



Clutterbuck
Associates

COACHING AND MENTORING FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Virtually every sizeable company in the UK has either launched or re-launched an initiative in coaching or mentoring (or both) in recent years. Some have been highly successful; others much less so, fizzling out within two years or less.

The reasons for the failures are numerous, but the most common include:

- Poor clarity of objective (what is this for and why?)
- Poor clarity of role (what do coaches and mentors do?)
- Inadequate support structures.

The issues of objectives and role are intertwined and revolve around the questions: “what do you want to change in the organisation?” and “what changes does the individual learner need/want to make?”

Most of the confusion between the terms coaching and mentoring can be removed at this point. Coaching addresses specific learning needs, related to performance, typically in the current task. It is about developing skills and know-how and is best done within the team, where the tasks and issues are understood. (It doesn't have to be by the line manager – a more experienced colleague will often have more relevant knowledge to share.

Mentoring takes a longer term, broader perspective, helping the learner develop a clearer sense of career directions and broader, more intuitive skills. The mentor acts as sounding board, counsellor and advisor, as well as helping the learner build more effective networks. Inevitably, this role is best played by someone outside the line, who has a wider and different perspective.

The evidence for the effectiveness of both coaching and mentoring is very strong at individual level. Good coaches and good mentors are highly instrumental in retaining and improving talent. At a programme level, however, the evidence for the effectiveness of mentoring is much stronger than for coaching. This is at least in part a result of more attention to measuring how effective mentoring is. However, while mentors are typically volunteers who have an interest in and commitment to developing others, coaching is essentially an imposed activity in most organisations – managers are *expected* to be coaches.

Their competence at and commitment to coaching is variable at best. Simply teaching people the techniques of coaching is not enough to guarantee they will use them, let alone with enthusiasm.

The secret lies – for both coaching and mentoring – in the structure, i.e. the framework and the process. For mentoring the structure needs to promote *formality*, in the senses of:

- Having a coordinator with time allocated to the programme
- Insisting that everyone (mentors and mentees, is properly trained for their role
- Measuring progress and outcomes

and *informality*, in the sense that the relationship is:

- Allowed to develop in its own way, without undue supervision
- Customised to the individual needs of the participants (both learner and helper)
- Relaxed, friendly and very open in exploring issues of importance to the learner.

Managers who wish to develop leadership skills have a wide range of learning resources available to them. First and foremost are things they can do themselves – opportunities they can seize to experiment with different leadership styles and approaches, both inside the organisation and outside. Taking charge of a project team, joining the board of a charity, staking ownership to a management issue and its solution are all relatively easy to achieve with commitment. But how do you know how well you are doing? How can you most effectively review and assess what you have learned?

The answer lies not just with coaching and mentoring, but also with making pragmatic use of your *learning net* – the variety of people around you who you can usefully learn from. Some of them may be your direct reports (often the most honest and direct sources of feedback on leadership behaviours). Others may be more experienced peers, who you can use to a greater or lesser extent as role models, although it is important to be conscious of both their strengths and their weaknesses and to learn from observing both.

The two most significant influences in your learning net are nonetheless likely to be coaches and mentors. You will find coaching most valuable when you need direct, observed feedback from someone who is able to watch you at work and draw on their own experience to advise you. The competent coach will be able to draw on a variety of styles, from simply telling you what to do, then giving feedback on how you performed, through demonstrating, suggesting alternatives, to helping you work out for yourself what to do and what the results were. An effective coach is therefore likely to be someone who understands the tasks or skills you want to improve in, has the time, opportunity and patience to work with you, and has a vested interest in seeing you succeed.

You will find mentoring most valuable when you need a dispassionate, but friendly sounding board, when you have decisions to make that go beyond your current job and when you need to take time out to reflect deeply on what you want to achieve and why. The effective mentor therefore combines, relevant personal experience with strong behavioural understanding, a deep fund of business and personal wisdom, and the ability to help you develop the insights from which you can define and commit to your own solutions. They may also be a role model – someone who you can use as a benchmark for your own ambitions. The mentor usually gains his or her reward partly from the satisfaction in seeing someone else grow and partly from the learning that they acquire from the mentoring dialogue – mutual learning is a clear sign of a successful relationship.

Finding the right mentor or coach for you is not always easy, especially in organisations undergoing major cultural change. The few obvious candidates rapidly become oversubscribed. Having a formal process to help people find and select from a panel of mentors helps, but experience suggests that those managers, who are clearest about what kind of coach or mentor they want and why, are likely to have more developmental relationships with more successful outcomes. In short, the more proactive you are in seeking and using a mentor, the more value you will achieve from doing so.

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