



Clutterbuck
Associates

MENTORING EXECUTIVES AND DIRECTORS

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A whole new profession of advisers is emerging to help people in top management. Whilst non-executive directors and consultants have responsibilities toward the company, the executive mentor or executive coach (although not strictly interchangeable, the terms are often used as synonymous) has a primary responsibility towards the individual executive.

The reasons for the rapid rise of the executive mentor are multiple, and arise from both supply and demand pressures. On the supply side, highly experienced managers are retiring earlier, maintaining their health and fitness longer, and receiving more exposure during their careers to the “softer” sides of management. Many develop a strong interest in different methods of helping others learn, which reinforces the natural instinct to pass on accumulated wisdom.

On the demand side, the pressures include:

- Jobs at the top involve increasing pressure on time, to demonstrate performance, to meet the often conflicting demands of different stakeholders. The risks of being an executive or director grow each year, along with the volume of legislation from national or supranational sources. Maintaining a sense of balance on a multitude of complex issues is very difficult if the people you discuss them with are all involved as you are. It makes a great deal of sense to seek the perspective of an unbiased, trustworthy individual, whose judgement you value.
- Maintaining the balance between work and home has become much more difficult. With allowance made for commuting time and working at home, today's typical executive works at least as long hours as his or her Victorian counterpart, who had a 60-hour week. Early retirement is as much a symptom of exhaustion as seizing the opportunity created by society's greater wealth. Reflective dialogue about how to maintain a quality of personal life are more often than not a feature of mentoring relationships at this level.
- As executives face up to their own needs for continuous performance improvement, they need to gain greater insight into their motivations, their strengths and weaknesses, particularly in how they relate to other people in the business. Admitting a lack of confidence can be very difficult inside the organisation, yet fairly easy to an experienced listener from outside. Good mentors help executives understand their behaviours, identify where to build on good habits and address destructive ones, and plan personal improvement
- Flatter hierarchies make the jump from one level of management to another increasingly difficult. In particular, the transitions between specialist and general manager and between executive and director, director and chief executive all involve radical changes in the way the individual makes judgements and manages his or her team. It helps greatly to have the support and guidance of someone who has been through the same experience and is able to make their experiences relevant to you. In a recent research project¹ examining high performance companies around the world, one of the common characteristics was that the

¹Goldsmith, W and Clutterbuck, D *The Winning Streak Mark II* Orion, London, July 1997

outgoing CEO always remained in some capacity to act as mentor to the new CEO, until he or she no longer needed the support.

- The expectation that executives would pursue careers within a single organisation has largely vanished. Career planning has become an essential activity for the ambitious executive, providing a role for the mentor who is able to help the person think through choices and suggest new avenues to explore.
- Small business enterprises have become an almost obsessive interest for successive governments across Europe. The problem is that, as the seedcorn for tomorrow's successful giants, a great many get eaten or wither before they can take root properly. A major cause of the high failure rate is that the owner-managers are so busy growing the business that they do not grow their own abilities in tandem. As a result, they rapidly outreach their competence. Small business counsellors can help to grow the business, but it often needs a mentor to help the entrepreneur plan and manage his or her own development.

What they do

Given the complexity of roles at the top, it is not surprising that the function of the coach/mentor varies considerably. Among the most common roles are being a sounding board, a critical friend, a counsellor, career adviser, network developer, or simply someone to listen. The behaviours range from the relatively directive advising and guiding (this is what you should do) to challenging the executive's assumptions and helping them work out their own futures. The topics of discussion vary considerably, too – from specific work issues to decidedly non-work issues; from focus on current problems to exploring future career opportunities.

Three types of executive mentor

The kind of help executives choose tends to reflect their needs, as they perceive them. Common to all successful relationships at this level, however, are a strong sense of trust, a degree of mutual learning, and an openness/ willingness to say what has to be said. Says one executive of her mentor: "Sometimes I finish a session thinking, 'How dare he [say that to me]? but by the time I'm halfway down the motorway, I'm saying 'Damn it, he's right. I need to make a decision on that.'"

A useful typology of mentors is as executive coach, elder statesman and reflective mentor.

The executive coach is usually part of a short-term relationship, based on a clearly defined skills or behavioural issue for the executive concerned. Some coaches shadow the executive closely for a period, to observe what they do and provide objective feedback. Executive coaches need strong observation and communication skills, but often may not have had significant personal experience of managing at the top.

Executives tend to seek them out (or have coaches thrust upon them) when they:

- are deeply concerned about some aspect of their performance
- want to make some specific changes in behaviour
- want to acquire some specific skills.

The elder statesperson is typically a senior player who has "been there, seen it, done it," the elder statesperson gives the benefit of their experience and may act as a role model. They need good listening skills and the ability to withhold judgement and advice, until it is needed. This can be very frustrating for the person who is itching to pass on their accumulated wisdom and many of these characters spoil the role by trying to give more than is wanted. In doing so, they risk taking the ownership of the relationship away from the mentee. Elder statespersons tend also to be very well networked and able to introduce the executive to new sources of

information and influence. If the relationship works well, it often leads to an enduring friendship.

Executives tend to seek elder statespersons when they:

- want a successful role model to follow
- simply need a sounding board
- want to tap into a source of much greater experience, without using consultants (eg a CEO making a first acquisition).

Reflective mentors operate at a more intensive, holistic level than either the coach or the elder statesperson. They help executives explore their own issues, build their own insights and self-awareness and develop their own unique ways of handling how they interact with key colleagues and the business. They use current issues to examine recurrent patterns of thinking and behaviour, asking penetrating questions and stimulating the executive to take control of issues s/he has avoided. They build the executive's confidence through greater self-understanding.

Executives seek reflective mentors when they:

- are keen to maintain the pace of their learning
- recognise the need for constructive challenge, beyond what they will receive from insiders and non-executives
- want to build and follow through demanding personal learning plans
- are committed to managing their own development and owning the processes involved
- want to explore a wide range of issues as they emerge and become important to them
- want to develop a more effective mentoring style in the way they develop others

What makes an effective reflective mentor?

In general, the skill set of the reflective mentor is both broader and deeper than in other mentor styles. They need a broader knowledge of behaviour, both theoretical and practical; a stronger capability to translate other people's unstructured thoughts and feelings into clarifying visual or linguistic models; and an ability to inspire and motivate while leaving most of the talking to the mentee.

All effective executive mentors and coaches share a number of common characteristics, however. These include some level of "been there, seen it, done it" – the credibility of experience; skills in building rapport and listening; and practical processes of helping others analyse and resolve issues. They also need to be switched on to their own learning; genuinely interested in other people (without having morbid curiosity); a good all-round communicator; and, perhaps most important of all, have a strong sense of humour.

Over the next few years, we can expect to see a rapid growth of senior level mentoring in all its forms, encouraged at least in part by Government initiatives. Some companies, such as Diageo, have responded to the challenge by developing in-house resources; most others are turning to a growing range of external providers – a handful of partnerships or limited companies and a variety of sole practitioners. The issues of quality, competence and relevance are going to become increasingly prominent. A certificate in counselling is not in itself a guarantee of effectiveness as a mentor – indeed, experience shows that counsellors frequently have great difficulty breaking out of the narrow mould into the broader set of competencies required for executive mentoring. Most observers are at best luke-warm about following the counselling profession's certification path to create certified mentors, although relevant training is beginning to be available. The debate is likely to continue for some while. For the present, *caveat emptor!*

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