

What's the Difference between Mentoring and Coaching?

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A Common Question

In the seven years Oystercorp have been delivering coaching and mentoring programs a question we often hear is – "What is the difference between coaching and mentoring?" This month we kick-off by covering some basics that are still causing confusion in the market. Included is a simple one page chart that outlines the main differences between coaching and mentoring – an easy reference tool for you to use in training or situations where you may be asked to explain the difference.

Coaching and mentoring – What 's the difference?

There is a lot of confusion out there about coaching and mentoring, often with the two terms used interchangeably. This is not surprising as both involve an experienced hand helping a learner to become more effective. Coaching is a key skill of a mentor and an effective mentor will have well-developed coaching skills. Coaching is primarily about skill acquisition, as demonstrated from its origins in sport. It is action and performance-oriented. The international coaching accrediting body the International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching as, "an ongoing partnership that helps [people] produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives and...deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life".

Coaching's close cousin, mentoring involves skills transfer from a more experienced to a less experienced person. It is a 'strategic approach to developing an employee by pairing that employee with someone who is more experienced who will teach, coach, counsel and encourage the mentee' (Management Mentors, 2002). Mentoring focuses on the overall development of the person and is often about knowledge transfer. In short - a mentor is someone to learn from and a coach is someone to learn with. A simple example can be found in Olympic swim coach Lawrie Lawrence – a coach of champions, however Lawrie is not be a mentor because he has not competed at elite level, in fact rumour has it that he can't really swim. The following chart will help to clarify the differences.

Key differences between coaching and mentoring

Coaching	Mentoring
Relationship is often finite and short-term (3-12 months)	Relationship is often long-term, on-going (1-2 years)
Coaches are more frequently external to the organisation	Mentors are often found within the organisation
Coaches are most often paid for their services	Mentoring is seen as a benevolent and goodwill gesture
Goals are clearly identified	Goals not always as clearly identified
Action-oriented	Process- and relationship oriented
Results- oriented	Outcomes are often oblique
Relationship is a partner-approach	A mentor is usually higher in the organisational hierarchy
A coach may be the same age or younger than the person they are coaching	A mentor is usually older, more senior than their mentee (although peer and reverse mentoring are also gaining momentum).
A coach may not necessarily be an expert in the area they are coaching in (ie they are expert at coaching the best out of people)	A mentor is usually an expert in the area the mentee is aspiring to achieve in but may not be an expert at coaching the best out of people
A coach is not necessarily a mentor	A mentor will usually have good coaching skills
Coaches are most often formally trained in coaching	Mentors are not necessarily formally trained although many may be naturally good mentors

Next month we will be looking at the qualities and competencies of good coaches and good mentors – and what to look out for when you are selecting coaches and mentors.

Feel free to send you comments and suggestions for future topics directly to:
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