Employee mentoring and coaching: What is the difference?

by Dr. Susan G. Weinberger for Business and Legal Reports

The American writer, George Matthew Adams once observed that "many moments of personal success and fulfillment in an individual's life come about through encouragement from someone else." No doubt you can remember those who impacted your life when you were young, during the school years, involvement in community activities, at your first job and perhaps, the job you hold now.

Whether the support came informally or through a deliberate, formal program, helping you personally or professionally, there is no doubt that others can be easily identified who influenced and shaped your future. Those were or are your mentors.

Typically informal mentoring programs do not have a structure, time limit, or support from a sponsoring business or other organization. How often the mentor and protégé meet is up to them. There are no entrance requirements.

Formal mentoring programs are long-term. They have minimum requirements including selection of participants, training, support, and frequency of meetings between mentor and mentee.

Coaching and mentoring: Different goals, different methods

Establishing an internal mentoring program is not a new idea. In fact, a front page article in the Harvard Business Review in 1978 declared, "everyone who makes it has a mentor." Until recently, however, business has been less involved in establishing formal mentoring programs for employees, focusing more on internal coaching.

It is easy to get confused about the differences between coaching and mentoring. The purpose and expected outcome of each is distinctly different; although at times, some overlap exists. For example, coaching, which provides specific feedback, can be used within mentoring. But as Lorraine Stomski, senior vice president of Aon Consulting, explained, mentoring is more holistic than coaching in that it develops the whole individual through guidance, coaching and development opportunities.

An employee serving as the "coach" assists another colleague known as the protégé in order to improve their job performance. Often the purpose is to work with the protégé toward the goal of climbing the ladder of success and get ahead.

Some companies even offer reverse coaching. That is, a senior employee who has, perhaps been in the company for several decades is coached by a newer, junior employee in areas such as computers and advanced technology. Research informs that these kinds of formal coaching efforts improve career success and employee morale and retention.

Mentoring, on the other hand, is far more personal and friendship-based, offering non-judgmental support as a positive role model and focusing on a mentee's longer term personal development. The mentor makes suggestions. The relationship is neither formally evaluated nor connected to job advancement but rather to personal improvement.

According to Lois J. Zachary, President of Leadership Development Services in Phoenix, "The mentee or protégé has gone from being a passive learner — where the mentoring is done to you as you sit at the foot of the master — to an active learner who directs the process. It's much more collaborative now; there is more precision and structure."

Many companies do not choose between implementing a coaching or mentoring program. They often implement both programs to meet different employee needs. When Jack Welch, former Chairman of General Electric, stated that a strong mentor/mentee relationship is the basis of forging tomorrow's leaders, I suspect that he recognized this as an outcome of both internal coaching and mentoring programs. The chart below demonstrates some of the differences between coaching and mentoring.

	COACHING	MENTORING
GOALS	Improve job performance or skills	Support and guide personal career growth
INITIATIVE	Coach directs learning	Mentee is in charge of learning
VOLUNTEERISM	Protégé agrees to accept coaching; may not be voluntary	Both mentor and mentee are volunteers
FOCUS	Immediate problems & learning opportunities	Longer term personal development
ROLE	Focus on telling with appropriate feedback	Focus on listening, behavioral role model, making suggestions and connections
DURATION	Short term needs; "as needed"	Longer term

(Source: Coaching and Mentoring – Harvard Business Essentials – 2004)

Benefits of implementing an internal mentoring program

The business community in this nation is seeking employee retention, productivity, satisfaction on the job and improved morale, leadership, pride and social responsibility. Creating corporate citizenship programs leads to competitive differentiation and stakeholder loyalty. Mentoring plays a critical role in personal combined with professional development. Mentors help their mentees over the speed bumps, providing needed support and encouragement. They offer advice, guidance, and promote enhanced self- confidence. They foster pride in the organization and boost organization communication.

Mentors and mentees work together to discover and develop the mentee's talents. The mentor offers perspective, insight, support and wisdom based on experience. The good news is that mentoring is two directional. Usually the mentor gains as much if not more rewards from

working with a mentee, including enhancing their own leadership skills, satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

A word of caution: not all employees make good mentors. Business should identify individuals to serve as mentors who are outstanding employees and set positive examples for others. These are employees who like people, are committed and willing to set aside the time to work with a mentee. They are consistent and confidential, have a superb work ethic, are patient and responsible, positive role models and have a genuine interest in developing others and sensitivity to others' needs and development, and possess excellent listening skills.

This is the first article in a series that defines and examines formal, deliberate internal mentoring programs within the business environment and their benefits. The second article will discuss how to implement such a program including adherence to quality assurance standards and the role of management to ensure successful outcomes. Finally, the third in the series will discuss another form of mentoring with different expectations and outcomes, namely external mentoring. This occurs when employees gain work release to serve as a mentor to someone in the community.

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