

SELECT[®] Online

The Journal of the International Oracle Users Group

Select Journal
Home

Regular Columns

Past Issues

General Information

IOUG Home



Select Magazine - September 2001

Volume 7, No. 5

Sharing Our Oracle Expertise: Coaching Tips and Techniques to Help Others A Conversation with Oracle's Joe A. Holmes

INTRODUCTION

You have a lot of knowledge and experience, both technical and non-technical, built up working with Oracle, so now what? How can you apply it in other ways that will help make your team operate as a cohesive unit? The answer is easier than you think.

Everyone is "new to Oracle" at one time or another. So it is important that we share what knowledge we have with others. Sharing practical experience helps build successful teams. The proverbial new kid on the team benefits by learning from the old pro. At the same time, the old pro can learn a few tricks from the new kid. In other words, everyone wins.

FORMAL COACHING

Oracle knowledge and experience can often be shared through coaching. Formal coaching, in the management sense of the word, may involve an agreement between the coach and the individual being coached.

Formal coaching may be required when an employee has experienced a change in the workplace, such as a new assignment using new software tools, when training needs to be combined with practical work experience, when a performance assessment is required, or when ongoing job support is needed. Regular meetings are held between coach and the person being coached. Ground rules are agreed upon. The person coaching actively listens to the person being coached. A diagnosis of a problem is done and a plan of action is agreed upon. Follow up meetings are held later to see what progress has been made, to answer specific questions and to assess the effectiveness of the coaching. (Xebec, 1997).

INFORMAL COACHING

This article is about coaching in a less formal sense of the word by providing either specific help with a problem or tool, or more general assistance, guidance and advice to those who may be newer to Oracle (or any other type of software product). Here, coaching is considered simply the process by which knowledge and expertise is shared with others. As a manager or project leader, you may have technical people reporting to you that would greatly benefit from your experience. You may be directly responsible for ensuring that your employees have the skills to do what is expected of them. As a service provider, you may be called upon to provide technical advice to users.

EXPERIENCE LEVELS

Since Oracle environment is vast and complex, everyone regardless of his/her experience level, has something to offer. Certainly someone currently working in the trenches such as a developer or DBA will have a lot of specific technical knowledge. In addition, a manager or project leader who has worked for years on a variety of Oracle projects will likely have board range of experience at both the technical and non-technical levels and will have a very good idea what works and what doesn't.

MAKE YOURSELF KNOWN

Make yourself known so that others are aware of your experience and your willingness to help. If a project is successful, word will likely get around. Someone may refer you or even recruit you. You can also let others know more directly through personal contacts, e-mails or networking opportunities.

The following is a general list of technical and non-technical skills that can be shared with others.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

- DBA functions (install, configuration, monitoring, space management, backup)
- Network and OS administration
- Programming in SQL*Plus, PL/SQL and SQL*Loader
- Using Designer and Developer (Forms, Reports)
- System upgrades
- Performance tuning
- Internet and web development
- Java and object-oriented languages
- Trouble shooting and debugging skills
- Configuration management and version control
- Analysis, design and testing (at a lower level)
- Running production jobs
- Using 3rd party software

NON-TECHNICAL SKILLS

- Managing a development team
- Project management
- People skills
- Database design and standards
- Contracting, licensing, negotiating
- Client and customer support
- User requirements and specifications
- Analysis and design (higher level)
- User acceptance testing
- Feasibility studies and risk management
- Presentation and demonstration skills
- User training
- Marketing the system
- Technical writing

MOTIVATION

There are a number of important reasons for sharing your Oracle expertise.

1. PART OF YOUR JOB

You may have some technical people, either developers or DBAs, reporting to you. Since management is "getting work done through others" you will want to help your employees develop their skills. This does not mean always doing everything for them, but rather helping them develop their own analysis, design, programming and problem solving skills through coaching. Part of your job may involve going to Oracle seminars and conferences and to disseminate what you have learned. As a hired consultant on a project team, part of your job may be to share your expertise with permanent employees on a project.

2. GOOD FOR THE PROJECT

Show stoppers can hold up a critical project. By providing immediate technical assistance, a project team can more quickly overcome or avoid roadblocks. Some technical problems can be solved immediately by a knowledgeable person that might otherwise take days for an inexperienced person to cope with. Projects are more likely to be successful if an experienced person can share his/her expertise when needed in order to keep the project on track and avoid problems they may have encountered in the past. Major disasters are more likely to be avoided if those involved seek the help and approval of experts before doing something critical.

3. **VERY REWARDING**

Assisting others can be a very rewarding on a personal level. It increases your own technical knowledge while at the same time developing research and people skills. It also gives one a positive feeling that you are contributing to the organization in other ways than just your usual job activities and that your knowledge and expertise is of benefit to others. You also become more valuable to the organization if you are willing and able to provide assistance to others.

4. **LEARN MORE TECHNICAL SKILLS**

You can learn a lot by helping others. You also find out pretty quickly what you don't know (but perhaps should know). It can keep you on your toes by forcing you to do some fast research or conducting experiments with the products. Often people who are newer to Oracle try out the latest features right away, and so become experts at using them before others have had a chance to try them out. By working with them, you become more aware of what new features are available before you need to use them yourself.

5. **BUILDS GOOD RELATIONS**

Helping others will build up good interpersonal relationships, making others more likely to help you if needed in the future. Being regarded as an Oracle "expert" or "guru" is of no benefit to anyone if you are unwilling to offer assistance either directly or indirectly when called upon.

6. **BETTER RETENTION**

Employees are more likely to want to stay with an organization if they feel they are being assisted and supported by more experienced people in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Everyone is happier in an environment where knowledge is shared.

DIRECT HELP: TIPS & TECHNIQUES

The following are some suggestions for directly assisting others.

- **Levels of Assistance:** Various situations call for different levels of assistance. An experienced person could be a programmer or DBA currently working in the trenches, who can occasionally provide direct technical assistance. He or she could also be a manager or project leader, who can provide ongoing guidance and advice at a higher level. The level of assistance can vary from immediate help with performance tuning to providing suggestions for how best to normalize a database design. It also depends upon how experienced the person being helped is, either with Oracle in general or with a specific tool.
- **Direct Involvement:** Often providing assistance involves direct one-on-one meetings with someone to solve a problem. For example, if you have had a few years of experience with SQL*Plus and PL/SQL, you could be called upon to help someone with a specific SQL problem. Listen to what they want to do and make suggestions. You may try some experiments with the code yourself or provide some examples of past work. Have the person conduct some SQL experiments based upon your suggestions and then follow up to see whether or not they were successful.
- **Mentoring:** Mentoring may come about informally or through a formal mentoring program. Mentoring involves matching up a new person with someone more senior with the focus on sharing experience and wisdom. The mentor may act as a role model, adviser, coach or advocate for the employee. Mentoring can have benefits such as an accelerated learning curve and increased employee productivity. However, it can be a problem if the one being mentored becomes too dependent on the mentor for help (Stone 1999).
- **Experimentation:** Encourage experimenting directly with the product. There is no substitute for hands-on experience. If you don't know exactly how to do something, try programming through a basic example. I have been frequently asked how to solve a particular SQL problem that I did not know to do off hand, but was able to figure out after programming through some basic SQL examples. This is also useful when attempting to replicate an error message or bug.
- **Provide Concrete Examples:** If you have a particular programming standard that you wish to enforce or already have a certain coding solution, then provide some concrete examples. These can be used as a template for further development projects and can help avoid "re-inventing the wheel". Rather than describing a solution verbally, send an example by e-mail. When syntax is written down, there is less

room for error and the text can be cut and pasted directly into a command line or source code

- **Group Discussions:** Group discussions are useful for handling many questions from many people at the same time. Outside experts can be brought in from other projects or organizations to field questions. Group discussions are also useful for coding reviews and brainstorming sessions. Brainstorming encourages everyone to contribute his or her ideas for discussions. Even a bad idea may spark someone to come up with a very good one.
- **Resource Person:** An Oracle resource person can be assigned to an area to provide expertise and support as needed without being directly involved in a project. For instance, a user area may have someone available from a development area to assist with ad hoc SQL queries or performance tuning when called upon.

INDIRECT HELP: TIPS & TECHNIQUES

The following are some indirect methods for helping others.

- **Referrals:** If unable to assist directly, refer the person to a more knowledgeable colleague. They may in turn refer the person to someone else and so on, until a contact is made with someone who can help. It is useful to keep a list of known experts both inside and outside the organization with their phone numbers and e-mail addresses. In large organizations such as Statistics Canada, there is a formal Help Desk that can find someone to either help directly or to log a TAR with Oracle Support. Also refer them to research material such as manuals, textbooks, conference proceedings and Oracle-related web sites. Some examples of web sites with useful information are ioug.org, oracle.com, Metalink, Technet and Appsnet.
- **Textbooks:** Besides the usual collection of online and hardcover Oracle manuals, it is a very good idea to buy your own copies of Oracle and other computer textbooks. Oracle Press, O'Reilly and others have a number of excellent Oracle reference books available. Regard these purchases as an investment in your career and recommend that your company library also purchase some copies that can be borrowed. I have a stack of over a dozen Oracle textbooks in my office on everything from performance tuning to SQL*Plus and PL/SQL. That doesn't mean I have read them all, but I do have the information at my fingertips when needed.
- **Centers of Expertise:** One way of concentrating and developing Oracle expertise in one area is to set up a formal "Center of Expertise". A Center is made up of a group of Oracle experts that work for a limited time on a number of projects within an organization on an "as needed" basis. This also facilitates the sharing of Oracle expertise across many projects and helps avoid isolated pockets of knowledge that can arise from a lack of interaction. It also provides more opportunities for Oracle people in the group to gain further training and experience.
- **SWAT Teams:** An Oracle SWAT team (i.e. Special Weapons And Tactics) can also be established, comprised of Oracle experts that are called upon in critical situations such as major performance problems or backup and restore problems.
- **Bring in Experts:** It can be useful to bring in knowledgeable and experienced consultants for a limited period of time on a project. These experts can coach permanent staff members and help bring them up-to-speed. Consultants and vendors can also be brought in to deliver technical seminars and specialized training courses when required.
- **Joining User Groups and Attending Meetings:** Oracle User Groups facilitate the sharing of information through networking, testimonials, Q & A sessions and presentations. Staff should be encouraged to attend their local Oracle User Group meetings and to give presentations.

WRITING ARTICLES AND PRESENTATIONS

Writing papers, publishing articles and giving presentations are ways to share your expertise on a wider basis.

TECHNICAL PAPERS

Writing your ideas and experiences down in technical papers (also called white papers) is a way of disseminating your knowledge to others on a wider scale. Papers can be e-mailed to others, posted on an Intranet site for dissemination within an organization, or made available worldwide on an Internet site.

ARTICLES

Once a technical paper is written, it can also be converted into an article for publication in a computer magazine. This provides wider coverage to a specific audience and it can be very exciting and rewarding. First, try getting published in Oracle User Group magazines like SELECT, SQL>UPDATE, The NorthWest Oracle and others. These publications are always looking for good articles from the user community on everything from helpful tips to applications stories. You can also send in letters-to-the-editor if you have tried something based on a tip from a previous article.

If you want to get paid for writing, try publications such as Oracle Magazine, Oracle Internals and Intelligent Enterprise Magazine. These magazines usually want a query letter sent first, outlining what you would like to write about along with some examples of previous work (referred to as clippings). Based upon this material, the magazine may ask you for a full article. Publication websites usually have a "Guidelines for Authors" section that spells out what they are looking for and the required format. Payment is usually so much per article of a certain size, or more specifically by the number of words or pages.

PRESENTATIONS

Another way of sharing your expertise with many people is by giving presentations. These can be based on technical papers or articles you have already written. There is more direct audience involvement and interaction where specific questions can be asked. Look for opportunities to give presentations and demos within your company. Our organization, System Development Division at Statistics Canada, has a formal Presentation Committee that encourages employees to give presentations about conferences they have attended, software tips and techniques, or successful development projects. Schedules of presentations as well as handouts and white papers are posted on an Intranet website.

To further develop one's presentation skills, I would recommend joining a Toastmaster Public Speaking club. Toastmaster is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving public speaking and communication skills in a fun and supportive atmosphere, with over 8,000 clubs in 60 countries. Both Statistics Canada and Oracle Corp HQ have their own clubs.

PRESENTING AT USER GROUPS

You can also present to the Oracle community at large through your local Oracle User Group and at international conferences like IOUG-A Live or Oracle Open World etc. There are many benefits. Presenting at a conference disseminates practical information directly to others, provides the presenter with an opportunity to develop presentations skills, promotes the person as knowledgeable in a particular area, and provides an opportunity to network.

Conference organizers put out a "call for papers" inviting interested persons to send in an abstract. If accepted, a full paper must be written and sent to organizers and a PowerPoint presentation must be created and ready to present at the conference. Speakers whose papers are accepted for presentation at IOUG-A Live and Open World (or other conferences) have their papers published in the conference proceedings and their conference fee waived, making it less expensive for an organization to send someone.

INTERNAL COURSE DEVELOPMENT

While you can always send people to Oracle courses given by outside training organizations, in theory you could create your own internal courses based on the accumulated expertise of knowledgeable people within your organization. Course material can be developed from previous white papers and presentations.

WHEN SEEKING HELP

Because of the size and complexity of the Oracle environment, everyone needs assistance from time to time, no matter what his or her experience level. The following are some suggestions for those seeking help.

1. **Try It Yourself First:** Part of the coaching experience is for the person being helped to demonstrate and gradually improve his/her own ability to solve problems. Although it is good to seek help, always make some attempt to solve the problem yourself first. For example, if the problem is an error code, look it up. Try some experiments to replicate the problem and search for other cases on a web site such as Metalink.
2. **Don't Flounder:** While it is important to at least make an attempt to solve things yourself, don't flounder for a long time. Know when to seek help. This is can be a problem for those who are shy. Overcome this by gradually building up a good working relationship with someone more knowledgeable.
3. **Don't Be Too Bold:** While it is good to attempt to solve something yourself, don't be too bold by forging ahead with something critical when you are not sure. Always err on the side of caution. Consult a more experienced person first and get written approval for anything critical before going ahead with it. For example, always test a critical procedure that will delete or update data in development first before running it in production. Make sure that there is a backup that enables an easy restoration of the data should a problem arise. It is usually a lot easier to avoid a problem in the first place than to fix it later.
4. **Be Prepared:** Be prepared to explain the problem by providing documentation, hard copies of the code, error reports, spooled files, sample data etc. that would help someone locate a problem. When it is a specific error, always provide a printout. It is virtually impossible for anyone to solve an Oracle problem without at least seeing what the error code was and in what context it occurred. Be up front about who ran what, when, where, why and how. Make it as easy as possible for someone to help by providing background information and printouts.
5. **Spread Questions Around:** Repeatedly asking the same person over and over for help is sometimes referred to as "response burden". This can turn people off who might otherwise be more than willing to assist on occasion. Avoid this situation by spreading questions around. Try asking different experts each time. People will be more responsive if they are called upon less frequently. It also builds more contacts and gives you a better idea who knows what. Another way to reduce response burden is to draw up a list of questions to be given to the same person at the same time rather than running back to ask each question separately.
6. **Take Notes:** When someone explains something, always take notes. Procedures, commands and syntax that are copied down are recorded forever. They can be referred again in the future when the problem, the solution and the helper are long forgotten. Notes can also be used as a basis for writing more formal documentation if none exists. Make a note of error messages and how they were fixed for future reference. Although it is now taken for granted, corresponding by e-mail facilitates the recording of information for later use. Commands can be cut and pasted into source code or executed directly.
7. **Get Training:** If there are known gaps in your knowledge and skill set, be proactive and volunteer for appropriate training. Training combined with hands on experience is essential. After training, if you are not yet working on a project that requires the newly learned skills, create a small but interesting project of your own. Use it as an excuse for getting hands-on experience with the product that can be worked on at lunch-time or after hours.
8. **Be Patient:** Be patient with yourself and others. Don't expect the helper to know everything. The Oracle environment is very complex and there are always new features and versions coming out. Your questions could be about a command or tool that is so new, that others have not had chance to use it yet. Be tenacious and don't give up easily on a problem. Continue to research the cause and solution to a problem and seek help until your problem is solved.
9. **Be Appreciative:** Thank the helper for his/her time. Even if they were unable to directly solve your problem, this will go along way in case you need help again. If you are happy with their help, recommend them to others.
10. **Become an Expert Yourself:** Once you have worked through a problem or learned a new tool, you now become an expert of sorts in that area and are now able to share your knowledge with others. Don't think that you need years of Oracle experience just to be able to help somebody else. Even a little experience can be very helpful in a particular situation.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Often one can learn a lot by knowing what not to do. Here are some examples of tactics that should be avoided.

DOING EVERYTHING

Don't do everything for the person being helped. This can be a problem for technical people who are now in a more managerial position. As a manager or project leader, there are always crunch situations where you need to get in and fix the code yourself. But, in general, you should be encouraging your employees and others to do the work.

Not delegating responsibility can limit the amount of experience an employee can obtain and may lead to a crisis situation later. For example, a backup DBA who is never given a chance to be in command of the database and to test out the functions may not be able to run a critical backup and restore if the senior DBA is unavailable.

GETTING DRAWN IN

If a protracted problem has occurred on another project that you are not responsible for, then be careful not to be too drawn into it. There is a limit as to how much free time you can spend on some else's problem. In these cases, either refer the person to another expert or make formal arrangements that fully compensate you for working on that project.

LAISSEZ FAIRE

Leaving employees totally on their own may lead to either floundering or inappropriate solutions. Occasionally check up on what they are doing and ask if they are encountering any situations in which they need your assistance. Keep your door open and be friendly and approachable. Make others aware that you are available and willing to help if needed.

IGNORING REQUESTS

Ignoring requests or being unfriendly and uncooperative when asked for help does not create a good working environment. If you are "up to your neck in alligators", say so and arrange to meet with the person at a later time. Be generous with your time. Rather than feeling inconvenienced, consider it an important learning opportunity for you.

BEING CRITICAL

People may show you designs, coding and procedures you don't like. Rather than being too critical and reacting negatively, recognize the fact that, by coming to you, they have already made a positive step. The design or code they show you could be something inherited from previous developers. Offer positive suggestions and examples based on your own past experiences of why something worked or didn't. Focus on the problem and not the person.

Don't think that a question is too obvious, silly or ridiculous to answer. We all have gaps in our Oracle knowledge and experience. Something you may think is easy could be completely unknown to someone else and is likely the reason they asked you for help in the first place. However, if the same questions are repeatedly asking by the same person, get them to take notes, refer them to someone else or post Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on an Intranet site.

OSMOSIS

There is no substitute for providing a new employee with proper Oracle training and hands-on experience. A dozen years ago, I worked for an organization that did not want to spend any more money on Oracle training. As an alternative, my supervisor thought that if I sat in and just watched a consultant do some DBA work, I would somehow learn by osmosis all about Oracle and even how to copy a database from one machine to another. It didn't work. For someone to understand what is going on, and to get up-to-speed with Oracle, requires a proper investment in training and hands-on opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Everyone is new to Oracle at one time or another. As we continue to work in this environment, we gain more knowledge and experience. At the same time, there are always new people that can benefit from our help and expertise. Sharing our expertise through coaching can be very rewarding. While you may not be able to help solve a technical problem immediately, the main objective is to help others more quickly get up-to-speed with Oracle than they would otherwise with no intervention. As a manager or project leader, you will want to help your employees develop their own analysis, design, programming and problem solving skills. You will also learn a lot of new things, so your expertise will continue to grow through helping others.

REFERENCES

- [1] Foster, B. and Seeker, K.R., Coaching for Peak Employee Performance, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, San Francisco, CA, 1997
- [2] Holmes, J.A., Seven Deadly SQL Traps and How to Avoid Them, 1999 IOUG-A Live Conference Proceedings, Paper #434, Denver CO, Apr 1999
- [3] Holmes, J.A., Amazing SQL*Plus Tricks, 2000 IOUG-A Live Conference Proceedings, Paper #424, Anaheim CA, May 2000
- [4] Holmes, J.A., Leveraging Oracle Performance Tuning Tools Using Simple Mathematical Techniques, 2000 IOUG-A Live Conference Proceedings, Paper #461, Anaheim CA, May 2000
- [5] Mink, O.G., Owen, K.Q. and Mink, B.P., Developing High-Performance People; The Art of Coaching, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1993
- [6] Minor, M., Coaching for Development; Skills for Managers and Team Leaders, Crisp Publishing Inc., Menlo Park, CA, 1995
- [7] Stone, F.M., Coaching, Counseling & Mentoring, Amacom, 1999
- [8] Xebec, Coaching for Results, Computer Based Training Course, Xebec Interactive Learning Inc., 1997

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe A. Holmes is a Project Leader for the Systems Development Division of Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ontario. He has had 22 years of computer systems experience across five Canadian Federal Government Departments including 12 years working with Oracle related systems. Joe can be reached at Joe.Holmes@statcan.ca