

Using a blended style of coaching

Sue Smith, University of Derby, Derby, UK.

Email: s.smith3@derby.ac.uk

Abstract

This research focused on the coaching practices of internal coaches in a multimedia organisation. Survey questions were sent to 135 clients who had completed the ‘Coaching Programme’ since its inception. Although a pure style of coaching proved to be most effective in enabling clients to achieve their objectives, applying a blended style of coaching and mentoring achieved almost the same perception of effectiveness in achieving objectives. A blended style of coaching and counselling achieved the most highly rated blended style when applied by internal coaches; perceived to be as effective as pure coaching in terms of achieving objectives.

Key Words: Internal coaching, style, blend, mentoring, counselling.

Introduction and Background

Much has been researched and written on external coaching; less so on internal coaching and the different balances of styles used in sessions. The versatility of coaching has often lead to the confusion over its outline and although there is no one agreed definition of coaching in business, there is a common understanding (Passmore, 2010). As coaching continues to evolve it seems it has few parameters; almost any activity can be accepted by one neighbouring discipline or another as falling under the banner of ‘coaching’. In its broadest sense coaching can be perceived as an exploratory process about supporting and guiding people to realise their own goals to improve their performance or realise a resolution.

External coaches sometimes come from neighbouring disciplines such as counselling and psychotherapy and want to convert their knowledge and experience of therapeutic skills and develop appropriate coaching skills (University of Portsmouth, 2013). These diverse experiences and competencies will bring a rich holistic approach to coaching, but also bring challenges over the perception of what coaching is.

Internal coaching is a more recent form of coaching that has attracted some criticism from qualified or specialist coaches, some challenge for the internal coach (Mukherjee, 2012), and some benefits for the managers and people being coached within the organisation (St John-Brooks, 2014; Mukherjee, 2012). This form of coaching has evolved from the necessity to provide coaching to employees in the workplace (McComb, 2013) but without the justification and expense of bringing in external coaches when training and development budgets are under scrutiny. Internal coaches are often part of the Human Resource or Organisational Development departments and arguably lack the experience or qualification that specialist

coaches have (Frisch, 2005). Challenges faced by the internal coach, including confidentiality, ethical issues, and confidence in themselves and confidence from the organisation (St John-Brooks, 2014; Rock and Donde, 2008), are often much different to those faced by external coaches, but it does offer a practical alternative to external coaching.

Due to their departmental position within the organisation an internal coach may apply coaching from a repertoire of techniques available in their skill-set and are therefore not necessarily a specialist coach, rather a generalist learning and development professional. Frisch (2005) explains that the 'internal coach' has evolved from the curiosity of HR Professionals to learn about the inner workings of coaching and set appropriate expectations and standards when applied within an organisation. This may be true but internal coaching has also been drawn from the need to develop employees effectively and resourcefully whilst reducing additional costs and minimising external spend (St John-Brooks, 2014). Frisch (2005) acknowledges the benefits of applying internal coaching to provide development 'more widely and less expensively' than sourcing it from external expertise (p.23).

Almost a quarter of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) UK's 'individual' membership is conducting coaching and mentoring within their organisation (EMCC, 2013). There are some clear overlaps of definitions and skills between coaching and mentoring. This is to be expected since coaching has evolved from other person-centred helping therapies (Blakey and Day, 2013).

Coaches should be mindful of their styles whilst practising coaching. For the purposes of this paper, a 'pure' style of coaching is one that supports a specific kind of coaching, which encourages listening so that the client can get in touch with their own values and beliefs (Leadership Coaching, 2016). This style entails questioning and listening, to surface the clients' own intelligence and is not particular to internal or external coaching. A 'blended' style of coaching would describe a style which included a mixture of different styles experienced by the client throughout a session; such as coaching, mentoring and direction or instruction. One could argue that a blended style of coaching might be more acceptable from an internal coach; a known person within the business, seen as having experience and understanding of the culture of the organisation and thereby justifiably being able to share their experience as a mentor in certain areas and at appropriate times. However, including other helpful disciplines in their repertoire of style, such as counselling, could potentially risk harm to the public when coaches are untrained in such disciplines and unintentionally or otherwise attempt to treat psychological problems. Untrained coaches are found more commonly within organisations but not exclusively and therefore such blended styles of coaching can be found in coaches both internally and externally to organisations.

Misunderstanding of terminology, what the different styles and approaches are and what coaching can be used for (McComb, 2013), can be compounded if inappropriately applied when coaching a client; although a coach might defend such practices as acting in the best interest of the client's development. Such approaches should be discussed and clarified during the contracting stage of the intervention. Even in contemporary literature, the phrase 'coaching and mentoring' appears in titles with little attempt to differentiate between the activities; for

example, see ‘Coaching and Mentoring Nursing Students’, Haider (2007), ‘Coaching and Mentoring; Enhancing Education’, Berard, (2005).

Although there are some commonalities, mentoring is seen quite differently to coaching. Megginson and Clutterbuck (2010) write that mentoring ‘relates primarily to the identification and nurturing of potential for the whole person’ (4). Unlike coaching, mentoring is perceived as a relationship where the mentor is often seen as a role model who leads by example and is more senior and certainly more experienced than the person being mentored. Mentoring is perceived as a sharing of knowledge, experience and advice, sometimes by example and usually with the focus around development for future roles.

Finding a universally agreed definition of coaching is more challenging; which is possibly a reflection of its ‘flexibility, individualisation and variation of its application by professionals and practitioners’ (Smith, 2015: 27). An appropriate working definition of coaching is provided by Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck (2010) as a...

...human development process that involves structured focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee... (1)

This definition indicates an allowance for the variation in styles such as a blended technique, as long as it benefits the coachee. It also permits the use of accompanying tools such as 360⁰ feedback and similar inventories.

Although carrying the title of ‘coach’, the coach may indeed be coaching or maybe integrating a blend of different styles to achieve a client’s objectives (Minter and Thomas, 2000). Downey (2003) refers to a more instructional style as directive coaching, which he claims is less effective as it removes the opportunity for the person being coached to experience the intrinsic learning that non-directive coaching promotes. Matthews (2010) writes about why managers struggle to implement coaching more frequently, agreeing with Fournies’ (2000) and Downey’s (2003) comments that resorting back to an instructional telling style doesn’t encourage self-dependency amongst clients. A blended style of coaching is supported by Schein (2006), Hargrove (2003) and Kinlaw (1989), according to Moen and Skaalvik (2009) who embrace coaching as ‘everything acoach does to realize the coachee’s potential...’ (Moen and Skaalvik, 2009: 32). However, this account may be too vague or all-encompassing for some as it removes the parameters of coaching and allows all manner of development activities to fall under the heading. Grant, Curtayne and Burton (2009) also describe a blended approach when they adapt Kilburg’s (1996) description of what a coach does:

“... a coach (who) uses a range of cognitive and behavioural techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her professional performance and well-being and the effectiveness of the organisation” (Adapted from Kilburg, 1996 in Grant *et al.*, 2009: 396).

This description acknowledges the aspiration to improve performance through coaching and embraces a blended approach. There is opposition to a blended school of thought, those who draw a clear distinction between coaching, mentoring and other helping relationship roles; including Downey (1999), Whitmore (2002), and Flaherty (1999) according to Moen

and Skaalvik (2009). Whitmore (2003) does acknowledge however, that ‘there is no one right way to coach’ (Whitmore, 2003: 171), believing that every individual is different and therefore applying the same learning strategy to each will not be most effective. Style is considered to be the manner or behaviour that the coach takes to conduct the conversation. In reality, a coach may prefer to promote whichever style (pure or blended) best optimises the potential of the individual being developed.

The coaching experience generally tends to be for a limited period of time; the origin of the word dates back over 500 years, when to ‘coach’ someone meant to provide carriage over rough terrain, transferring them to a destination point (Cox *et al.*, 2010). If it is accepted that modern day coaching focuses on role and task achievement, once this journey is completed the function of coaching has achieved its goal. Mentoring, on the other hand, is about learning through the sharing of experiences. Such experience can continue as long as experiences are being created and is therefore a much longer term intervention (Smith, 2015). Based on this, it might be logical to conclude that a blended style of coaching (which involves mentoring) might be observed over a prolonged development intervention whereas a pure style of coaching might produce a more intense and focused intervention.

Currently a coach may focus or specialise in a multitude of areas ranging from retirement coaching, business start-up coaching, team coaching and health and wellness coaching. The approaches used throughout the practice of coaching are equally diverse and dependent on the specific development and background of the coach. As the coaching industry grows more widespread, it attracts practitioners from neighbouring disciplines who believe that their methods and approaches are highly relevant (Parsloe and Leedham, 2009). Consequently, the coaching market place is full of approaches, models and practices from coaches who are keen to represent best practice but often leading to a consumer with more choice than knowledge. The coaching profession is currently unregulated so it relies on the voluntary means of conscientious coaches, both internal and external, to continually develop their competence. Modern practices of coaching are customised to the coach, the person being coached, the context and the specific conditions (Brock, 2010). In such practices, it is not therefore uncommon to find a blend of styles applied under the title of coaching.

Methodology

This case study research was undertaken in a regionalised national multimedia organisation in England. Five learning and development professionals (the coaches), who were in full time employment within the organisation conducted the coaching in person with the recipients. Their remit was to provide learning and development services to all functions across the regional management. The programme of coaching was initially introduced in the North of the Midlands Region but was very popular and word of the intervention spread rapidly across the other regions.

The *Coaching Programme* was rather a unique situation within this organisation in that the programme was designed and developed specifically for a business need. This adaptation of coaching had not been experienced by managers at different levels in this organisation. The programme was preceded by a 360⁰ feedback instrument, specifically designed for the audience

and the series of coaching sessions were tailored to the business; it was not an off-the-shelf product. The training for the coaches in preparation for the *Coaching Programme* was delivered by an external company who was experienced in external coaching provision. Two days of training was given to the coaches, including some administrative processes for the 360⁰ feedback tool, basic coaching training and some skills practice. The duration of the Coaching Programme, including the feedback from the 360⁰ feedback instrument was approximately 9 months per client, with 6 sessions scheduled approximately every 3 weeks. The GROW model was suggested to provide a structure for the coaching sessions during the skills practice.

GROW is a mnemonic acronym used to provide a flexible structure or framework for a conversation, project or plan (Passmore, 2010). It is the most popular coaching model used by coaches in the UK, or one with at least some association or derivation of it (Palmer and Whybrow, 2008). Despite the model being a behavioural-based coaching model, used to develop competencies and remove blocks to achieve sustainable changes in business practice, few coaches recognise the behavioural based roots in the work of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner (Palmer and Whybrow, 2008).

The study did not focus on a smaller sample of a larger population within the organisation, or across multiple organisations. In this situation, the intervention was a case that was ‘studied’ in its own right, not as a sample from a population (Robson, 1999: 5). Polit and Beck define a case study as:

“...a research method involving a thorough, in-depth analysis of an individual, group, institution, or other social unit” (Polit and Beck, 2006: 496).

In research, a sample is taken to ensure that the data is retrieved is representative of a population; although it is acknowledged that no sample can guarantee total representation (Fisher, 2007). Convenience sampling is regarded as the most commonly used sampling method in qualitative research due to the convenient accessibility and proximity of the participants to the researcher. It is relatively easy to carry out convenience sampling with few rules governing how the sample should be collected but it is also the weakest and least satisfactory method (Trochim and Donnelly, 2008; Polit and Beck, 2006; Robson, 1996) and subject to many biases. It has been described as the ‘cheap and dirty’ (Robson, 1999: 141) way of doing a sample and is not regarded as strictly representative because in the convenience sample participants might be atypical of the population (Polit and Beck, 2006; Robson, 1999).

A risk assessment was conducted to ensure the protection of participants, weighing up potentially conflicting risks and benefits involved in the research period. There was no wish to detriment the research by compromising any participant under relevant legislation, for example Data Protection, Equal Opportunities, Discrimination (e.g. sex, race, religion, etc.), and Employment Rights. Participants were treated fairly and respectfully; and were not coerced into participation in the research. Participation in the research was on the basis of informed consent based on the appreciation and understanding of the facts and implications of any outcomes of the research. Debriefing sessions were available for all participants, after the data collection phase of the project, when the conclusions were presented back. It was the intention that the dignity, welfare and safety of the participants were not compromised throughout the research undertaken. Information and data collection was done so with the utmost respect for the confidentiality and privacy of materials and individuals.

The survey pilot sample size represented 15% of the total population who had been on the Coaching Programme. None of the questionnaire pilot participants were included in the main research. Including them would alert them to the questions included in the questionnaire and subsequently could potentially skew the results if they then researched the answers to questions, such as definitions, before completing the actual questionnaire. All participants were employees of the organisation as it was felt that obtaining perspectives from the same context and environment would be beneficial to the construct of the questionnaire. Subsequently, the wording of a small number of questions used in the pilot was amended for clarification before being used in the main survey to improve the quality of the response and ensure the question prompted the relevant information from the respondent.

The 135 'clients' who had received coaching were invited to complete the 41-item questionnaire on Survey Monkey. A benchmark question was used to determine how well the client perceived the objectives of the coaching session had been met. Of the 80 completed responses to the survey, 65 participants responded to this (n=65). Other data was also regarded as important and is supported by qualitative and quantitative responses (n=80).

Results

The research hypothesis sought to confirm that internal coaching had contributed to a positive impact on business outcomes. From the data collected it was found that the participants felt the coach was important to the success of the coaching session. There was evidence of positive support for the internal coach being objective, credible, confidential and independent to the department. It was also apparent that the coaching style adopted by the coach during the coaching session was a blended mix of coaching and mentoring.

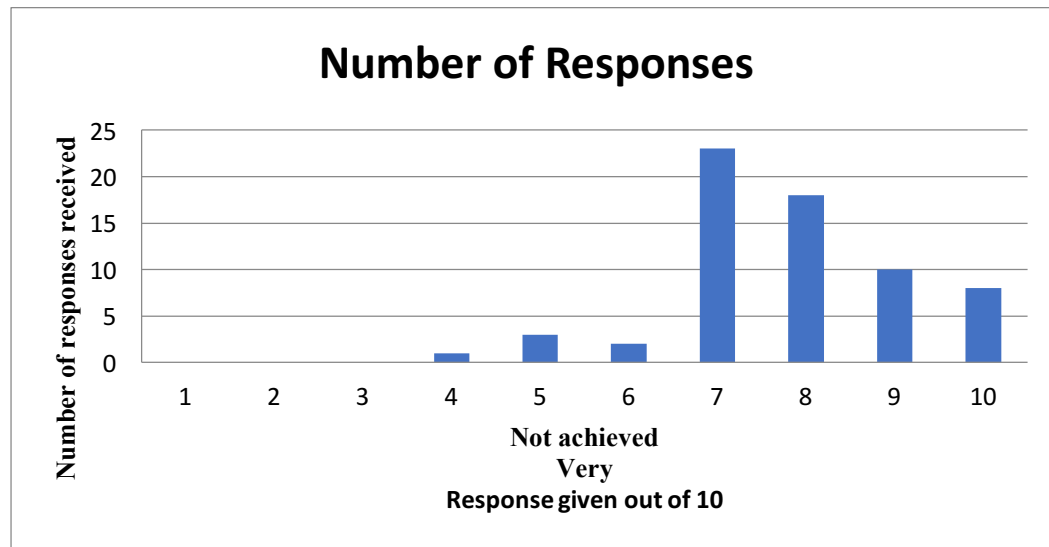
There was also an indication that some participating coaches were more effective than others. The findings demonstrated that clients felt they had successfully achieved their objectives set in the coaching; which supported the research question that internal coaching had an impact on business outcomes. It was also established that participants felt that changes in terms of business outcomes could be attributed to the internal coaching. In other words, they felt that performance had changed in a positive manner due to contributable behaviour affected and influenced through the coaching interventions.

Figure 1 (on page 6) shows the number of responses for the qualitative question in the survey measuring perceived success of the coaching. Respondents were asked to respond by rating how well they achieved their objectives out of 10. The mean is the middle point between the two extremes and is calculated as the balance point in the distribution of the responses (middle point between 4 and 10 given the number of responses for each). No responses were received for 3/10 or less and so do not appear in the graph. In Table 1 (on page 7) the mean is calculated at 7.78 and indicates that a high level of success was perceived.

The styles, such as mentoring and coaching, might be flexibly applied and blended in a combination of approaches, depending on the conversation. The survey questionnaire was designed to determine if specific items and approaches were important, such as style and

achieving business outcomes. The survey provided quantitative data and percentage ratings; as well as qualitative information from open questions.

Figure 1: How much do you feel you have achieved the objectives set?



In the survey, 63 participants (90%) perceived that a coaching style had been used and 27 participants (38.6%) perceived that a mentoring style was used. This is shown in Figure 2. Although the response percentage for a coaching style was 90, of the 70 people who responded to this question, 39 (55.7%) respondents felt that a blended style had been applied and 31 (44.3%) felt the style had been a pure application of one style. 26 (40%) respondents felt they had received a pure coaching style and 2 (3%) felt that they had received pure mentoring style during the sessions.

When asked if participants felt that they had achieved their outcomes, of those that perceived they had received a pure coaching style (26), 83.3% felt they had achieved their business outcomes. Those who had received a blended style (39) 76.9% felt they had achieved their business outcomes. The respondents were also asked, on a scale of 1-10 (1 being very little through to 10 being totally) how much they felt that they had achieved the objectives set. The outcome of this question is shown in Figure 1 (on page 6). Of those that answered 10 out of 10 (8), 50% felt they had received a pure coaching style. Two of those receiving a blended coaching style felt they did not feel that they could attribute the coaching to achieving the business outcomes. Those that answered 9 out of 10 (10) for this question all felt that the coaching had contributed to achieving the business outcomes; 60% received a blended coaching style.

Table 1: Calculating the mean

Benchmark Question: *On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being 'very little' through to 10 being 'totally') how much do you feel that you have achieved the objectives set?*

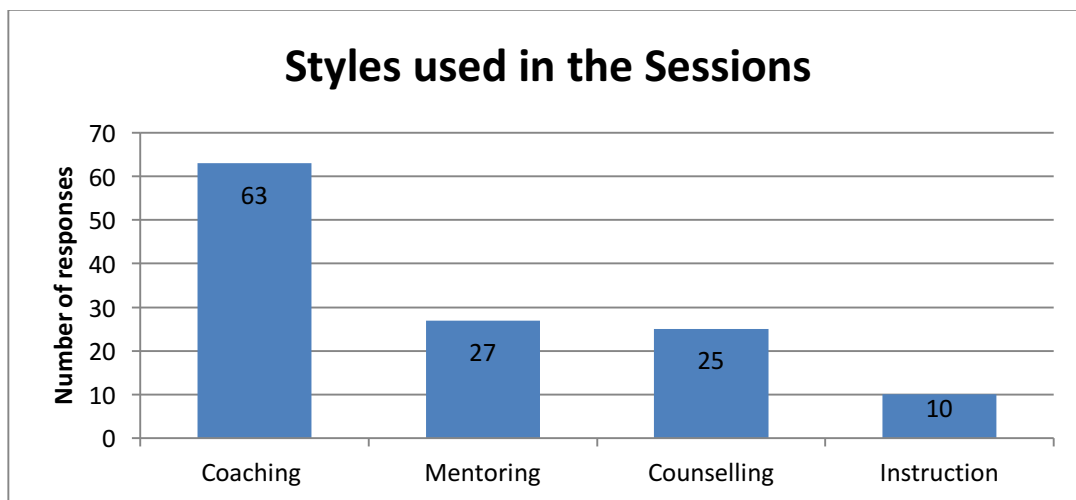
Answers to Benchmark question (out of 10)	Number of Responses	Number of Responses x Rating
X	f	Fx
4	1	4
5	3	15
6	2	12
7	23	161
8	18	144
9	10	90
10	8	80
	65	506

$$\text{Mean} = 506 / 65 = 7.78$$

The mean is calculated at 7.78 and indicates that a high level of success was perceived. Of the 11 (61%) respondents who indicated 8 out of 10 (18) for achieving the objectives set received a blended style of coaching and 8 of these 11 felt that the coaching had contributed to the achievement of the business outcomes. There were 24 respondents who replied 7 out of 10 for achieving the objectives set and of these 14 (58%) received a blended style of coaching. Of the 14, 85.7% felt that the coaching had contributed to the business outcomes.

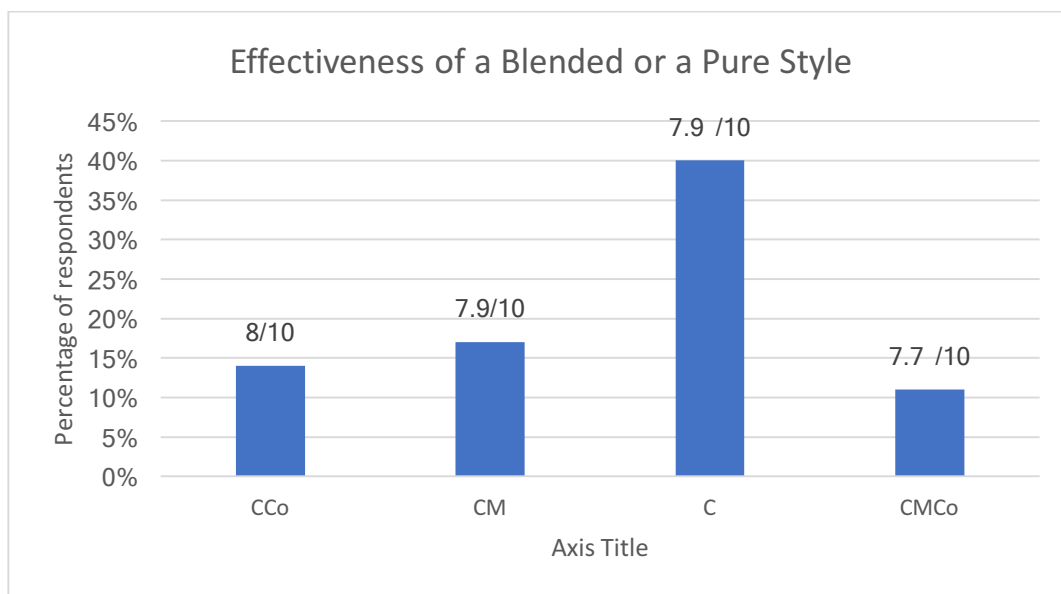
In total, those who felt they had received a blended style of coaching and rated 7 or above in achieving the objectives (33), 81.8% felt that coaching had contributed to achieving the business outcomes. Those who felt they had received a pure style of coaching and rated 7 or above in achieving the objectives (25), 92% felt that coaching had contributed to achieving the business outcomes. When reviewing the rating for achieving their objectives and the styles used, it seems that a blended style of coaching and counselling was perceived to be most effective (Figure 3 on page8). 14% of the respondents rated this combination 8/10. However, when reviewing a pure coaching style, 40% of the respondents rated this as 7.9 out of 10. This was perceived equally as effective as a blended coaching and mentoring style (7.9 out of 10) by 17% of the respondents. 11% of the respondents felt that using a blended style (coaching, mentoring and counselling) yielded a rating of 7.7 out of 10.

Figure 2: Different Styles used in the Sessions



This shows that the majority (40%) of respondents felt that pure coaching (C) enabled them to rate achieving their objectives as nearly 8/10. Using a blended style of coaching and counselling (CCo) was perceived to attract the highest rating of 8/10 but only 14% responded in this way. 17% responded to say that a blended style of coaching and mentoring (CM) enabled them to rate achieving the objectives 7.9 out of 10. Using a blended style of coaching, mentoring and counselling (CMCo) attracted a rating of just 7.7 out of 10. Although a pure coaching style is perceived to be the most effective (rated 7.9 out of 10) by a majority of people (40%), a blended style using coaching and mentoring achieved almost the same perception of effectiveness (7.9 out of 10) in achieving objectives by 17% of respondents. The most highly rated style was a blend of coaching and counselling, which achieved 8 out of 10, but was achieved by 14% of respondents.

Figure 3: Effectiveness of style



Discussion and Conclusion

This paper looks at the balance of styles that were used in coaching sessions during internal coaching in a multimedia company. In the survey, participants were asked to indicate which descriptor best described the style used throughout the coaching session. They were encouraged to ‘tick all that applied’, suggesting that multiple styles could be chosen. 90% of respondents reported that a coaching style best described the style used in the session. Mentoring received 27 responses (38.6%), indicating that some respondents felt that a blended style of coaching and mentoring had been used, combining styles.

Pure coaching was seen as most effective in enabling the coachees to achieve their objectives. A blended style of coaching and counselling achieved the most highly rated blended style when applied by internal coaches; perceived to be as effective as pure coaching in terms of achieving objectives. It is feasible that a coaching style or a blended style was used much more than represented here. The graphs represent what was described in the survey. Downey (2003) refers to directive coaching (a more instructional style), which he argues is less effective as it removes the opportunity for the person being coached to experience the intrinsic learning that non-directive coaching promotes. Fournies (2000) and Downey (2003) suggest that in practice a more instructional style is often used. This approach might be more efficient but may not be as effective from a learning and self-dependency point of view.

The survey asked participants to describe or define what they understood as coaching and mentoring. Defining coaching is clearly more difficult than defining mentoring, possibly due to its legacy and heritage. It was evident that support and guidance were high on the agenda, since these were mentioned in the majority of qualitative responses about coaching. It is also recognised that the definitions received in the surveys are the practical recognition from operational people rather than views of practising coaches who might better understand the intervention and have deeper insight into what it might look like. It is also acknowledged however, that practising coaches haven’t an ‘agreed’ working definition and given the variety of practices in the marketplace it is little wonder if the recipients of coaching are confused over what activities fall under the title of coaching.

Coaching was perceived quite differently to mentoring, however. Respondents felt that mentoring was more about learning from someone with more experience and knowledge, often in a senior position. This intervention is probably more widely recognised and acceptable as it may not have the legacy that coaching brings with it. Coaching was about being objective, achieving goals, being challenged to think differently and explore ideas.

Throughout the qualitative responses, it was evident that a blended approach could acceptably be adopted to empower a person to go into any situation and find answers or the right path independently of instruction.

Coaching gives you the opportunity to explore and understand why you have done something, what led to it happening and if in the future you could do it in a way which gave a quicker or better outcome (Participant 23.8 from the survey).

Mentoring is working alongside someone to show them how a job is done - in the first instance mentoring could start off as them shadowing you, but as the process continues the role of mentor should take on the role of coach, which enables the individual to find their own way to do things (Participant 43.9 from the survey).

Mentoring is like coaching but over a longer period of time so you learn by example (Participant 67.9 from the survey).

Evidently a blend of styles was used within the coaching sessions and this approach was perceived to be effective. A blended style of coaching can be effective when applied by internal coaches. It is suggested that a blended style is more appropriate for an internal coach, as these individuals also understand the workings from within the organisation, rather than external coaches who have the advantage of being 'detached' from the organisation and may not appreciate the culture or the business as well. Increased productivity was also mentioned in many accounts. Three testimonials are outlined below:

I was able to make a compelling case for making some design tweaks to the three newspapers. I gave a presentation to the three editors and was fully prepared for any obstacles or queries that arose during the discussion. The changes have now been implemented and that has had a positive effect not only on my team, but also on the appearance of the paper (Participant 19.14 from the survey).

It's hard this, as a lot of my objectives were based around giving staff a voice and improving my relationship with them. As part of that process, we've changed working practices and productivity has increased (Participant 7.14 from the survey).

A great example is last year I headed up a supplement which needed to involve all Sales Teams and departments ie production. We made 11k. This year I have headed up the same supp in a tougher market place but we have achieved 23k. Through my coaching sessions I have worked on my awareness of communicating and involving all departments so all deadlines were met which in turn kept business costs down and due to improved planning great amount of revenue secured (Participant 74.14 from the survey).

The research observes the different balances of styles used in coaching sessions and shows that a blended style of coaching and mentoring can be effective in achieving objectives set and in terms of achieving business outcomes. 31 respondents answered yes to whether they felt that changes in the business outcomes could be attributed to the coaching programme. Pure coaching might involve a more intense and focused intervention, whereas a blended style of coaching and mentoring might prolong the development intervention. Modern day coaching interventions will see a blend of customised styles specific and suitable to the recipient, context and situation. It is recognised that more research is required on internal coaching and the balance of styles used during such interventions. However, internal coaching is a cost effective alternative to external coaching for development and has many challenges and many benefits.

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Dr Sue Smith is a development professional, practitioner, author and coach with over 20 year's operational business experience in the UK and abroad. As the founding Director of the S²UK Limited training company, Sue is a Coach, learning and development professional, a Senior Lecturer from the University of Derby, a published author, and a graduate with a Doctorate of Education in Internal Coaching.