

The Difference Between Mentoring and Coaching

Valerie Pelan



While coaching and mentoring use many of the same skills, one is short term and task-based while the other promises a longer-term relationship.

Imagine the following scenario. The vice president of human resources has just finished an in-depth discussion with the director of engineering about high employee turnover for one of the engineering teams. The manager of that team has a command and control leadership style, like a drill sergeant. His style has created a lot of tension and poor performance results. The vice president of HR told the engineering director the drill sergeant manager needed to change his management style, and reminded him that executive leadership mandated all managers use mentoring and coaching skills. This manager needs to be more in tune with the company culture, and the engineering director agrees.

This scenario is common. There is confusion about mentoring and coaching skills. Part of the challenge is the terms are used interchangeably. Explaining the difference between mentoring and coaching with definitions and examples can help managers change their style, and holding informal meetings with the managers can benefit the entire organization. Introducing new skills is not easy. Employees will have questions and need practical information and examples on how to mentor and coach. Talent leaders will need a practical way to communicate the information.

In an article in the October issue of *Strategy and Business* magazine, authors Mark David Nevins and Stephen A. Stumpf state that talented human capital will be the prime ingredient of future business success. The article said one way current leaders can support future leaders is to commit to an organizational culture that values mentorship and coaching and includes constructive and timely feedback. Coaching is about strategizing ways to handle situations; mentoring is about providing guidance.

The two often operate together. For instance, leadership coaching can improve interpersonal communication style and decision making and as a result lead an employee to become more engaged and productive. The coach can offer the employee advice and guidance. The same employee also may receive suggestions from a mentor, who will act as a role model and help to manage a potential career change.

Despite some crossover, there is some difference between the two skills.

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Mentoring: This means helping the protégé succeed by providing guidance. The mentor-mentee relationship is characterized by a more experienced person helping the less-experienced person with political advice, information and guidance about a company, an industry or his or her career:

- Mentors are usually older, more experienced and higher up in the organization, but outside the protégé’s chain of command.
- Mentors act as role models.
- They focus on political skills and encourage self-development.
- They provide advice on career next steps and can recommend the mentee for visible positions or attractive compensation packages.
- The mentor-protégé relationship works well when someone is starting out in a career or entering a new role.

Here is an example of when mentoring is effective. In this scenario the manager, Mary, is more experienced than Jane, and she is concerned Jane will negatively impact bottom-line revenue. This is the situation:

Jane, a 25-year-old, is bright and highly educated but has a “take-no-prisoners” attitude when working with customers and other team members. She entered the department six months ago from graduate school and has produced considerable friction within the department and headaches for Mary in dealing with those outside the immediate department and customers. When Mary approached Jane about being more diplomatic in various situations, Jane’s response was, “These people are in the wrong. Why is there a need for diplomacy?”

Mary decided to mentor Jane on how the team works with other company team members and customers. She set up meetings with Jane using a four-step structured feedback plan.

Step one: Mary focused the discussion on specific behaviors and their effect, not on personalities. In this case, it was Jane's "take no-prisoners" attitude that was upsetting customers and team members; they felt Jane was not listening and responding to their questions. Mary asked Jane for her perspective on the situation.

Step two: Mary used mentoring skills such as suggesting different ways to respond and interact in various situations. She suggested Jane view the situation from the customers' perspective and gave her guidelines and ways she might try to handle the situation differently. Mary asked Jane to summarize what they had discussed and asked her to try different approaches. They also set up a time for their next meeting to see how things were going.

Step three: They both chose the time and place for their next meeting. This gave Jane the opportunity to discuss how things were going with the new approach — working on her listening skills and trying to see things from the customers' perspective.

The team seemed supportive of Jane's efforts, and she said she felt the team was helping her as she continued to modify her approach. Mary, acting as Jane's mentor, suggested other roles Jane might be interested in pursuing. She introduced Jane to other leaders in the company and helped Jane with career options.

Step four: Mary and Jane met several times to solidify the change in Jane's approach and to talk about career options.

Feedback meetings can continue as the mentor-protégé relationship grows. In this situation, Mary used mentoring skills to guide and help Jane. Jane benefited from the relationship by receiving guidance, customer perspective and ways to improve her communication skills.

Coaching: The focus of coaching is to improve performance and skills. Many don't realize the coach-coachee relationship is collaborative, a relationship of peers. It's also a certifiable skill. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) certifies coaches and provides core competencies and a code of ethics.

Traditionally, whether a coach is internal or external, the details of a coaching session are confidential. A good coach-coachee relationship is based on trust and collaboration. External coaches can be brought in to offer an external strategic perspective; internal coaches have both a company and strategic perspective. Coaching usually supports the coachee in taking steps and actions that move him or her forward to achieve a goal; people are more likely to be engaged and accountable for solutions and goals they have designed.

Here are some guidelines for the coach-coachee relationship:

- It is collaborative and starts from the coachee's strengths.
- Coaches ask open-ended questions to help the coachee strategize solutions and facilitate problem solving.

- Coaches do not give advice; they provide encouragement and urge continuous improvement.
- Coaches hold the coachee accountable for trying new things and using his or her strengths to get results.
- Coaches offer objective perspective and support the coachee's efforts to try new actions.

Consider the following fictional situation to illustrate how coaching could be effective with a high-potential employee whose leadership style was having a negative impact on a key project team.

Bill, the manager, received some negative feedback about Paul, one of his high potentials. He was surprised because he knew Paul wanted to be promoted. Paul was excited about leading this team but his actions did not reflect this enthusiasm. Bill decided to walk in during one of the meetings. He observed Paul dominating the conversation and interrupting other team members as they gave their suggestions. When the team started listing tactical action steps, Paul did pay attention but quickly ended the meeting with nothing accomplished, making some team members visibly upset.

Bill viewed Paul as an experienced and high-performing person — a potential leader. He decided to have several meetings with Paul using open-ended, coaching questions to support and assist him in figuring out how to pull the project team together and complete the project on time.

Step one: Bill asked Paul about the team and if they were going to make the deadline using open-ended questions to create awareness about the team situation and how Paul's actions were contributing to it.

Step two: With Bill's support, Paul realized he had not been an energizing leader. Paul strategized on the steps he needed to take to bring the team around and called it "timely damage control and regrouping" to get the team on target.

Step three: Paul started his action steps and worked on his listening and collaboration skills. He was able to tell Bill how this new approach was working and also talk about his next steps.

Step four: Due to the importance of the team project, they decided to have 30-minute meetings for the next month to ensure the project met its deadlines. Paul kept Bill apprised on the progress and gave him updates on his action steps, what worked and what did not. Paul was thankful for the coaching, and Bill was glad that using open-ended questions and coaching worked well with an experienced employee who needed to refine his manager skills. Paul worked hard to regain the team's confidence and to regain Bill's trust that he was a potential leader. He felt accountable to change his style and finish the project.

Plan of Action

Some of the ultimate goals in a coaching or mentoring engagement are improvement, having an employee take ownership for his or her actions and developing

steps to move forward. Before strategizing what steps can lead to a desired future, coachees and mentees should examine their current and preferred leadership style and consider whether or not their organization actively supports a coaching and mentoring-friendly culture.

Organizations that want to but do not currently support coaching and mentoring can use the following steps to start the process:

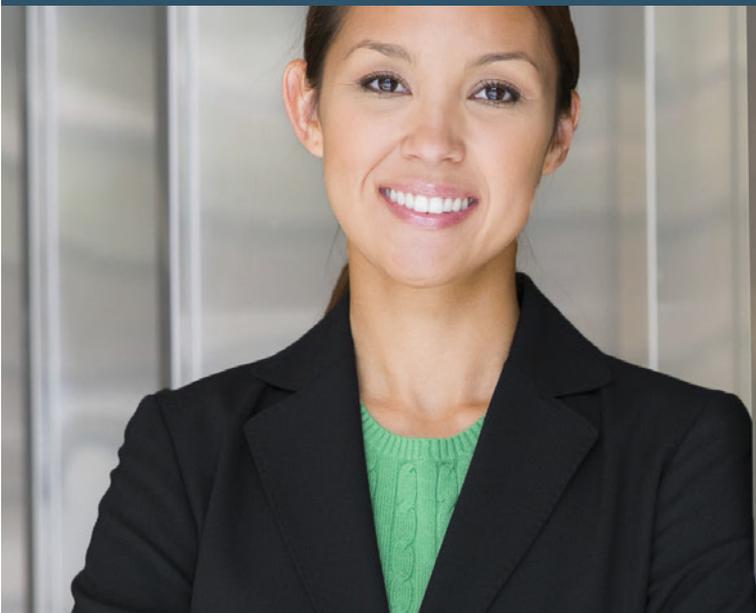
- Present a unified program and definitions to the whole organization. A town hall meeting can be an effective way to ensure the whole organization hears the same communication.
- Hold smaller roundtable discussions with key leaders who are influencers in the organization. They will be leadership sponsors as the mandate from the executive team filters down in the organization.
- Clarify any confusion or misuse of terms in the beginning of the communication process. The talent leader will provide definitions of mentoring and coaching, break the skills into practical and adaptable steps and provide examples of situations to clarify when to use the different skill sets.

- Hold concise training meetings of ideally no more than 90 minutes to introduce the difference in mentoring and coaching in mixed-level groupings from leadership to mid-level managers. This creates a unified message and reinforces continuity throughout the organization. It also connects the hands-on managers with senior-level leaders.
- Mentor the less-experienced employee or someone new on a job; coach when the person is experienced and needs to target specific problems or areas of concern.
- Set up a voluntary mentoring program for newer employees and make it part of employees' career planning.
- Develop a team of internal coaches for mid-level managers.
- Bring in external executive coaches for upper-level managers.
- Place all the information on the company website. **TM**

Valerie Pelan is president of Integrated Focus, a management and leadership consultancy. She can be reached at editor@talentmgt.com.

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