
MENTOR OR COACH?

By Dennis Heath

The context of executive coaching and mentoring in this article refers to their application from an organisational perspective, where coaching or mentoring is being used to develop middle to senior managers to a higher level of performance. The organisation may be a commercial entity or government department. **A professional Executive Coach is usually hired from outside the organisation, while a Mentor is usually an internal employee.**

In discussions with prospective clients, Coaches often find the terms "Mentor" and "Coach" used interchangeably. Although both refer to a person who is responsible for the professional development of another individual, they are quite different in scope and application. The danger is that organisations unaware of the difference may be applying one, when the other is clearly more appropriate. Making the wrong choice is unproductive and expensive in the long run.

There are fundamental differences between coaching and mentoring. A Mentor is most often senior to the person being mentored and in a different area of the company. The job of a mentor is to help the less experienced person develop his or her functional skills and to advise on the best way to achieve their work objectives within the culture and politics of the organisation. The Mentor is someone with whom to discuss ideas and problems, in order to receive advice based on his experience of handling similar situations within the organisation. The Mentor will be aware of company procedures and processes, as well as the political traps the mentee may encounter when putting forward a proposal or implementing a plan. In some respects the mentor is the "oracle" the mentee goes to for specific advice and help on the workings of the organisation and is usually an established "old hand".

On the other hand an Executive Coach is usually an external third party, who does not give specific instructions on how to navigate organisational processes and politics, nor does he provide technical advice on how to carry out a particular task. The Coach need not necessarily be familiar with the industry or the function within which the coachee is working. The Coach, like the Mentor, will act as a sounding board for ideas and tactical plans. Through skilful questioning techniques he will then challenge those ideas, cause the coachee to think more deeply about his approach to an issue and prompt new ideas as to how the plan can best be achieved, or how the idea can gain support from seniors and peers. The Coach will also work with his client on leadership behaviour and communication style to help him become more effective and influential within the organisation and externally. Throughout the coaching engagement the coachee will work on business and personal goals established at the beginning of the coaching programme aimed at achieving a higher level of performance.

Some of the key differences between coaching and mentoring lie within the nature of the relationship. Whilst in both cases sessions are confidential, there is always a feeling that a Mentor may have a personal agenda or that company politics may preclude 100% trust



between the Mentor and mentee. A professional Coach on the other hand, has an ethical duty of confidentiality towards his or her client and is uninfluenced by company politics or power plays. The Coach may also possess tools to help his client deal with lapses in confidence or self-limiting beliefs which are holding back career progression. These feelings of uncertainty or self-doubt are unlikely to surface in a relationship with an internal Mentor but may be freely expressed within a Coach/coachee relationship.

When launching a mentoring or coaching initiative, make sure the people doing the mentoring or coaching are qualified for the job. An in-house mentoring programme can be an excellent step towards creating a learning organisation, but only if the Mentors have received proper training to equip them with the requisite skills to be effective in the role. Similarly, when hiring a Coach be certain you are hiring a professionally trained Coach who complies with a code of conduct, such as the International Coach Federation, Code of Ethics. Furthermore, accreditation by the ICF is added proof that they have undertaken professional training, have a minimum amount of experience and have passed an ICF accreditation exam.