entrepreneurs who wish to give back must choose between contexts that could create conflicts of interest or contexts they know nothing about.

Structure of the paper

In this paper, we argue that the key to resolving both of these predicaments is to cultivate a particular kind of relationship between the entrepreneur and whoever is trying to help the entrepreneur. People who help and assist start-up entrepreneurs call themselves different things: advisor, consultant, mentor, and coach are the most usual categories. In the next section, we define these categories of helper, and explain why we think that startup entrepreneurs need coaching before they need the other types of help. Then, we describe the Supercoach™ training workshop which was designed to enable people to help entrepreneurs overcome their predicament, in
a way that overcomes the helper’s predicament at the same time. Next, we report feedback results from several Supercoach™ training workshops from around the world, and some case studies on participants on these workshops. We conduct a comparative analysis to uncover differences and similarities in response to these workshops in different settings.

TYPES OF HELP FOR ENTREPRENEURS

In this section, we draw on relevant literature to define the main categories of people who help or assist entrepreneurs.

1. **Advisors** tell entrepreneurs what they think the entrepreneur should do in a specific situation, and indeed research shows that interventions that provide customized vs. general assistance tend to be of much more value to entrepreneurs (Raffo, Lovatt, Banks and O'Connor, 2000). Entrepreneurs tend to need context-specific advice (Stevenson and Sahlman, 1988). Giving context-specific advice is fine if you are an expert in the entrepreneur’s industry or in the specific domain that sets the rules for the issue facing the entrepreneur; for example if you are patent agent and the entrepreneur wants to know if her idea is patentable. But what if you are not? Many helpers of entrepreneurs fall into the trap of thinking they have to give context-specific advice because “advisor” is their job description. We assert that it is impossible to be a successful generalist advisor to all entrepreneurs who come in the door, because they all face such different contexts. The advisors are placed in impossible positions, and can even open themselves to being sued if their advice is mistaken. This is why some advisors have to retreat to a box-ticking approach to dealing with clients. It is not surprising then that many startup entrepreneurs end up dissatisfied with small business advisors (De Faoite, Henry, Johnston and van der Sijde, 2003).

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

3. **Mentors** share their wisdom that they have acquired through experience (Doyle and O’Neill, 2001). Mentors, in other words, use their personal experience in business to suggest a specific solution to the mentee’s problem. Many mentors are entrepreneurs who have sold their own business and wish to ‘give back’ by helping other entrepreneurs. If the context is the same, the mentor’s suggested solution may be appropriate, but often the context is different. Thus, most of the time, mentors face the same predicament that advisors face. Mentoring can also be intensely personal, with the mentor taking on some of the emotional baggage that rightly belongs to the entrepreneur, and, often unintentionally, creating a dependency without the core skills to back it up.

4. **Coaches** show entrepreneurs how to work out their own solution to their predicament. Thus coaching squares the circle of providing customized assistance without having to be expert in everything. D’Abate, Eddy and Tannenbaum (2003) have conducted a detailed review of the literature on “developmental interactions” such as mentoring, coaching and action learning. Their review of 182 articles, books and conference proceedings revealed that mentoring and coaching were distinct constructs. They conclude (p.376):
“Traditional mentoring has a general object of development, whereas coaching is more strongly associated with a more specific one. The time frame for coaching is short-term performance, whereas traditional mentoring tends to relate to long term development. Traditional mentoring is more concerned with modeling, counseling, supporting, advocating, introducing and sheltering as exhibited behaviors, and coaching is more concerned with goal-setting, providing practical application, providing feedback, and teaching”.

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

While one-on-one coaching can be very effective in helping early-stage entrepreneurs (Walshok, Furtek, Lee and Windham, 2002), the consistency of this coaching varies across programs as communities adopt this form of assistance. Although there are several programs that offer materials and content for performing such one-to-one coaching, there is little in the way of formal training to develop coaching skills for this important form of assistance (Markley and Macke 2004).

THE SUPERCOACH™ WORKSHOP

Supercoach™ Workshops by EnableVentures, Inc. were developed to specifically address the development of coaches for early stage entrepreneurs. Several hundred coaches have now been trained in this method, varying from engineering professors at Arizona State University (ASU) to high technology investors in Finland to Enterprise Trust advisors in the Highlands of Scotland to rural volunteer community coaches in North East Kentucky. An important feature of the training is that entrepreneurs are present during the training. Entrepreneurs are first coached by the trainers as the coaches watch and then gradually the trainee coaches take over. The tremendous strides made by the entrepreneurs in a short period (typically four days) convince the coaches of the value of the method.

We will not describe the tools imparted during the workshop in this paper. Interested readers are referred to a paper available for downloading at http://www.asutechnopolis.org/schedule_docs/ASU%20Technopolis%20Launch%20Pad%20Curriculum%20Overview.pdf

EnableVentures’ Sharon Ballard and long-time collaborator Dr. Jonathan Leive, director of the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, have been delivering Supercoach™ training since 2001. The Supercoach™ content is the basis for several entrepreneurial assistance programs in the US, UK and Finland that combine one-to-one coaching with custom-tailored assistance designed to meet each venture’s unique needs, such as Launch Pad Program at Arizona State University Technopolis. Further, the methodology supports networking into the community’s assets and networking with other entrepreneurs.

Ballard was inspired to create the original training called Supercoaching the Entrepreneur after she served a 10-month Management Fellowship for the Springboard Program of CONNECT, an entrepreneurial assistance program from the University of California, San Diego, in 1997. Over a 10-month period, Ballard provided one-to-one coaching to over 60 early stage high technology and life
sciences entrepreneurs. The centerpiece of this technique was a “springboard” where each entrepreneur presented a 15-minute briefing of their business plan to a ‘dream’ panel tailored for their unique needs. The entrepreneur then received an hour of feedback and advice from this dream panel. Springboard became the most supported and popular program at UCSD CONNECT. With Ballard’s help, similar Launch Pad programs have been established at ASU Technopolis and at the University of Jyväskylä and Jyväskylä Polytechnic, Finland. The Supercoach™ system of entrepreneurial development is also the basis for undergraduate, graduate and MBA level studies in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial assistance programs at the University of Strathclyde’s Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship and at ASU. At the University of Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute (KECI), 60 volunteer coaching Fellows have received the 4-day, 24-hour Supercoach™ Workshop.

**The Supercoach™ Approach**

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

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

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

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

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

A good coach holds the entrepreneur accountable to what the entrepreneur says she wants to accomplish and checks for consistencies using the one-to-one facilitation efforts. The coaches are taught to ask questions and to guide business-planning efforts by the entrepreneurs and to offer specific advice only when asked. The coaches are taught to avoid creating a dependency with the entrepreneurs. Rather, the coach provides ways of accessing the training, information and resources the entrepreneur requires for business planning and execution. Coaches can connect entrepreneurs to others who can be of value to them, for example to agencies that provide technical and financial assistance. In this way, coaches act as a resource facilitator. However, this is only incidental to their larger role in the community (Scorsone, Hustedde and Jones, 2003).

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

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

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

Who can be a coach?

On first glance, it might appear that an effective coach must have previous education and acquired pedagogical skills. However, we are finding that this is not the case. Our experience has shown that effective coaches can be found in the local community, although they do require effective training. These civic entrepreneurs can direct positive change through their involvement and leadership (Schweiger Berg, 2004; Emery, Fisher and Macke. 2003). The coaches can be Chamber of Commerce directors, professional services providers (lawyers, accountants, marketing and sales experts), bankers and investors, high school teachers, extension agents, retirees, experienced business people, or anyone interested in counselling and assisting local entrepreneurs and desires to contribute to their communities.

ASSESSING THE VALUE OF SUPERCOACH™ WORKSHOPS

The value of the Supercoach™ workshops can be measured in various ways. A short term assessment is available from exit feedback forms. A short-to-medium term assessment of one of the workshops was provided by an independent panel of assessors of the Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute. We get occasional medium term anecdotal feedback as we hear of entrepreneurs we coached on workshops who have done well, but no rigorous assessment has been conducted of their progress, with an appropriate control group to estimate the incremental gain from coaching based on the Supercoach™ method rather than another form of support or assistance. Long term, assessment might be conducted using sales, employment, and local value added in the community that might be attributed to the impact of coaches trained in the Supercoach™ method.

Short term effects

Below we present feedback results for three Supercoach™ workshops, run twice in successive years, in three countries, a total of 6 workshops. While the format of each workshop varied in structure, the content was very similar and the order in which the content was presented was identical. The workshops were designed to impart skills to potential coaches, using a mix of lectures and demonstration with startup entrepreneurs who had agreed to be “guinea-pigs” in return for intensive coaching during the workshop. The feedback forms were analysed quantitatively by calculating mean and variance for scores (scores out of 5 for the Finnish workshops and out of 10 for the US and UK workshops).
## Feedback summary scores for Finland (Jyväskalä) Copyright Balentor Ltd.

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#### 1. Evaluate the Course

- **1.1 Clarity of course objectives**
  - Day 1: 4.3
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.5
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **1.2 Intelligibility of course contents**
  - Day 1: 4.1
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.4
  - Day 4: 4.6

- **1.3 Applicability of course methods**
  - Day 1: 4.1
  - Day 2: 4.1
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **1.4 Course materials and exercises supported learning**
  - Day 1: 4.0
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.0
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **1.5 Methods used supported learning**
  - Day 1: 4.0
  - Day 2: 3.9
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.6

#### 2. Evaluation of Your Learning Process

- **2.1 I am able to adapt the information received to my own work**
  - Day 1: 4.3
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.3
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **2.2 My motivation to attend the course was high**
  - Day 1: 4.5
  - Day 2: 4.7
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **2.3 I understood and learned today’s issues**
  - Day 1: 4.6
  - Day 2: 4.4
  - Day 3: 4.3
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **2.4 I took an active part in the course assignments and found them to be useful to me**
  - Day 1: 4.1
  - Day 2: 3.2
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.0

#### 3. Evaluation of the Course Instructor

- **3.1 Instructor was knowledgeable on the course subjects**
  - Day 1: 4.8
  - Day 2: 4.7
  - Day 3: 4.6
  - Day 4: 4.8

- **3.2 Instructor inspired student participation in exercises**
  - Day 1: 3.9
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.3
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **3.3 Instructor encouraged good interaction between students**
  - Day 1: 4.1
  - Day 2: 4.1
  - Day 3: 4.3
  - Day 4: 4.5

- **3.4 The instructor was prepared and organized**
  - Day 1: 4.8
  - Day 2: 4.6
  - Day 3: 4.4
  - Day 4: 4.9

#### 5. GENERAL GRADE

- Day 1: 4.0
- Day 2: 4.3
- Day 3: 4.4
- Day 4: 4.5

### 2004 (N = 9)

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#### 1. Evaluate the Course

- **1.1 Clarity of course objectives**
  - Day 1: 3.8
  - Day 2: 4.2
  - Day 3: 4.0
  - Day 4: 4.2

- **1.2 Intelligibility of course contents**
  - Day 1: 3.9
  - Day 2: 3.8
  - Day 3: 3.8
  - Day 4: 4.2

- **1.3 Applicability of course methods**
  - Day 1: 3.8
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.3

- **1.4 Course materials and exercises supported learning**
  - Day 1: 4.2
  - Day 2: 4.2
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.3

- **1.5 Methods used supported learning**
  - Day 1: 3.9
  - Day 2: 4.1
  - Day 3: 4.0
  - Day 4: 4.1

#### 2. Evaluation of Your Learning Process

- **2.1 I am able to adapt the information received to my own work**
  - Day 1: 4.2
  - Day 2: 4.0
  - Day 3: 4.1
  - Day 4: 4.4

- **2.2 My motivation to attend the course was high**
  - Day 1: 3.8
  - Day 2: 3.8
  - Day 3: 4.0
  - Day 4: 4.1

- **2.3 I understood and learned today’s issues**
  - Day 1: 4.1
  - Day 2: 4.4
  - Day 3: 4.3
  - Day 4: 4.4

- **2.4 I took an active part in the course assignments and found them to be useful to me**
  - Day 1: 3.0
  - Day 2: 3.7
  - Day 3: 3.4
  - Day 4: 3.4

#### 3. Evaluation of the Course Instructor

- **3.1 Instructor was knowledgeable on the course subjects**
  - Day 1: 4.8
  - Day 2: 4.7
  - Day 3: 4.7
  - Day 4: 4.9

- **3.2 Instructor inspired student participation in exercises**
  - Day 1: 4.3
  - Day 2: 4.4
  - Day 3: 4.3
  - Day 4: 4.2

- **3.3 Instructor encouraged good interaction between students**
  - Day 1: 4.3
  - Day 2: 4.3
  - Day 3: 4.4
  - Day 4: 4.3

- **3.4 The instructor was prepared and organized**
  - Day 1: 4.7
  - Day 2: 4.8
  - Day 3: 4.4
  - Day 4: 4.6

#### 5. GENERAL GRADE

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- Day 2: 4.1
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Alongside the quantitative feedback scores, we obtained many textual comments from SUK and Kentucky participants, and a smaller number from Finnish participants. Participants were asked to list positive and negative aspects of the workshop. A content analysis suggested the following main themes:

1. Entrepreneurs were more likely to recognise the immediate short term value for their work. Almost all of the forms we were able to identify as coming from entrepreneurs gave the highest possible ratings. One comment from a Scottish entrepreneur on the September 2005 workshop illustrates the perceived value of the workshop to the entrepreneurs on the workshop:
   “I didn’t like struggling for nearly two years before this course was offered. More enterprise agencies should apply these techniques. I almost paid £20,000 (half funding available from Scottish Enterprise) to get concept to investor ready stage. This coaching has given me the tools to do that myself time and again plus understand my business better than if another consultant had taken me to investor ready stage.” One Finnish participant and several Scottish participants asked that the course be rolled out to the region.

2. A second theme was the sheer quantity of concepts and information the participants were exposed to and the fast pace they were expected to work through this information. Kentucky participants were much more likely to comment in this way
than the Finnish or Scottish participants. Indeed, some coaching participants on the Scottish workshops were disappointed that they did not have evening coaching sessions scheduled, and some felt the pace was too slow at times. In contrast, faced with the same material, many Kentucky participants considered it too much to cover in four days. One described it as “drinking fine wine from a fire hydrant”.

3. Several participants from UK and Kentucky workshops requested additional reading material. Here is one example: “I’m pretty visual, and written how-to descriptions of each exercise (more detail than what there is now,) would be helpful to me.” Their requests, essentially, were for a book that presented much of the orally presented material, with worked examples of the tools being taught and frequently asked questions that entrepreneurs might ask of them. Several participants wished that the material had been available before the course so they could read and prepare in advance.

4. Many coaches commented on the value of having entrepreneurs on the course, watching the instructors coach them, and trying their hand at coaching.

5. The course seemed to awaken an entrepreneurial spirit among several coaches on the UK workshops. For example, one coach wrote: “Although I trained as a coach, I believe in the future I’ll be completing the exercises myself”. Another concluded: “I got so excited, I want to identify an opportunity that I can apply these tools to myself – forget being a coach!”

6. Two trainee coaches in the October 2005 Kentucky class appeared to be disaffected, giving overall ratings of 4.5 and 5 out of 10 respectively. The workshop was part of a larger year-long training program by the Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute, and this second cohort was exposed to the Supercoach™ workshop early in the year, following comments from the first cohort that they would have gained more had it been run earlier. As a consequence, the second cohort had perhaps not gelled as a group by the time of their Supercoach™ workshop, there was less peer pressure and peer support, and several individuals were not yet convinced of the value of coaching as opposed to mentoring or advising. Several entrepreneurs on the second Kentucky workshop commented in feedback forms that certain trainee coaches were “uninterested” and not making an effort. We have had similar feedback from entrepreneurs attending one-day workshops in the UK, who felt they had been talked at rather than listened to by trainee coaches who had not grasped the difference between being a coach and being a mentor. We suspect that by the time the first Kentucky cohort of entrepreneurial coaches took the Supercoach™ workshop, the disaffected had left that cohort.

7. Some text comments revealed that different people learned in different ways. One or two disliked the Socratic style of teaching. One of the two disaffected 2005 Kentucky participants wrote: “Too many group/table activities; too many after-hours assignments. If you are the expert, teach me, not let me learn on my own.” This, of course, is the antithesis of the coaching approach. On the other hand, a Scottish entrepreneur commented: “Liked having to think things through rather than be told – far better likelihood of me remembering”.

**Short-Medium Term effects**

We have third-party evidence of the effect of the Supercoach™ workshops on participants. Excerpts from the external reviewers interim report (Markley, Gruidl,
Bradshaw and Calvin, 2005) on the 2004 Supercoach™ workshop in Kentucky are given below.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Medium term effects**

To date, we have only anecdotal evidence of the longer term effects of these workshops. One of the 2004 Kentucky participants, Melony Furby, was quoted in May 2005 as saying “So many people in the class have said ‘I wish I had this information before I started’”, making the point that they had learned things to make their own businesses better.

We believe that the medium term effects will mainly be indirect as coaches begin to work with entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs achieve more than they previously believed was possible. In 2005, two of the six firms whose founders were entrepreneur-participants in the 2004 Kentucky workshop won Level 1 Rural Innovation Fund grants from the Kentucky Science and Technology Corporation. Another third entrepreneurial team from that workshop, with the help of its coach, won a $50,000 grant to develop educational services on their farm-based business. This was the team which several trainees coaches had decided on day one of the workshop would never succeed as entrepreneurs, and asked for guidance on how to break this to the entrepreneurs. As it turned out, the presentation from this team on the fourth day was so impressive that it was met by stunned silence followed by a standing ovation.

In the 2005 Kentucky workshop, a power linesman reluctantly attended as an entrepreneur, with little more than a feeling that he did not want to have to work to
survive for the rest of his life. After 4 days, he emerged with a clear goal: to double his income by exploiting the natural resources of his farm. After the workshop, he drew up various strategic plans using the tools from the workshop, worked on samples, and in February 2006, he walked into the Maysville Kroger (department store). He knew ahead of time with whom he needed to speak, did a very brief presentation with his samples, and walked out with an initial order of 12 display crates and requests for designs for future specialty display units.

DISCUSSION

The feedback results forms show uniformly high overall ratings, with the exception of ratings for facilities and catering for some workshops. This suggests that the high ratings are a reflection of conscious thought and that participants are discriminating between categories in the feedback forms. The Finnish feedback data is unique in that ratings are available for each day of the workshops. In both years, the average daily rating rose each day, suggesting that the participants appreciated the value of the workshop more each day. The standard deviation of the mean in the second Kentucky workshop for the coaches (instructors) ratings and overall workshop rating is almost double that of the first Kentucky workshop. This can be explained in part by the two disaffected individuals who gave low ratings, and, perhaps, the placing of the workshop early in the one-year program, at a time when participants were still unsure of their role as entrepreneurial coaches in the local community. Generally, however, the ratings are similar across the three countries, with the average overall ratings for the workshops in each county as follows: 4.5, 4.5 (Finland); 4.7, 4.4 (US); 4.7, 4.7 (UK), based on a 5 point scale. This suggests that participants in all three countries recognised the workshop as being of value to them.

These workshops have shown us that some people find it more difficult to accept a coaching role, as opposed to advising or mentoring role, than others. These are often experienced business people who have well-developed, strong views. Other coaches come with fixed views that assume the entrepreneurs they coach have limited potential. The vignettes we sketched on some of the entrepreneurial “stars” that have taken part in the Supercoach™ workshops, show that entrepreneurial talent lies in, to the untrained coach’s eye, the unlikeliest people. Some of these experienced business people come around after struggling hard with the Supercoach™ method and seeing for themselves the effect it has on the entrepreneurs in the workshop after just four days. Others do not want to learn.

After witnessing the dynamics of trainee coaches and entrepreneurs in many workshops over the past few years, we are convinced of the value of training the entrepreneur how to operate a set of tools that enable them to create their own solution to the business concept creation and communication predicament we highlighted at the beginning of this paper. Entrepreneurial coaches, for their part, need a set of tools that can be used in any new venture context. That releases them from the predicament of feeling they have to be an expert in every domain. We have found that the Supercoach™ tools work in contexts as far apart as Eastern Kentucky and western Finland. Our intention now is to spread the use of these tools through a franchising system based on the ASU model and through print and web-based media, so that as many entrepreneurs – and coaches – benefit from them as possible. Two of us (Levie and Ballard) are in the process of completing a book, as requested by the coaches and entrepreneurs on our workshops. We plan to link this to a website which will contain new tools and other materials for entrepreneurial coaches and their entrepreneurs.
In the context of the conference theme: innovative formats for entrepreneurship education teaching, one contribution of this paper is to highlight the value of entrepreneurs in the classroom for training coaches of entrepreneurs. While the entrepreneurs rapidly see the value of the tools, and begin to implement them right away, coaches tend to be more sceptical at first. The true pedagogical value of the entrepreneurs is as demonstrators of the value-in-use of the tools to the coaches. Frequently, entrepreneurs make breakthroughs in the workshop classroom, or after working overnight on a Supercoach™ tool. It is the rapid progress of presumed “no-hopers” in four days that convinces the majority of coaches of the value of the tools, not the workshop instructors. This is, perhaps, a particularly appropriate form of pedagogy for adult learners, who are unlikely to take someone else’s “method” at face value, particularly if they have personal experience in the field, in this case, entrepreneurship.

In the context of internationalising entrepreneurship education and training, we are now beginning to connect coaches and entrepreneurs who are graduates of the various Supercoach™-based training programs with each other. For example, the 2004 Kentucky cohort visited Scotland in 2005 and met participants in the September 2005 UK cohort. Two Finnish Supercoaching graduates have made presentations at ASU Technopolis’ Launch Pad program, with early American sales a direct result of one of the company's presentations.

There is clearly a need for further work in monitoring the effect of coaches who have been trained using the Supercoach™ method. This is an area fraught with methodological difficulties. However it should be possible to measure before-and after effects in an area such as Eastern Kentucky which now has a trained coach in every county and compare concurrently with a rural region of the US which has not had such intervention but which is broadly similar in other ways.

REFERENCES


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i We are grateful to Dan O’Neill, accredited Supercoach™ instructor at Arizona State University Technopolis, who prompted us to write an earlier version of this paper, and who continues to develop the Supercoach™ offering with us.

ii The Finnish workshop structure was unique in that afternoons were devoted to masterclasses in one-on-one coaching, while in the other workshops examples of coaching entrepreneurs was distributed throughout the day.

iii http://www.uky.edu/Ag/KECI/press/2005_05-mason.html