

# ***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***

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## **Are You *Really* Coaching and Mentoring Your People?**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

During the fall I taught an Executive MBA course on coaching and mentoring. I began the course by asking how many in the class regularly coach or mentor employees or colleagues. Of the three dozen participants, most raised their hands.

A few weeks later, as we brought the course to an end, almost none of them still made this claim. What they had called "coaching" and "mentoring," they now realized, was in fact neither. Instead, it was merely high-quality one-on-one training.

### **Returning to Precision**

Unwittingly, they had been swept along in a trend that is increasingly common in corporate life. The trend can be summarized in three statements:

- It has recently become the "in thing" to be known as a coach. People everywhere now call themselves "coaches," when in fact their actual service is more nearly consulting, training, or advising.
- This spills over into corporate life, where almost any type of employee guidance or training is now likely to be called "coaching."
- In addition, corporate jargon has blurred the distinction between coaching and mentoring, so that many organizations use the two terms interchangeably.

This lost clarity is unfortunate. Training, coaching, and mentoring are all uniquely beneficial as tools for personal development. But they differ distinctly from one another, for each one has its own strengths and limitations. By blurring these distinctions, we sacrifice precision when we talk about strategies for helping people improve.

The time has come, therefore, for leaders to develop a more precise vocabulary when they talk about mentoring and coaching. What exactly constitutes mentoring? How does it differ from coaching? And what distinguishes both of them from training?

### **Mentoring**

To answer these questions, let's start with some basic definitions. When I help companies develop internal mentoring programs, I offer this definition of mentoring:

*Mentoring is a paired relationship whose aim is to transfer wisdom and insight from someone with veteran experience (the mentor) to another person with more limited experience (the mentee) in a setting of collegial dialogue.*

Several elements of this definition beg for comment. First, notice that mentoring centers on collegial dialogue. It's not one-way communication. It's give and take, back-and-forth conversation. Thus, by definition, anything that passes as lecture or presentation is not mentoring, even though it may be very effective training.

Second, mentoring is more about imparting wisdom than about conveying information. Training, on the other hand, tends to be information-centric, not wisdom-centric.

Indeed, effective trainers at times have little or no experience using their subject-matter expertise in anything but training environments. Yet, only by practicing their know-how in real-life settings are they likely to develop subject-related wisdom to go with their subject-matter expertise.

Trainers, therefore, do not necessarily bring a body of subject-related wisdom to their work. Mentors always do. A mentor in any field must have authoritative knowledge of the field *plus* a body of wisdom derived from applying this knowledge to concrete circumstances.

## Coaching

Now let's contrast mentoring to coaching. Whereas mentoring assumes that subject-matter expertise is resident in the mentor, coaches can be very effective in businesses and industries where their subject-matter expertise is limited. Why? Because coaching assumes that the primary subject-matter expertise resides in the one being coached, not in the coach.

Coaching conversations draw out the "coachee's" knowledge and wisdom, helping him or her develop fresh insight and master new skills. I typically describe coaching this way:

*Coaching is interactive dialogue in which a skilled facilitator (the coach) uses questions, feedback, and encouragement to help a learner gain deeper self-understanding, improve effectiveness, accelerate achievement, and become fully self-directed in pursuit of personal and professional goals.*

In this definition the coach is a facilitator, not an instructor or trainer. The root meaning of "facilitator" is "one who makes it easy." The coach makes it easier for the learner to tap into his or her own deep wisdom and draw it out.

To do so, the coach relies on insightful, probing, revealing questions. The purpose of these questions is to prod the other party to think things through reflectively and to talk things through thoroughly.

Because coaching is about questioning more than about telling, we have a general rule of thumb in coaching: If you are talking more than 20% of the time, you are probably no longer coaching. You have moved over into mentoring or training.

But why such emphasis on questions? Because coaching is about furthering self-discovery. Coaching presumes that when people discover something for themselves, they take ownership of it more quickly and internalize it more fully. In coaching, therefore, our objective is to maximize the learner's self-discovery.

### **Putting It All Together**

The truth is, most coaching conversations are not purely 100% coaching. They commonly make little forays into mentoring or training.

For example, as a coach I may see that the management theory from a recent book would enlighten the current coaching session. Since my counterpart has not read the book, I may take a few moments to offer a mini-training on the book's most salient points. But I then return immediately to coaching by asking something like this: "How would you apply the book's theory to solving the problem we've been discussing?"

In a similar way, mentoring conversations may occasionally venture into coaching. And trainers may have elements of mentoring and coaching in their work, too. What's important, however, is for the coach, mentor, or trainer to understand clearly whether the conversation at hand is primarily for the purpose of training, mentoring, or coaching. The methodologies for each approach are unique. And each has its own special contribution to make to the process of personal development.

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