

Probation Officer as a Coach: Building a New Professional Identity

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ALTHOUGH MASS IMPRISONMENT has justifiably received great attention (e.g., Clear & Frost, 2014; Pratt, 2009), the simultaneous rise of mass probation in the United States has often escaped systematic commentary and widespread awareness (Phelps, 2017). The correctional reality is that on any given day in the nation, 1 in 66 adult residents are on probation, which translates to nearly 3.8 million offenders. When parolees are added to this equation, the population under community supervision rises to more than 4.6 million—or 1 in every 53 adults (Kaeble & Bonczar, 2016). A continuing policy and practice concern is what role probation (and parole) officers should play in the lives of this substantial slice of the American citizenry.

The rapid and intractable growth of community supervision populations in a decades-long punitive era undermined the traditional rehabilitative ideal and ushered in competing visions of what constituted appropriate supervision (Phelps, in press; Simon, 1993). Although allegiance to human service supervision never vanished, many jurisdictions deemphasized behavior change through treatment in favor of risk management through a range of control- or deterrence-oriented approaches. These included the trumpeting of such practices as intensive supervision, drug testing, electronic monitoring, and, more

recently, swift-certain-fair probation. With only occasional exceptions, these practices have proven to be ineffective or, at best, inconsistently and modestly successful (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Cullen, Pratt, Turanovic, & Butler, in press; Petersilia & Turner, 1993; Schaefer, Cullen, & Eck, 2016).

Notably, American corrections is emerging from this mean season (Petersilia & Cullen, 2015). In many jurisdictions, there is a renewed recognition that, while risk management to protect public safety remains a priority, officers must also use their skills to effect behavior change in their supervisees. Although not mountainous, research is accumulating showing how this goal might be accomplished by building quality relationships with offenders, possessing treatment skills, and using RNR principles to guide the content of office visits with offenders (Bonta, Bourgon, Ruge, Scott, Yessine, Gutierrez, & Li, 2011; Chadwick, DeWolf & Serin, 2015; Cullen, Jonson, & Mears, 2017; Raynor, Ugwudike, & Vanstone, 2014; Robinson, Lowenkamp, Holsinger, VanBenshoten, Alexander, & Oleson, 2012; Skeem, Loudon, Polaschek, & Camp, 2007; Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, & Latessa, 2012).

These advances in evidence-based supervision practices certainly are welcomed but something more is needed. Officers need to

have a conception of their role that allows them to use this knowledge. In traditional discourse, role choices have often been posed in dichotomous terms—whether officers were going to emphasize treatment or control. We suggest, however, that it may be more useful to move beyond these stale categories. Instead, we propose that probation (and parole) officers might benefit from a different concept of who they are and what they do: *probation officer as a coach*.

Social psychologists illuminate how all of us have ideas about who we are and what our lives are about (McAdams, 2001; see also Maruna, 2001). They use the concept of “narrative identity” to capture the story we tell about ourselves. Such an identity is important because it organizes our action, motivates our choices, and provides meaning to our lives. In the world of sports, the identity as a coach carries with it status, expertise, obligation, purpose, and accountability. Similarly, having probation officers build an identity as a coach has the potential to open up new ways of envisioning their role and how they can be effective.

Our argument is developed in three sections. First, we propose that too often the current probation officer role is best conceptualized as being a “referee.” We use the probation officer-as-referee as a way of showing what, in contrast, a coach’s role would

entail. Second, we examine the skills that a probation officer-as-coach would need to possess to supervise offenders effectively. And third, we discuss the potential benefits that would accrue should probation officers be conceptualized as part of the coaching profession. Notably, coaching has broadened beyond athletic teams to include diverse pathways (e.g., life coaches, executive coaches, personal trainers). We should note that although our focus is on probation officers, the insights we are developing could just as easily be applied to parole officers as well.

Probation Officer as a Coach

What would it mean for a probation officer to be a coach? One way of answering this question is to describe what being a coach would and would not entail. To stay with a sports metaphor, we suggest that for many probation officers, their role approximates that of “referee.” Becoming a coach would involve moving beyond this more limited role. In Table 1, we outline how being a referee and coach differ along eight dimensions of the probation officer role. This section examines these distinctions and how they combine to create two very different identities for a probation officer. We realize, of course, that any conceptual framework is limited in its capacity to capture the rich complexities of real-life situations. Our distinguishing the roles of referee and coach thus should be seen as heuristic devices for distinguishing divergent ways in which officers can envision their job

role and their professional identity. Our goal is to show the potential advantages of conceiving probation as part of the coaching profession.

Rule Enforcement vs. Behavioral Change

Many aspects of a probation officer’s role are defined by legal statutes, agency policies, resource capacity, and so on. Beyond these constraints, our concern here is what officers hope to accomplish when an offender enters their office. Many see their job as notifying their supervisees of the rules and then enforcing compliance. This approach is akin to being a referee (see Table 1, dimensions 1, 2, and 3).

In the most professional version of this role, the officers would not use coercive tactics such as yelling and threatening. Instead, they would engage in procedural justice, which involves applying rules strictly but in a fair and respectful way. Theory and research suggest that this style of justice produces compliance rather than defiance (see Tyler, 2003; see also Sherman, 1993). Like a referee, when an infraction of the rules occurs, the officers would “blow their whistle”—announce the violation—and impose the prescribed penalty. Their interest in those they supervise would be limited, mainly concerned with being able to detect if a rule or condition of probation had been broken. They would be aided in this task by drug tests, electronic monitoring, and small caseloads that allow for intensive supervision.

Referees do not have a win-loss record,

but coaches do. As a coach, probation officers would see each offender as an opportunity for a win or a loss—for success or failure. Their job would be to “coach” their supervisees in a way that ensures that they complete their term of probation and, ultimately, do not recidivate. For low-risk offenders, this might involve minimal intervention. For high-risk offenders, the challenge would be to achieve behavioral change. Where referees see a “foul” or violation as the “player’s” fault, coaches would see such rule-breaking, at least in part, as their failure to win the game. At the end of a game, referees go home. Coaches celebrate wins and hopefully learn from losses.

There are times of course, when probationers engage in serious violations (e.g., a new crime) and officers have no choice but to initiate a revocation hearing. After all, there are times when coaches must cut or dismiss players from their team. But apart from these incidents, probation “coaches” would use a violation as an opportunity not only to hold offenders accountable but also to enable them to learn from their mistake. Good coaches know that players will make errors, have penalties, or commit turnovers. These indiscretions make for coachable moments, where players are shown not only what they did wrong but also how to make choices that enable them to avoid violations in the future.

To take advantage of these learning opportunities, however, officers must “know their players.” Great coaches have standard rules for the team but also know that each member is different—in what motivates them, in their skills, and in their developmental stage. For probation officers, this means assessing offenders so that they are aware of their deficits or criminogenic needs (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). But it might also mean identifying their strengths that can be built on to enable offenders to avoid failure in the future (see Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Relationship with Offenders

Referees do not want to get too close to players because this intimacy might bias their ability to be fair. In this regard, probation “referees” would prefer to be an authority figure who impersonally imposes sanctions. Their professional obligation and expertise are to know and apply the rules equitably. When interacting with supervisees who have violated the rules, their tool kit involves warnings not to repeat the error, sanctions, and potentially revocation (see Table 1, dimensions 4, 5, and 6).

TABLE 1.
Probation Officer as a Referee vs. a Coach

Dimension of the Officer Role	Referee	Coach
1. Main Job Function	Procedural justice—apply the rules as intended	“Win”—behavioral change and improved conduct (lower recidivism)
2. Response to a Rule Infraction	“Blow the whistle” and apply the penalty	Accountability and education—learn from mistakes
3. Knowledge of Offender	Know if the offender followed the rules or not	Know the offender’s deficits (“criminogenic needs”) that need to be improved and strengths that can be built upon
4. Relationship with Offender	Impersonal: Authority figure who imposes sanctions	Supportive and trustworthy: Authority figure who is authoritative (“warm but restrictive”)
5. Feedback to Offender	Warnings, sanctions, and revocation	Training and encouragement: Develop skills so as to perform more successfully
6. Professional Expertise	Know and apply the rules equitably	Core correctional practices
7. Organizational Culture	Control	Human service
8. Organizational Goal	Efficiency and equity	Behavioral change and a good life

By contrast, the key to effective coaching is having a relationship with players, clients, or in this case offenders that is supportive and based on trust. Coaches are authority figures in part due to their position and in part due to their expertise (e.g., appearances in the NCAA tournament). But their effectiveness is not based on authority (“my way or the highway”) but on being *authoritative*. There is an extensive literature—from criminology to psychology—showing that behavioral change is most likely to occur when control occurs in combination with support, or what has been called being “warm but restrictive” (Baumrind, 1991; Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Cullen, 1994; Wright & Cullen, 2001). Being restrictive means making rules known and enforcing them. But warmth or support is critical because it shows that the sanction is being imposed not out of anger or dislike but out of caring and a desire to improve the person. This context is what allows the discipline to be educative rather than destructive—to elicit learning and change rather than hostility and defiance (see Braithwaite, 1989; Sherman, 1993).

Effective coaches also coach—that is, they engage in the teaching enterprise. They are not impersonal and disinterested. Because they care about their players and want to win, they use their expertise to develop skills. They rely on training and encouragement, not just rule enforcement and toughness, to improve their charges’ abilities. When players move on, they often say that their coach was like “another father to me,” and they maintain a life-long affiliation. While these accolades might be too much to expect probation officers to earn, their efforts to coach offenders and transform their lives should create meaningful mentorship. Again, research shows that the quality of the officer-offender relationship predicts success on supervision (Manchak, Kennealy, & Skeem, 2014; Skeem et al., 2007).

Effective coaches also know their field well. In recent years, there has been a growth of the use of evidence in sports. At one point in time, “Moneyball” was the exception rather than the rule (Lewis, 2003). Today, every baseball franchise uses actuarial data to guide both personnel decisions and in-game strategic choices by coaches (Law, 2017). In the same way, evidence-based corrections has become a standard part of a professional approach to corrections (Cullen, Myer, & Latessa, 2009). To be an effective coach, therefore, probation officers would have to be experts on how best to support and change their supervisees:

using core correctional practices, including “anticriminal modeling, effective reinforcement, effective disapproval, problem solving, structured learning, effective use of authority, cognitive restructuring, and relationship skills” (Labrecque & Smith, 2017, p. 240; see also Bonta & Andrews, 2017).

Correctional Agency Mission

Finally, we turn to the big picture of what defines the mission of a correctional agency (see Table 1, dimensions 7 and 8). For an agency that seeks to employ referees, the organizational culture—or correctional orientation of officers—would be to exert control over probationers. The hope would be that by emphasizing rule compliance and enforcement, officers could move offenders to avoid technical violations and recidivating. If offenders did commit technical violations or recidivate, however, then the goal of the organization would be to apply rules efficiently and with equity.

By contrast, an agency that seeks to employ coaches would hire staff who embrace a human service correctional orientation. They would want to employ officers who were committed to building cognitive and social skills in offenders so that they could avoid future legal entanglements. These coaches would have people skills and desire to have expertise in delivering effective interventions. The ultimate goal of the organization would be to use its coaches to effect behavior change and to enable offenders to live a good life.

Being a Coach: Four Key Talents

As we have suggested, being a coach requires a very different mindset and skillset from being a referee. A probation officer-as-coach wants to “win” by having offenders who not only comply with supervision conditions but also improve themselves (“become better players”) and be successful in life. A probation officer-as-referee wants to judge compliance with conditions of probation and, when a violation occurs, to blow the whistle and impose the prescribed penalty. Each of these roles—coach and referee—requires a different mindset and skillset. A coach is in the business of skill development and performance; a referee is in the business of applying rules and sanctions accurately and fairly. In the end, coaches are judged by their wins and losses, whereas referees are judged by their rule enforcement and equity.

Importantly, being a successful coach requires a different kind of expertise than

being a successful referee. Remember, coaches are in the behavioral-change business, whereas referees are in the rule-enforcement business. Applying rules accurately and fairly requires expertise; there are referees in the hall of fame. But coaches spend time and have a relationship with their players. Great coaches seek to improve the athletic talents and human capital of their players. Referees are respected for their fairness; coaches are beloved by their former players not only for their wins but also for their life-changing capacities.

In this context, a probation officer-as-coach would need to have a set of skills or types of professional expertise that would increase their chances of “winning” the supervision “game.” We can identify four key professional talents that they would have to possess to ensure effective supervision: assessment, skill-building, effective use of reinforcement, and a supervision playbook. Probation officers who adhere to a referee professional role are likely to see no need for these skills. Although they may be essential for achieving behavior change (the goal of a coach), they have little to do with the referee’s job of detecting fouls, blowing the whistle, and assigning a penalty.

First, it is vital for coaches to study their players and to assess their strengths and weaknesses. In probation, strengths are protective factors that can be used to encourage conformity. By contrast, weaknesses are risk factors or “criminogenic needs” that, if not targeted for change, will lead to recidivism (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). Any good coach knows not only how to judge talent but also how to improve their players’ skills across seasons. Doing so, however means having the expertise to identify strengths and weaknesses. In corrections, of course, the parallel skill is being able to use appropriate instruments (e.g., the Level of Supervision Inventory) to assess criminogenic risks and needs.

Note that probation officers who embrace the referee role are likely to resist developing assessment expertise. They may be interested in knowing the identity of high-risk offenders because they may warrant closer supervision and a quicker whistle to be blown. By contrast, assessment is essential for coaches because it tells which players they must work with more closely to develop their skills.

Second, a concern for assessment is a prelude to an essential coaching expertise: the ability to build skills. Notably, referees do not generally have the skills to play a sport at a high level. They are not selected for their ability to play the game; they are selected carefully

for their ability to remain neutral, knowledge of the rules, decisiveness, and management. By contrast, most coaches are former players who have expertise about how to play the game and what it takes to be successful in that endeavor. They are selected because they know techniques, can demonstrate skills, and are adept at developing and reinforcing new skills. For a probation officer, this capacity means developing prosocial skills in offenders, such as undermining criminal thinking errors and obtaining and keeping a job.

Third, the best coaches know how to use reinforcement. Remember, the best referees are impersonal and do not hand out praise; they only detect violations and apply penalties. Do they high-five a player upon scoring a touchdown, say encouraging words when someone tries hard, or acknowledge good plays? Of course not. A referee model thus would dictate that probation officers remain emotionally distant and engage in procedural justice—applying rules in an equitable and consistent way. By contrast, coaches have a relationship with their players. They remain authority figures, ideally respected by their players. They apply rules fairly but also seek to improve their players' athletic talents and personal attributes. They hold their players accountable (e.g., by meting out playing time), but also positively reinforce good performance. In the end, coaches are in the business of human development, whereas referees are in the business of rule enforcement.

Fourth, whereas referees have a rule book that they enforce, coaches have a playbook that they teach. In corrections, the rulebook comprises conditions of probation. By contrast, the playbook comprises the principles of effective intervention and, more generally, of knowledge of evidence-based practices (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). A coaching model of probation thus would encourage officers to learn best practices in their profession and to become behavioral-change experts. "Winning" would involve offenders not only successfully completing their probation term but also avoiding future recidivism and living a more productive life. Again, many ex-players praise their coaches for transforming their lives. The best that is said of referees is that they called a fair game.

Benefits of a Coaching Model

Would adopting the job title of "probation coach" as opposed to "probation officer" really make a difference? Ultimately, this is an empirical question. Our purpose is to

make the case that the potential benefits of transforming the identity of probation staff outweigh the risks. We recognize that it would be possible to implement a coaching style of supervision without officially designating staff as "coaches" (Kauffman, 2018). This option might avoid staff resistance to an unconventional occupational designation and allow training to focus on coaching supervision strategies. Some agencies might prefer to pursue this type of reform. However, we prefer a bolder innovation, one that aligns a new professional identity with a newly conceptualized role. The goal is not only to develop novel ideas on how to supervise offenders but also to have staff think differently about their professional role. A first step would be for a select number of agencies to implement the name change and the corresponding coaching model and to assess their effect on officer supervision styles and on offender recidivism. Experimentation should precede any wholesale reform.

One possible objection is that the title of "coach" rather than "officer" would diminish the legal legitimacy of probation staff and thus be a source of staff resistance. The officer label implies the power to coerce, whereas the coach label implies only voluntary compliance. Thus, personal coaches can be fired, and even team coaches lose their control once a player quits the squad. One response to this concern is that the problem with calling staff members "officers" is precisely that it prioritizes policing offenders over changing their behavior. Probationers have been to court and know that they face sanctions for misconduct. The other word in the role title—"probation"—communicates this reality. Adding "officer" is likely redundant and thus unnecessary to impress on probationers the seriousness of their legal status or the power that staff have over them.

Another response is that coaches in our society are not seen as weak individuals that can be disrespected with impunity but as major authority figures. This is particularly true of team coaches—the type of coach that offenders are mostly likely to have experienced growing up (i.e., many would have played on athletic teams but few would have hired personal trainers or life coaches). Coaches generally have the option to bench or cut a player and, to secure performance, can exhibit tough love. They have been known to raise their voices, to get in players' faces, and to insist on perfection. However, coaches are a unique kind of an authority figure. While

demanding adherence to rules and performance, they also are known to care about their players, to have the expertise to improve the players' games, and to win championships. They are effective because they combine the key ingredients to behavioral change—they are restrictive and supportive. If anything, the name of "coach" might well initially inspire more legitimacy and offender compliance than the name of "officer."

Of course, it would remain to be seen if probationers would respond differently to a probation "officer" (with its policing implication) or a probation "coach" (with its helping implication). Research could also survey probation officers to capture their willingness to experiment with being called "Coach Smith" rather than "Officer Smith." Regardless, a name change without the corresponding supervision change likely would be meaningless. But if staff embraced the role of coach, it could lead to a new professional identity and ways of supervising offenders. If this were to occur, it could have three interrelated benefits.

First, the identity as a coach implies an obligation to care about one's players. At a minimum in probation, it would imply that a central task of a "coach" would be to improve the lives and to decrease the recidivism of offenders under supervision. A "probation coach" might have no choice but to "cut" (revoke) a troublesome offender, but enforcing supervision conditions is not the mainstay of the coaching role. Rather, as coaches, staff would also see their job as involving efforts to intervene with offenders to effect behavioral change. In short, officers or referees watch and police; coaches train and support.

Second, a coaching model would thus create a new kind of correctional accountability. In athletics, coaches are primarily evaluated by a simple metric: win-loss record. In corrections, the comparable statistic would be whether offenders on a caseload stayed out of crime (wins) or returned to crime (losses). Notably, in policing (e.g., Comstat in New York City), leaders are evaluated on whether crime in so-called hot spots is reduced through enforcement strategies. In a similar way, a coaching model implies a level of probation accountability. It is possible to measure which officers' caseloads have the lowest rates of reoffending (controlling, of course, for the risk level of the supervisees) (see Cullen, Jonson, & Eck, 2012; Cullen, Jonson, & Mears, 2017).

In probation, most agencies measure job performance by whether officers are seeing

offenders, securing mandated drug tests, collecting fines, and monitoring supervision conditions. Strangely, officers are not evaluated on the extent to which their caseloads recidivate. Compliance with rules is emphasized, which is the core of the referee's role. By contrast, true behavioral change may be part of the agency's mission (i.e., rehabilitation), but it is not evaluated or rewarded. There is no accountability in this regard (see Cullen et al., 2012; Cullen et al., 2017).

In a way, this neglect of recidivism is understandable. Officers can legitimately claim that they spend limited time with their supervisees and have no control over the untoward influences they may encounter or seek out while in the community. Saying that "It's not my fault" may be a fair statement. Still, the goal of lower reoffending cannot be achieved if it is not prioritized, measured, and rewarded. Probation coaches could be expected to push for the time and resources to do their job—that is, to "coach" their supervisees. Although it might be unfair to penalize poor performance, it would be possible to give special notice and rewards to "coaches" who achieved reductions in recidivism.

Third, if probation were to become a coaching profession that valued performance, it might well create strong pressures for knowledge creation and transfer. As noted previously, there is a small but instructive literature on supervision effectiveness. This work emphasizes the limits of control- or deterrence-oriented strategies and the value of quality officer-supervisee relationships, a human-service approach, and the risk-need-responsivity model to guide therapeutic interactions in office visits (Cullen et al., 2017). Given that more than 4.6 million adults are under community supervision, it seems bewildering why a major research agenda on supervision effectiveness has not been undertaken.

That said, some insights on probation officer coaching effectiveness might be drawn from the general coaching literature. As noted, the coaching profession has expanded from team sports and individual sports (e.g., gymnastics, tennis) to diverse areas of life (e.g., executive coaches, life coaches, personal trainers). Although an evidence-based movement is under way, research on coaching effectiveness appears to be in a formative stage (see, e.g., Bachkirova, Spence, & Drake, 2017; De Meuse & Dai, 2010; Grant & Cavanaugh, 2007; Stober & Grant, 2006). As Grant (2017, p. 62) notes, the fact that "coaching research itself is

focused on many different facts of coaching.... can make it difficult for both researchers and practitioners to grasp specific information from this developing knowledge base and engage in an evidence-based approach in their own personal coaching practice." Still, writings on effective coaching seem to share a core belief: that impactful coaching—like impactful corrections—ultimately hinges on the quality of the coach-client/player relationship. Let us give one example.

Stober (2006, p. 47) emphasizes that effective coaching must involve "deep involvement and active engagement" with the client. Again, this contrasts with a referee's commitment to impersonality and social distance. The relationship must be ethical and thus informed by core humanistic values (see also Bonta & Andrews, 2017, p. 176). These include "a belief in people's inherent capacity for growth, the importance of a collaborative relationship, the appreciation of the whole person, and a belief in the possibility of choice" (p. 47). According to Stober, the coaching process involves several key "tasks"—all of which probation coaches might consider when supervising offenders. For example, one "coaching task" is to "assess thoroughly and check for accuracy"; a "coach must take the time to construct a full picture of the client" (Stober, 2006, p. 33). Another task is to "expand the client's awareness of strengths, resources, [and] challenges" (p. 35). This allows clients "to consciously assess what they have at their disposal in meeting the reality of their lives" (p. 35). And another key task is to "facilitate goal-setting and accountability" (p. 35). According to Stober, the coaching relationship is crucial in serving as a conduit through which clients are supported in their efforts to make realistic and appropriate choices. Coaches work with clients to know their strengths and deficits and to make plans to reach goals. Importantly, "by maintaining an ongoing relationship and an environment of responsibility for choices made, the coach reinforces the idea of accountability for choices made by the client" (p. 36).

Beyond the importance of establishing quality relationships, two other observations can be drawn from the coaching literature. First, recall that supervision strategies rooted in punitive, deterrence-oriented principles have a poor record of achieving reduced recidivism (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Cullen et al., in press; Lowenkamp, Flores, Holsinger, Makarios, & Latessa, 2010; Schaefer et al., 2016). It is instructive that nowhere in the literature on effective coaching is there any

recommendation to use punishment or negativity as a means of behavioral change. If anything, best practices in coaching are rooted in positive psychology, which is focusing on the use of strengths and positive emotions to effect change. Accountability and responsibility are emphasized but within a context of affective and instrumental support.

Second, as might be expected given the nature of the enterprise, there is within coaching a focus on skill development. An important conduit for skill development—"deliberate practice"—may offer insights on how to build prosocial strengths within probationers (see Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson & Pool, 2016). Conceptualized by Anders Ericsson and his colleagues, deliberate practice is based on the assumption that high-level performance is not rooted in innate talent but in effective instruction. One prerequisite for the development of skills in people is sustained practice—that is, an investment of time by the player and by the coach. But for practice to be truly effective, it must have a certain quality; it must be deliberate or "purposeful" (see Ericsson et al., 1993, p. 367).

According to Ericsson and Pool (2016, p. 15), purposeful practice starts with "having well-defined, specific goals." Complex tasks are divided into components or chunks that are taught sequentially. Deliberate practice thus involves "putting a bunch of baby steps together to reach a longer-term goal" (2016, p. 15). Learning also occurs best when everyone's attention is focused on the goal at hand. In the learning process, it is essential that coaches give players or clients feedback so that they know whether they are doing the task correctly or incorrectly. The feedback can be simple but it must be direct and speedy. Importantly, coaches must incrementally push their students to get out of their "comfort zone" (Ericsson & Pool, 2016, p. 17). When one goal is achieved—when one baby step is taken—the coach deliberately pushes the person to learn the relevant skill at the next highest level. This process occurs until mastery is achieved. Again, the evidence-based deliberate or purposeful practice approach has clear implications for probation supervision. Officers thus can build prosocial skills in offenders by setting specific goals arranged sequentially, leading focused sessions, giving feedback to their supervisees in this process, and constantly guiding offenders to avoid complacency and move beyond their comfort zone to reach a better life.

Conclusion: Building a New Professional Identity

Identities matter (McAdams, 2001). Who we think we are and what we think our lives are about help to guide the choices we make. We have proposed that benefits might accrue by replacing the traditional identity of “probation officer” with the fresh identity of “probation coach.” In American society, coaches are held in esteem. They are accorded authority and, if effective and caring, are respected. Many are seen to have a transformative effect on those that they have coached, not only athletically but personally. Some are beloved.

In this context, embracing the identity as a coach may provide probation officers with a new way to envision their work. Too often, they get bogged down in heavy caseloads, mind-numbing paperwork, and perfunctory office visits. They often are expected to keep track of drug tests, monitor the payment of fines, and record any violations that might become known. All this might be part of the job, but it is at best tangentially related to effective behavioral change.

The identity as coach, however, challenges this narrow bureaucratic, control-oriented role that so many probation officers are either prescribed or find convenient to fall into. Coaching is not easy, but it can be life-altering for all involved. Coaching implies that the “player” or offender can be improved, and that the coach—in this case, the probation officer—has the skills and desire to achieve this goal. Indeed, to be a coach is to constantly work with your charges to improve them and to help them to accomplish more athletically and in life. As noted, a coach can impose rules and be tough, but ultimately the goal is to create human capital and to win the contest—whether that is an athletic game or the game of life during and after probation.

In the end, the future of probation hinges on whether staff wish to remain trapped in a traditional “officer” role or envision a different professional identity—that of a coach. Ideas of this sort at first might seem a bit fanciful or foolish. We are persuaded, however, that officers as a group—whether in a single agency to start with or perhaps more broadly—need to envision their occupation in bolder terms. Too often, probation officers receive mandates and do not carve out what they want their profession to entail. Some officers might be content to play the role of referee; so be it. But for others who wish to have a more transformative effect on offenders, the professional identity as a coach might offer an avenue to achieve this goal.

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