

CORNERSTONE CONSULTING

**Mentoring Matters:
Briefings for Business Leaders**

**Topic:
Coaches Versus Mentors**

QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES – IF ANY – BETWEEN A “COACH”/”COACHING” AND A “MENTOR”/”MENTORING”?

This is a question that is asked quite frequently in today’s business climate. When this question was asked only a few years ago, the answer was much more clear and defined, because there were fewer *professional coaches*, less performance emphasis and pressure on a manager to *coach* his/her employees and fewer developmental programs to teach individuals how to implement the skill/competency of *coaching*. Add to this, very tight economic conditions in which *professional coaches* were a luxury that an organization could not afford and training and development in such a *soft skill/competency* as coaching was just not in the budget.

Before we begin, it is important to make the distinction between managers/supervisors that perform the skill/competency of “coaching” and “coach” their direct reports and professional coaches. It is also important to understand that because organizations are at different levels of development and there are many varied interpretations and of this terminology and resulting behaviors expressing “performance” of this terminology, not all elements apply to every organization, every manager or supervisor, every “coach”, or every Mentor.

Let’s start with the concept of the *professional coach*. Within the “organizational” context, this was an individual that was brought in, usually only for individuals at a more senior level within the organization. It was considered a *perk* or it was specifically focused on addressing a performance issue or preparing someone for a specific role from a succession planning scope. The “coach” in this case was usually an outside professional that was skilled and trained in this area and based on the level of the individual within the organization and/or the performance issue involved, these coaches were well worth the investment.

When profiling the skills/competencies that a manager or supervisor needed “coaching” was one of the skills/competencies that always made the “list”. But in reality there was little developmental investment or performance emphasis on this specific skill/competency. Many times the term “feedback” and “coaching” were used synonymously. A common phrase was, “It is important to provide feedback to the individuals that report to you – you need to coach them.” It was as if you gave them “feedback” you were “coaching” them.

It is easy to agree that giving feedback is a vital part of coaching, but the single act of “giving feedback” is not the only element of coaching.

As economic conditions have improved, training and development budgets have increased, and organizations are beginning to realize that management skills/competencies and those *soft skills/competencies* such as “coaching” are just as important and can be measured just as easily as the technical or operational skills/competencies, there is much more of a focus on “coaching” and ensuring that a manager “coaches” his/her employees.

But even with this new emphasis, development and actual implementation of this skill/competency within organizations is still widely varied. Those organizations that valued the development of these types of skills/competencies previously are well ahead of the game, while many, many organizations are still struggling with the dilemma of “theory” versus “practice” when deciding whether to target development and reward performance based on leadership, managerial and soft skill/competency focuses or technical and operational focuses.

As we look within organizations it is clear that there are some managers that do “coach”, but “coaches” do not necessarily manage.

Traditionally the term “Mentor” or “mentoring” was automatically associated with the *soft* side of development. The long-established focus was solely on “upward” mobility and that of career enhancing/career pathing. Historically, individuals thought mentoring just sort of “happened” and having a Mentor was vital for many individuals if their desire was to advance to the most senior levels within the organization. In addition, many times an individual’s Mentor was that special “sounding board” or “confidant” that an individual went to for those issues that he/she didn’t feel could be discussed with his/her manager, supervisor or anyone with whom there was a reporting relationship.

The new focus of “mentoring” within an organization is with an emphasis on positioning such an initiative as part of the strategic business plan and creating specific processes to ensure success.

More and more surveyed organizations and executives are concluding that without some guidance there is “nothing surefire about finding a suitable Mentor”, or “ensuring the success of a mentoring relationship or a Mentoring Process” without a well thought out design or plan.

The role of a Mentor is now much more expanded to not only help sponsor and guide an individual’s career path and be a confidant, but to provide assistance and teaching in a specific skill/competency or knowledge area in a focused, planned and deliberate format. The historical definition of a Mentor focused solely on age, in some cases gender, job grade level and/or seniority within the organization. In addition, it was assumed that if individuals were *good* at what they *did* they would be good Mentors, Not so.

The new criteria that defines a Mentor has very little to do with this historical profile. A Mentor in the present context, needs to not only have the skill, knowledge, expertise, or experience in a given area, but must also be willing to share that skill, knowledge, expertise, or experience with another and have the skills/competencies to do so. Such skills/competencies as listening, communication, interpersonal, and yes, coaching are vital in this role of Mentor. This criteria has nothing to do with age, gender, job grade level or seniority.

So what makes the difference between a “coach”/“coaching” and a “mentor”/“mentoring”?

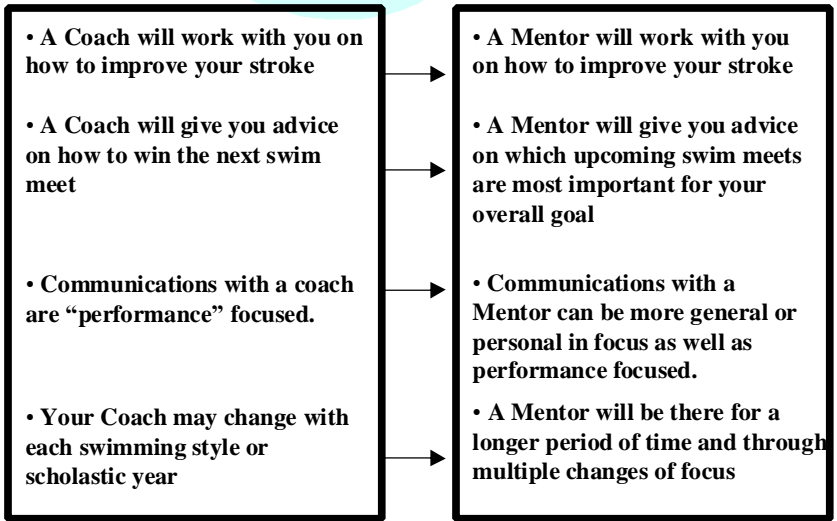
This illustration indicates some differences:

Coaches/ Coaching
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coaches seldom “mentor”• Coaches focus on a specific performance issue• Coaches teach how to complete a specific step in a process• Coaches help you decide what you want to do• A coaching relationship is normally terminated when specific performance has changed or improved.• “Coaching” is an even.

Mentors/ Mentoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentors “coach”• Mentors focus on overall development• Mentors teach how to complete the overall process• Mentors create, monitor and contribute to the plan to get there.• A mentoring relationship is usually ongoing and longer term

Let's take the skill, knowledge or area of expertise regarding swimming:

Example:



(Again, it is important to remember that in today's organizations, based on their level of development of their internal talent, not all criteria fit all situations. But in most cases these general statements begin to discern the differences between a “coach”/”coaching” and a “mentor”/”mentoring”.)

The “good news” about mentoring is that it is thousands of years old. The “bad news” about mentoring is that it is thousands of years old! Because this is true, there are many perceptions and historical mis-perceptions regarding the concept of mentoring and being a Mentor. Because of this, it is vital that there is a clear communication within an organization regarding this terminology. Whether you agree with all of the criteria listed above or not – it is the consistency and clarity of the communication that is important.

Questions or feedback - please contact us:

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