

A Coach, a Mentor... a What?

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Mentoring can claim a 3000 year headstart on coaching, but both are proving powerful aids to personal and organisational change and development.

Thinking of a mentor might conjure up visions of a white bearded wiseman in flowing robes and sandals or Telemachus' adviser in Homer's *Odyssey*. The image of a coach is somewhat different: someone critically observing a top athlete, stopwatch in hand.

How can either of these be of any relevance to a company on the eve of the new Millennium? Evolved from these origins, business coaching and mentoring are now widely recognised for their impact in leveraging personal and organisational development. For anyone who needs convincing, imagine having someone alongside you who is motivated solely to help you succeed; someone immune from but aware of company dynamics and politics; someone who takes time to listen and to guide you without any personal or political agenda other than the success of you and your company. There are few who would not benefit from such a relationship.

Although there are some key differences between coaching and mentoring, the edges are undoubtedly blurred. Mentoring is often referred to as the 'transfer of wisdom'. It is the process by which an individual learns from someone who has worn the same shoes and travelled the same path, someone metaphorically older and wiser. Often the mentor will work in the same organisation, as Marion Gillie, partner at Sheppard Moscow, specialists in organisational development, confirms 'The traditional definition of a mentor is usually somebody more senior in your own organisation, taking an interest and helping your career path'. Coaching, on the other hand, concerns itself with amplifying the individual's own knowledge and thought processes. It is about creating a supportive environment in which to challenge and develop critical thinking skills, ideas and behaviours.

Whilst the strength of mentoring lies in the mentor's specific knowledge and wisdom, in coaching it lies in the facilitation and development of personal qualities. The coach brings different skills and experience and offers a fresh perspective - a different viewpoint. In both cases one-to-one attention is the key. 'It has to do with focused and intensive development absolutely grounded in the business in a way that even an in-house, tailored training programme often can't deliver', says Marion Gillie. 'You can, in a one-to-one, focus on intra-personal issues to a far deeper level than in group environments which can only look at the superficial'.

Based on these definitions, most coaches and mentors agree that a good coach will also mentor and a good mentor will coach, as appropriate to the situation and the relationship. In considering the best fit, therefore, the two approaches should be regarded as synergistic and complementary, rather than mutually exclusive.

Organisations implement coaching and mentoring at all levels of a company structure, from graduate recruits to the Chairman. However, as with any programme or initiative, success is dependent ultimately on a high degree of senior level buy-in and commitment. Without such support, programmes risk death through lack of co-ordination and focus or even disruption by power groups or individuals seeking political gain.

For the Senior Executive

In employing a coach or mentor, the senior executive needs to consider a number of factors. The first key consideration is the objective - what am I hoping to achieve?

Coaching and mentoring services are often required at times of significant organisational or personal change, for instance on promotion to board level. Many new Directors face a variety of challenges, from how to behave with former peers who are now subordinates through to operating more strategically. Whether the requirement is driven by the individual or the company, the choices are numerous. For instance, is it appropriate to engage a member of the same organisation, a peer within a different company via an exchange scheme or professional mentor or coach? There are no hard and fast rules: there are benefits and drawbacks to each.

An internal mentor can be a powerful aide in providing admittance to parts of the organisation otherwise inaccessible. Their strength comes from their detailed and specific internal knowledge but this can evidently pose some issues in terms of company politics and matters of confidentiality. A mentor who comes from another organisation brings different benefits, particularly in offering alternative perspectives and insights. The downside is that mentoring relationships are not always easy to establish and maintain and can peter out if they are not formalised at the outset and managed appropriately.

The alternative is to employ a professional coach or mentor. The benefits are gained from working with an individual who is highly skilled as well as experienced in managing such relationships. Drawbacks are that an external coach may not be able to leverage opportunities for networking and inside track promotion.

The growth of coaching as a means of organisational development and training is not insignificant with many prestigious organisations opting to fund one-to-one programmes for entire senior or middle management teams. Others provide board members with a personal, external mentor or coach to facilitate improvements in key interpersonal skills such as communication and co-operation within a team environment. Using this approach, a leading china manufacturer is gaining considerable benefit in examining, understanding and evolving how the board members operate as a cohesive team.

For the senior executive, the coach is an ideal sounding board and a powerful facilitator for personal growth along with behavioural and attitudinal change. He or she is an objective partner who will support and yet challenge views, behaviours and attitudes in a constructive manner. Above all, the executive gains an ally whose primary motivation is their success.

Organisation-wide Coaching Programmes

Whilst it has been established that a fine line differentiates coaching from mentoring at senior management level, the distinctions are clearer when one examines company-wide schemes.

Coaching programmes are generally implemented at times of change or rapid growth. Results can be phenomenal. Companies developing a strong coaching culture demonstrate a strong commitment to empowering their employees to learn and grow. These companies are rewarded with greater loyalty, involvement and commitment, which in tangible terms are manifested in increased motivation, effectiveness and professionalism of both individuals and groups.

Whilst an increasing number of organisations are introducing coaching as the basis of their staff development programmes, a small number of forward-thinking companies have gone one step further. One such company is Mitel Telecom. Four years ago they replaced their hierarchical management structure with a coaching model. Mike Ford, Sales Director, explains 'We



established that the traditional hierarchy was too costly and that we needed a flatter structure. There's no right or wrong, but we felt that the only successful management style for us moving forward was coaching. It means that we share a lot more information on strategic things like business planning and new ventures with our staff early on, before final decisions have been made. Whilst this can mean more to-ing and fro-ing the result is almost always an improved idea'. The benefits have also been realised in employee attitudes. 'We have high levels of motivation and morale and when you have that you have better performance. The coach gives all the power to the people in the team. Their role is totally unselfish - they are there purely to make their people better in terms of both skills and performance. As a result, our people are able to make their own decisions and have the courage and confidence to do so - it saves me an awful lot of time!'

Whilst many organisations recognise the advantages of this approach, the realities of cost-cutting and rationalisation have limited the time individual managers can invest in their people. Introducing external coaches can be effective alternative, enabling the company to adopt the coaching model in-house gradually over a period of time with support from an experienced team of facilitators.

Coaching is designed to empower each individual to understand their potential and to identify how they can achieve it. Through developing a sound understanding of the protégé, the coach knows when to support and when to stretch, when to challenge and when to guide. Working on a one-to-one basis, coach and coachee collaborate to set and achieve key development objectives, taking into account the needs of the organisation as well as the experience, maturity, knowledge and career path of the individual. Coaching encourages the creation of goals, which can then be broken down into manageable, measurable steps. To support this, coaching is delivered on a 'little and often' basis through a combination of face-to-face sessions, telephone and email feedback and 'on-the-job' observation. A coach will require each individual to examine and adapt their approach and to seek fresh ideas for boosting performance and personal job satisfaction.

Attachmate Sales UK, part of the world's largest privately owned software company, is just one organisation which has benefited significantly from coaching and exceeded revenue targets last financial year to prove it! Fundamental to this success have been the retention, motivation and development of key staff. Ian Wells, Country Manager, believes that '[Coaches] help us develop our staff at a pace that suits the changing needs of our business - and we can bounce ideas off them whenever we want. In addition, my staff like the personal attention that coaching brings, and consequently are motivated to use their coach to challenge their approach and technique far more than they would with traditional training'.

Sue Smith, Commercial Director of Hanover Computer Systems, providers of IT solutions in the AS400 and PC arenas, points out another key benefit of employing an external coach. 'Our coach has become a member of the team. As with other outsourcing projects, the contractor has the incentive to maintain focus and enthusiasm for the job in hand - where an employee might not! Of course the ultimate goal is to have a happy, overachieving professional salesforce, which we are steadily working towards'.

Organisation-wide mentoring Schemes

Whilst coaching programmes are to do with empowerment and motivation of the individual, mentoring is concerned primarily with the transfer of key skills and with the provision of a formal structure for guidance through the company's procedures, culture and politics. Graduate mentoring schemes are one of the most common with graduates often mentored by a member of a previous year's intake. Such a mentor is able to hand-hold the new starter through their first months and may even continue to provide support for many years to follow. From guidance as



to whom to approach for specific requirements to how to complete company paperwork, the mentor is on-hand to answer questions and transfer their knowledge. Mentoring schemes are not just for new-hires though, they can be highly effective throughout the organisation.

In an age where 'a job for life' is no longer an option for either company or employee, organisations need to ensure that they retain staff as long as practical and that they manage the transfer of skills and knowledge throughout the business. Evidently the objective should be for the mentee to become as knowledgeable as the mentor. Many technology-based companies recognise the importance of mentoring and particularly peer-based 'buddy' systems to share and develop technical expertise. Interestingly, in the case of global corporations, such approaches are driven by the demands of organisational structure, such as 'follow-the-sun' worldwide help desks which require that the same level of technical support be seamlessly delivered from a number of support centres across the globe.

Implementation

It is unfortunate that coaching and mentoring relationships do not typically occur automatically. Both require careful consideration of requirements, expectations and objectives. Format, content and timescales need to be formally agreed. They are dependent on mutual respect and empathy between both parties and underpinned by a shared commitment to achieving results.

For this reason, it may be appropriate to use a third party to assist with the design and implementation of the scheme, whether it be based on a coaching or mentoring model. This could be a specialist within the HR department or one of the many organisations offering mentoring and coaching services, from the 'big players' to the independent 'one person' practices. Finding the right match is important: not only must there be rapport between the two parties but the external mentor or coach must also immerse themselves in the culture and understand the challenges facing the organisation. The internal mentor, meanwhile, must demonstrate strong and appropriate communication and interpersonal skills. If these factors are not present, programmes remain superficial and short-lived, with little opportunity for measurement.

In conclusion, both coaching and mentoring have much to commend them. Benefits may be gained from utilising different approaches across the organisation. A newly appointed MD may employ a mentor to assist him in his development into the role, he may also create an internal mentoring scheme within the R&D department and implement an external coaching programme for the sales division.

Whatever the schemes may be called, one-to-one development can be a powerful organisational and personal development tool, assisting forward-thinking companies maximise success in the new Millennium. The key is to define the aim and objective and to implement a programme designed from the outset to achieve specific measurable benefits. In terms of the original question of coaching or mentoring or both? As Marion Gillie of Sheppard Moscow emphasises 'The labels don't matter - it's the process that counts'.