

Climbing Gym Professional Development: Coaches & More

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Posted By: Kirby Kahl in [CWA Blog](#)



Professional development is key in maintaining and attracting quality talent in any workplace. Many small indoor climbing gyms may struggle with integrating this into budgeting and schedules. This can even occur with larger gyms, too. One of the struggles in our industry is that with its rapid development yet youthfulness, we are still developing the infrastructure of conferences, certifications, classes, and other support networks for development that other industries possess.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Tuesday 'Kirby' Kahl, an accomplished coach and future presenter at the 2025 CWA Summit. She currently focuses on coaching, training, and programming and served on the 2024 CWA Summit Content Committee.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for our coaches, programs staff, senior management and gym owners.
- **What Will You Learn:** A guide for creating the perfect professional development opportunities for your staff, no matter your budget.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** [Our Leadership Development Series](#) has a more generalized but step-by-step process for this type of content.

Don't fret, we have made exceptional moves in this direction. We have the CWA Summit and Indoor Climbing Expo. CBJ and CWA are constantly publishing articles. We see podcasts and

videos out all the time.

If you haven't yet, you can [purchase your discounted ticket today to the 2025 CWA Summit.](#)

However, it often ends up being up to the individual to source, digest, analyze, and act on this information. Some folks may not have time for this built into a busy schedule.

So, how do we make time for development? How do we become better? How do we invest in ourselves and our people without breaking the bank, the clock, and our backs? Well, let's talk through some ideas. While this article will use coaches specifically as an example, it's focused on all climbing gym employees.

Internal Options

Leadership

Leadership staff are often some of the gym's most knowledgeable and experienced folks. In a perfect world, there's time carved from their schedule to mentor, check in with, and develop their staff and direct reports. Ideally, this happens at all levels of leadership.

Gym directors should meet with desk supervisors. Program directors should meet with instructors, and so on. These meetings should focus on employee goals and ideas and should be collaborative.

When employees feel seen, heard, and attended to, **they are more likely to stick around. People want to be invested in.**

When I was an operations manager, we'd spend 30 to 45 minutes meeting with each staff member every six months, and some of the best ideas in the gym came out of those meetings. Our staff felt heard when we used their ideas and made it known that what we did was their call. The only cost associated with this and many of the below ideas is payroll, which is an expense - but a manageable one.

Peer Mentoring

Another avenue to explore, especially if leadership is beginning to feel overwhelmed, is peer mentorship. Experienced staff are a great avenue for offering mentorship to newer staff. It should be noted that staff should not be encouraged to mentor unless they WANT to mentor others and explicitly consent to do so and are compensated for their additional labor.

Additionally, not everyone wants a leadership role, but that doesn't mean they don't want to mentor and support others. Experienced instructors might love to teach newer instructors and involve them in classes. A great example of this would be scheduling an experienced instructor and a newer instructor for a high enrollment class and using it as a mentoring experience.

Peer mentorship can also be scheduled outside of existing shifts to work on specific skills like lesson planning, learning how to use your gym's point-of-sale software, visual merchandising, customer service, or anything else the gym needs. **This offers extra hours to both employees, guidance to a newer employee, and leadership experience to your more experienced employee.**

Lesson Planning and Admin Time

For instructors and other coaches, creating administrative and lesson planning time is a great space to ensure there is some time for professional development, drill creation, exploration, planning, and analyzing the wealth of information. I recommend ensuring there's enough to cover lesson planning for the week, emails, or other required tasks and some amount for exploring content, creating drills, or collaborating.

I know I'm at my best when given space to explore new ideas and design new content. You can also schedule collaborative time for your team. A weekly or biweekly meeting where you share content and ideas could be a great way to connect and share resources.

Building Internal Resources

I've worked at gym chains with exceptional internal resources and gym chains with shockingly few internal resources. Having more reduces the mental load on your instructors and gives them more space to devote to innovative ideas and concepts or to interact with your customer base. One gym chain I worked with had a Google site filled with drills, games, activities, and ways to teach concepts, all compiled by their programs leadership and submitted by instructors and coaches. This was my favorite internal resource I've seen. It was searchable but also organized by concept.

This kind of project allows everyone to be involved and gathers ideas from across your organization. It can also be implemented via SharePoint if your organization uses Microsoft or Google. You could also use a complex spreadsheet or build a website using Wix or another resource.

External Options

We've discussed many ways to develop folks in-house but many external resources exist. You're reading on one right now, the CWA site, CWA Summit, and certification courses are great resources but not the only ones out there.

Take a Certification Course

Our newly launched Certification Summits are great ways to get your staff certified in any of our various offerings like the Climbing Wall Instructor - Provider, Work at

Clinics and Workshops

Clinics, workshops, and trainings are great opportunities to gain certification or learn more about a topic. Hubs for this are the Indoor Climbing Expo or CWA Summit.

Other options are the [C4HP programs](#) or other coaching platforms. Coaching companies like [Power Company Climbing](#) or myself can also be contacted to run courses for your staff instead of sending everyone to the CWA Summit or other events. Sometimes, it can make more sense to bring an instructor to your facility to train your staff all in one fell swoop. Your instructors gain actionable knowledge, gain industry contacts, and feel invested in. They can take this information with them anywhere they go in the industry.

Subscription Services and External Resources

Some coaching companies like Training Beta or C4HP have subscription services, and there are so many climbing content creators and coaches out there like myself! The CBJ, webinars, and podcasts also can add in some great external expertise.

You should always take any information you gain or share with a grain of salt, even if they say it's based on a study or science. Even studies have biases, can be directed by funding, have limited scope, or other reasons for their data points in specific directions. Always question where data and information come from and be hesitant to trust blindly.

If you aren't familiar with scholarly articles and how to read them, [this guide from the National Library of Medicine](#) might help.

Budgeting for Professional Development

Whether focusing on internal or external professional development methods, you need to budget. My preferred method is for each month when target revenue is reached, I put X percentage into the professional development bucket.

A larger company can immediately set aside this income for general budgetary considerations. Smaller companies may need to handle it differently. Some are used internally from the professional development bucket, and the rest are set aside for external requests. For example, if an employee wants to take their AMGA SPI Course and Exam and requests funding, I'd use some of our external funding for either their course or exam. When I did mine, my company did the same for me. You could also get more complex with it and put aside a certain number of hours or funds for each hour an employee works, much like sick time or PTO. This option keeps it proportional to their working hours with your company.

All in All...

We know how critical professional development is to maintaining and attracting great employees.

We can't hold our employees accountable for growth if we don't directly support them but planning to support them is key as well.

About the Author



Tuesday "Kirby" Kahl is a movement specialist, passionate instructor, and athlete. She is the Programs Director of Skyhook Bouldering in Portland, Oregon. Kirby has worked every job in a climbing gym, from manager, retail buyer, routesetter, and everything in between, but her true passion is instruction. Kirby's primary populations are youth and adaptive competitive athletes, but she loves assisting climbers of all ages and abilities and helping them reach their goals. She is a student at Portland State University studying Applied Health and Fitness and minoring in Neuroscience. She has been coaching for the last 15 years across several sports, enjoying a bubbling career as a swim coach before falling in love with climbing. You can find her bouldering, multi-pitching, competing, or backcountry skiing when she's not in school or coaching. Off the wall, she's a dedicated plant mom and painter.

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