Coaching and mentoring - The role of experience and sector knowledge

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Abstract

This article explores the difference between executive coaching and mentoring. It argues that the boundary between the two is more blurred than is sometimes suggested. I n order to do this the article draws on a range of literature in order to examine aspects of coaching and mentoring behaviour. The paper goes on to argue that coachees value behaviours which are more often associated with mentoring than coaching, such as sector knowledge and an understanding of leadership dilemmas. It is often claimed that the mentor brings career and business knowledge, while the coach is free from this clutter and brings a more independent perspective. This article challenges this view.

Key words: Executive coaching, mentoring, coaching and mentoring behaviours, definitions

Introduction

Executive coaching is a relationship based intervention. Its focus is on the enhancement of personal performance at work through behavioural, cognitive and motivational interventions used by the coach, which provide change in the coachee.

A wide selection of definitions have been offered by writers (Kilburg, 1996; Grant 2004, Kilburg, 2004). One definition of executive coaching frequently quoted in academic writing is from the International Coaching Federation (2000). The ICF define it as:

> *…a facilitated one to one mutually designed relationship between a professional coach and a key contributor who has a powerful position in the organization. This relationship occurs in areas of business, government, not-for-profit, and educational organizations where there are multiple stakeholders and organizational sponsorship for the coach.....the coaching is contracted for the benefit of the client…the focus of the coaching is usually focused on organizational performance or development…..*

Central to the work within coaching is the creation of an effective working relationship between the coach and coachee (Jones and Spooner, 2006). The relationship between client and helper has, in counselling circles, become known as the 'therapeutic alliance'. In coaching, this is referred to elsewhere as the 'coaching partnership' (Passmore, 2006a). Without such a partnership the work in coaching cannot begin.

Alongside the development of an effective relationship there is general agreement that the coach needs to employ a series of behavioural interventions which can help the coachee to move forward. The growing research literature has begun to identify these behaviours.

This article firstly reviews the literature on coaching behaviours. Secondly it moves to review the definitions of coaching and mentoring and argues that the boundary between them is more blurred than is sometimes suggested in the literature. Thirdly, it returns to the aspect of coaching behaviour to argue that coachees also value behaviours which are more often associated with mentoring than coaching, such as an understanding of leadership dilemmas and knowledge of the sector, but when used by the coach bring added value to the session.

Core coaching behaviours

Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck (1999) have identified a list of coaching behaviours which coachees found helpful and less helpful (Table 1). These include reflecting back, being caring, and good listening.

Table 1: What works best in coaching?

From executives	From coaches
Honest, realistic, challenging feedback	Connecting personally, recognising where the
Good listening	coachee is
Good action points ideas	Good listening
Clear objectives	Reflecting
No personal agenda	Caring
Accessibility , availability	Learning
Straight feedback	Checking back
Competence, sophistication	Commitment to coachee success
Seeing a good model of effectiveness	Demonstrating integrity
Coach has seen other career paths	Openness & honesty
	Knowing the ‘unwritten rules’.
	Pushing the coachee where necessary

(From Hall, Otazo & Hollenbeck, 1999)

More recently other studies, including my own research (Passmore, 2006b) have begun to identify what behaviours are viewed by coachees as contributing towards positive outcomes. These include many of the behaviours which have been discussed within the wider coaching literature for the past decade, but have lacked the research evidence to support the claims. They include the coach using a collaborative style of working (Gonzalez, 2004; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999), the use of a discursive rather than instructive style (Gonzalez, 2004), the need for the coach to be authentic and integrity (Gonzalez, 2004; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999); the use by the coach of probing and challenging questions to encourage the coachee to reflect

(Gonzalez, 2004; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999;), for the coach to be confident on their own abilities (Jones & Spooner 2006), for the coach to be friendly without becoming a friend (Jones & Spooner, 2006; Luebbe, 2005;), for the coach to be confidential (Jones & Spooner 2006) and provide candid feedback (Luebbe, 2005). In addition coach coachees have identified value in the coach providing feedback which deepens their self awareness and focusing exclusively on their needs (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Jones & Spooner, 2006) as also being of importance.

So if the research is beginning to reveal what coaches are doing in their coaching practice, what is the literature saying about the distinction between coaching and mentoring?

Coaching and mentoring: definitions

The distinction between coaching and mentoring is a difficult one to draw. Most frequently the distinction has focused on the objective. In coaching the objective is skills development and performance enhancement. In mentoring the objective is longer term career development (Grant 2001).

In contrast to the coach, the mentor's role has been defined as:

> *"… a more experienced individual willing to share their knowledge with someone less experienced in a relationship of mutual trust. A mixture of parent and peer, the mentor's primary function is to be a transformational figure in an individual's development."* (Clutterbuck, 1991).

While over the past decade the coaching literature has exploded, mentoring still remains a poor cousin in terms of the literature coverage in relation to organisational objectives. There are fewer published studies which demonstrate the impact of mentoring on agreed outcomes, and like coaching no published random controlled trials, with reasonable group sizes to allow adequate analysis of the intervention.

A review of the wider coaching and mentoring literature suggests there has been little debate about the value of sector and business knowledge (Grant, 2004; and Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001). Writers who have commented on this area (Clutterbuck and Lane, 2004) have suggested that sector knowledge and experience are key distinctions between mentoring and coaching. It is often claimed that the mentor brings career and business knowledge, while the coach is free from this clutter and brings an independent perspective. This article challenges this view.

Coaching and mentoring compared

One way of thinking about the two interventions, their similarities and differences is through the use of a series of key dimensions, drawn from the literature. The dimensions used here are the level of formality, length of contract, outcome focus, business knowledge, training, client and supervision. These are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Contrasting Coaching & Mentoring

	Coaching	Mentoring
1. Level of formality	**More formal**: contract or ground rules set often involving a third party organisational client.	**Less formal**: agreement most typically between two parties.
2. Length of contract	**Shorter term**: typically between 4-12 meetings agreed over two to twelve months.	**Longer term**: typically unspecified number of meetings with relationships often running over 3-5 years.
3. Outcome Focus	**More performance-focused**: typically a greater focus on short term skills and job performance.	**More career-focused**: typically a concern with longer term career issues, obtaining the right experience and longer term thinking.
4. Level of business knowledge	**More generalist**: typically coaches have a strong appreciation of business or commercial realities.	**More sector knowledge**: typically mentors have detailed knowledge of organization or business sector.
5. Training	**More relationship training**: typically coaches have a background in psychology, psychotherapy or human resources, or have undertaken specialist coaching training.	**More management training**: typically mentors have a background in senior management, with limited coaching/mentoring training.
6. Client	**Dual client:** more typically a dual focus on the needs of the individual and the needs of the organisation**.**	**Single client:** more typically a single focus on the needs of the individual**.**
7. Supervision or support	**Formal**: typically the coach will be in (or be expected to be in) supervision as part of their CPD.	**Informal:** typically the mentor may have period discussions or briefings from HR, if based within an organisation.

The level of formality can vary between coaching and mentoring, however factors such as the style of the coach / mentor, and the circumstances of the assignment, will also be factors which affect this dimension. At one end of the range may be psychotherapeutic or psychodynamic trained coaches who operate their coaching relationship with strict boundaries and very limited personal disclosure. All of this gives the feel of a very formal meeting. In contrast others using a humanistic model may be more informal and personal. In mentoring too the level of formality will be strongly influenced by organisational culture (Hawkins & Smith, 2006), with the organisation setting out formal contracts.

Typically, mentoring relationships run over the medium term of 2 to 5 years (Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes & Garrett-Harris, 2006). But, drawing from the case studies illustrated by Megginson et al (2006), experiences vary widely with lengths ranging from months to decades

The outcome focus for coaching is often viewed as behavioural and skills based. In contrast mentoring is viewed as more career orientated. The reality is that there is a strong overlap, with career discussions featuring in coaching (Winum, 2005) and skills discussions featuring in mentoring (Field & Field, 2006).

In terms of training we have seen a significant growth in training over the past decade for coaching, but in more recent years this is being matched by provision for mentoring too. The Institute for Leadership and Management recognises the commonality of skills between the two and offers a combined programme. Other sector training providers such as the UK Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) have developed specific programmes for their mentors, while in other sectors, such as the National Health Service (NHS), a coaching route is offered for senior staff and is in turn supported with a development route provided by the Bath Consulting Group.

In workplace based coaching, the needs of at least two clients need to be satisfied: the client and the organisation (Hawkins and Smith, 2006), although the organisational needs have often been ignored. In mentoring it is often assumed that the relationship is less complex, but the more formal use of mentoring to develop cadre of managers suggests that both personal and organisational needs must be addressed.

Finally, a distinction may be drawn around the use of supervision. Supervision for coaches has risen on the agenda in the UK over the past two years from a position where only a few were actively speaking of it , to a point where it is now recommended good practice for coaches to use supervision to support every 35 hours of coaching (Hawkins and Schwenk, 2007). However, while the trade bodies in the UK, Association for Coaching (AC), European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and the Association of Professional and Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS), are recommending supervision, the take up of supervision by coaches still appears to be mixed.

The coach's skill set: leadership & sector knowledge

Having now established some classic differences between coaching and mentoring it is worth returning to the research literature to consider behaviours that may challenge this distinction.

Ahern (2003), who at the time was leading one of the UK's largest coaching practices, sought to build a competency model for use by executive coaches within organisation settings. The self assessment offered a range of behaviours which coaches could rate themselves on a quadrate matrix; with business competence and coaching competence the two dimensions. The framework included:

- *Ability to analyse at MBA level*
- *Know how in organisational dynamics*
- *Matching senior level talk.*

The inclusion of these elements confirms the perceived importance of business knowledge within commercial coaching organisations.

Also within the UK has been the comprehensive work on competencies undertaken by the EMCC (2005). This work involved the use of an expert panel to develop commonly agreed competencies. The results suggested a wide range of skills, but also included domain knowledge and an understanding of business and leadership.

The wider research too supports the case for coaches bringing to their coaching practice a wider set of skills than those illustrated in the first part of this paper. In particular the literature confirms the perceived value by coachees of sector and business knowledge to both enhance

credibility and also to deliver high value. Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck (1999) in addition to the classic behaviours listed above, also noted the importance of credibility, a point echoed by other writers (Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004), which could be delivered through experience and understanding of the coachees dilemmas and challenges. Also interesting is the value placed by coachees on the need for the coach to be authentic and have integrity (Gonzalez, 2004; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999), arguably more difficult if the coach is acting simply as a sounding board rather than bringing their own experience into the room. This issue of experience was echoed in my own research with directors, who noted the value they placed on their coach bringing an understanding of the issue and sharing this in the coaching session (Passmore, 2006b). Graham Alexander, originator of the GROW model, makes the same point, that he is failing to do his job if he fails to bring this experience into the room (Alexander & Passmore, forthcoming). Further, evidence considers the value provided by coaches bringing with them a rich career history (Bush, 2005; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999).

Conclusion

In this article, I have reviewed recent coaching and mentoring literature in order to shed light on the distinction between coaching and mentoring. A closer examination of the evidence suggests that the distinction between the two is more blurred than is sometimes suggested in the literature. The evidence from both the UK and USA also confirms that coachees do value a coach with experience and credibility and who draws on this to add value to their understanding of human behaviour. Thus, I would argue that coaching and mentoring are more blurred in practice and that holding an understanding of sector knowledge can help the coach, as much as it helps the mentor.

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