

Coaching and Mentoring are Not the Same

By

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Recently a business friend of mine said something that turned my head. While discussing what I was doing (coaching) he said “That must be difficult because most people I know think that coaching is the same as mentoring which we can do in-house.” Well, that made me stop in disbelief. Upon further consideration, however, it occurred to me that this indeed might be a true feeling of many business men and women. There are a few similarities and if a person has not experienced coaching he/she might well think they are the same. Both are approaches to helping people grow and improve. Both require a desire on the part of the mentor or coach to help and a desire by the individual to strive for improved performance. But that may be the limit of the similarities.

The processes differ immensely in at least three areas: technique, authority, and responsibility. Credible coaches invariably have an established technique or process in place and most often are supported by a certification. The processes are focused on future outcomes usually related to improved behaviors. Coaches use specifically designed tools and assessments to help the client discover opportunities for improvement and set strategies while maintaining an impartial relationship with the client. Mentors, on the other hand, do not require training or certification and will likely not have an established process in place. While they may have access to existing assessments or performance appraisals, mentors do not typically employ surveys or specific assessments to see deeply into the mentee’s areas of opportunities or strengths. Unlike coaches, mentors do not typically employ an impartial relationship with the mentee, preferring to maintain a more personal approach. And, finally, while helping the client make his or her own decisions, mentors are more likely to address issues with direct solutions.

Another differentiator between coaches and mentors is authority. Coaches typically are contracted by an organization to achieve certain behavioral change goals. In turn, the coaches desire and are supported by the contracting entity in the need to establish and enforce certain key process elements such as time lines, meeting times, etc. Coaches typically require contracts or protocols with the clients that are enforced by the coach with support of the organization. Finally, a coach typically renders periodic and final reports to the organization describing the type of participation and results demonstrated by the client. Mentors have a less structured relationship with the mentees. The relationship is usually not a contract and there may or may not be any reporting on the mentee’s progress. Rather than authority, the mentor is supported more by respect for the internal (power) position he or she occupies in the organization, the mentor’s related experience, and the personal connection between the mentor and mentee.

A third differentiator is responsibility. Coaches are trained to insure that their approach and process places responsibility for progress and success solely on the client. In this way, the client learns that he or she must be fully engaged and the final goals will be their responsibility to achieve. Mentors, however, are typically more prone to give direct advice and even solutions to problems. In the latter cases, the mentor may be seen as the responsible person especially if the

mentee fails to achieve the goal involved. In addition, some experts in learning believe that telling people what to do is not conducive to long term learning and development. The critical thinking and the review of multiple possibilities and self discovery provided through coaching has a better chance of developing a more powerful and effective performer. In support of this and in his book *Coaching and Mentoring*, Dr. Nigel MacLennan notes that “A mentor can never be a coach unless they deliberately adopt the skills involved in successful coaching. The coach concentrates on helping the performer learn how to achieve more. The mentor’s aim is to be available for the performer to use as a resource. A mentor can fulfill the role quite adequately with basic management, people and training or teaching skills. An effective coach must have the knowledge, technique and skill to help the performer achieve, without directing.”

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