

## Coach for Skill Development, Mentor for Career Development



Coaching brings to mind someone pacing up and down the sidelines at a sporting event, perhaps signaling to players what should be done; calling time out to confer with players; shuttling people on and off the field to “send in the play from the sidelines.” The implication contained in this scenario is that the coach has “all the answers” and that the players are expected to use their skills to execute whatever play the coach deems most appropriate for the existing circumstances.

Coaching, as it occurs in the workplace, is somewhat different. The most effective coaches may be seen behaving more like a parent helping their child prepare for an important test the child must take at school. In this situation, a parent would never think to give their child all the answers. Similarly, the parent realizes that, in the final analysis, the child is the one who must actually assess the problems or questions presented, decide on the best answer, and then provide the answer in a manner that will be clear to the person who will be grading the test. Parents would be quick to say, “If I give them the answers they might get a good grade on the test, but what will they really learn?”

If we translate that question, “What will they really learn?” into the workplace, it should be clear that the goal of coaching is to help the employee being coached develop an “answer” (i.e., plan of action) that will allow that person to “get a good grade” (i.e., execute their plan). This needs to be done in such a way that their goal or objective is met in an effective and efficient manner. Yes, it is tempting, for a variety of reasons, to want to “give employees the answers;” but such an approach, used to excess, tends to limit the development of employee talent, and the development of talent is one of the most significant responsibilities we as leaders have.

Might it be necessary, due to deadlines, to instruct someone how to deal with a situation? Of course. But a constant reliance on the manager can often stifle employee creativity, limit the development of analytical and problem solving skills, and cause high-potential employees to seek other opportunities. Given the projected shortages of employees, let alone talented employees, that will face many of our organizations in the next five to ten years, it is increasingly important to make sure that we focus on letting people learn, sometimes from their own mistakes, and by coaching appropriately, help them reach their maximum potential.



Coaching is skill application; allowing people, through a participative, interactive, and iterative process, to find ways to apply the skills they’ve been trained to acquire, for maximum performance. Coaching should be focused on leveraging strengths every bit as much, if not more, than focused on addressing performance deficits.

Mentors often use their position to introduce their “mentees” to new opportunities or to groups that the employee might not have access to on an individual basis. Mentorship often carries with it an element of sponsorship that affords the mentee visibility within the organization. Mentors often work to involve their mentees in projects or work assignments that offer the mentee a chance to gain experience that will assist their careers, either in terms of adding depth to the current job assignment or experience in a related area that will help prepare the mentee for a different job assignment. Mentors, in a professional and ethical manner, often help mentees understand the overall corporate culture, “how things really get done,” and which career moves will result in the achievement of the mentees goals.

By definition, then, a mentor has to have experience, and be seen as successful within the organization to serve as an effective mentor. We often hear of people who, upon realizing a career goal, thank their “network” of mentors. There has been a trend toward people actively seeking out others, typically with relevant experience in a specific area that the mentee would like to learn from. In many of these situations, the mentors are providing guidance in the areas of higher level or more abstract skill sets such as strategic thinking, high level negotiation skills and strategies, serving as sounding boards in frank discussions that the mentee does not believe can be conducted “within the four walls” of their current organization, or career advice. While one might make the case that some of these areas are, in fact, coaching, the goal of mentoring still tends to focus on career development and progression. As a recent contact explained, “I was told that if I truly wanted to advance within the organization, it was necessary for me to have at least two years of successful sales experience, and that’s what I’m preparing myself to do now. I thought my financial background and my MBA degree would be enough, but that’s not the way my company looks at things when it comes to developing the next generation of senior level staff. My mentor helped me develop the strategy necessary to make this happen.”

That conversation illustrates, in a nutshell, some of the best aspects of what true mentoring can do both for an individual and for an organization.

Finally, it should be noted that, just as good coaches often need training in how to maximize their skills before undertaking the development of employee talent, good mentoring programs have clearly understood guidelines and operating principles to ensure that the participants, as well as the larger organization, recognize the goals, and limitations, of the program.

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Mentoring calls to mind, for many people, the image of a younger employee being “taken under someone’s wing.” In many respects this is an accurate perception because, in the vast majority of instances, mentoring is and should be considered as a form of sponsorship wherein a more senior employee, most often in a visible leadership role, takes on a formal role as a career coach.

Training employees to ensure they have the needed skills, coaching them to ensure that those skills are applied in the most effective fashion, and mentoring employees to ensure that their realistic career goals can be reached are the three elements of employee development and performance management that are vital for the continued success of our organizations.

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