

How would you define the difference between executive coaching and mentoring?

Coaching and mentoring are not new activities. Perhaps what is new is the extent to which they are being adopted within the workplace as an enabler for changing the way in which people do things at work. Organisations are after all a collection of people doing tasks, and as organisations attempt to change, so do the needs for people to change within those organisations.

So there has been this explosion of interest and growth in these two services within the business world. With it has been a corresponding growth in the number of practitioners and providers of the services. Whilst it might seem a somewhat semantic exercise to attempt to separate the two by definition, there are several good reasons for this attempt to bring clarity:

- Several national and international bodies are working to bring common standards to the practices of coaching and mentoring. So it is important to be clear, what activities the standards are relating to!
- The purchasers of services within the business world frequently look for specific outcomes. So it is important that there is a match between the requirement and service provided. Definitions serve a role here to help bring that clarity and facilitate the match.
- An important aspect for an individual coach/mentor's professional development is the clarity about what type of interventions and in which situations they are competent to work. Here too a definition will help with this process.

The two activities, whilst having their differences also have much in common. Both activities enable and support learning to happen. In fact many practitioners use the words interchangeably, coaching and mentoring is used as a broad title to encapsulate this learning process. Mentoring organisations¹ are keen to broaden their definition, often claiming that coaching is nothing more than a sub-set of mentoring. And coaching organisations, like the International Coaching Federation (ICF) define coaching broadly the other way, for example as:

“partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”

So what are the differences?

Broadly speaking, coaching is a process where the coach is not typically giving 'advice', so superficially they are not required to have any **specialist experience** within the area in which their client requires support. However, in practice it can be very difficult to ask the right questions without at least a basic knowledge in the area of support. Also initial credibility with the client is easier if there is some form of track record or experience. Undoubtedly though, the coaching skill is in questioning and listening and the coach's role to enable the individual to find answers within themselves. Some people draw a comparison with the Socratic method.

Conversely, mentors will typically have an expertise within a particular field, or on a particular journey (through life, career or role) and have a wide ranging and recognised wealth of experience within the field in which they are advising and supporting others. However, here too mentors require good influencing skills (including questioning and listening) otherwise their advice will be like dust blowing in the wind.

Many times coaching can be an intervention which is designed to assess and improve a particular area (often linked to some form of performance) and so it concentrates on specific issues, which are identified with goals with clear outcomes.

Mentoring meanwhile is more usually delivered as part of a wider development plan or perhaps on induction to a company or new role. It can therefore form part of a longer term professional development path, which

opens doors, shares experiences and widens individuals' networking systems. So it can in a sense be less 'defined' than the outcomes specified for coaching.

A coaching engagement will often be a 'time bound' relationship with a defined duration to meet the specific goal identified. Individuals will often use the same coach to support them with different issues.

Mentoring relationships can go on for a long time, seeing progress through many stages and often survive through numerous relocation and career changes.

How do these play out in the executive space?

Our hypothesis is that there is an activity in mentoring executives which is distinctive from an activity of coaching executives, and there is also an activity which could be called both coaching and mentoring.

What would executive coaching encompass, that is distinct from executive mentoring, and what do they share?

Based on our previous definition, the executive coaching process could potentially involve someone who has not previously been an executive, but who is working with an executive on improving some particular aspect of their role and perhaps something related to performance, or overall business performance. The relationship would be time bound, for example an agreed number of sessions.

So the part that is exclusively executive coaching, would relate to a part of the executive role. The executive role isn't easily split down into simple competencies and skills. However, there are some major areas which are held to be linked to performance, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, learning about the industry, and networking are but a few of the examples of fields for an executive coach.

How about our executive mentor? What is exclusively their domain? A discussion about what it is like operating in a board environment, introductions to key players in the city, the mentor sharing their experience of coping with the stresses and strains of operating at the highest level. All of these would be outside the scope of your executive coach operating solely on that activity.

The final area then is the overlap between the two: where the executive coaching and executive mentoring worlds meet. This would perhaps mean working specifically on the developmental journey of the executive. This would need to be underpinned with a good understanding of the executive and business environment as well as working with some models for individual development, also perhaps with a leadership developmental model. Many with a background or knowledge of psychology and/or counselling have therefore been drawn to this world. According to some² in this world, development is only achieved through relationship, so our executive coach/mentor needs to be able to connect real time in the relationship for growth to occur.

This would certainly be supported by the approach to leading organisations who train executive coaches. I sit on the Board of the AoEC, and that organisation's experience from training over 500 executive coaches is that to be effective as a coach you need to understand how you work, to be able to explain your own theoretical underpinnings and to demonstrate this to your peers. This in fact is the basis of their accreditation which is supported by both the ICF and the EMCC (European Council for Coaching and Mentoring).

Case study – executive mentoring

Bill is a 52 year old Finance Director. Bill has just been promoted to his new role and to the Board of his FTSE listed company. Bill's previous roles as head of management accounting, FD of one of the subsidiaries and head of internal audit have given him a range of different experiences and exposures within the company. Bill is very competent professionally, has a long track record within his company and is confident he will be

successful but his exposure to the Board and to the City has always been on the periphery or as number 2. John, Bill's 65 old year mentor has previously served on three Plcs as FD and has a breadth of experience of what being in that role means. Their conversations, since Bill has known about his promotion, have been open and frank. They are principally about helping Bill succeed in his new role. John shares his experiences, provides tips and suggestions and is always available on the phone or via email for useful snippets of advice.

Case study – executive coaching

Frank is a 42 year old CEO of a technology company. Frank's background was primarily in sales and marketing across a variety of companies in the technology sector. He is driven, intelligent and has a very impressive record of success. On his appointment, the Board, whilst agreeing him as the best choice to take the company forward, experienced a couple of minor reservations. These were identified during their reference checks and concerned his sometimes brusque attitude with other people (typically direct reports) and his somewhat limited leadership styles. Frank, to his credit accepted both criticisms and had himself identified these as topics he would like to develop. In his first session (of six agreed sessions) with Stephen, his executive coach, they identified "the use of stories as a tool for communicating within leadership" and "reacting under pressure to poor performance from subordinates" as specific coaching areas. Stephen has guided Frank towards some resources he has been aware of in these areas and Frank has committed to undertaking his own research and reading between coaching sessions. Within their session Stephen actually gives Frank direct feedback on how their interactions are together as a resource for them to both explore. Especially concerning what triggers Frank's brusque behaviour. The combination of reading, direct feedback and exploration "in the moment" improve Frank's awareness of his own style, approach and behaviours. He becomes aware of how he impacts others in a way that he has never had before in his life. This in itself provides the basis for Frank to change and increase his flexibility as a leader.

Sources

1. International Mentoring Association <http://www.mentoring-association.org/DefM&Coach.html>
2. Carl Rogers

Biography



Richard Clarke

Richard works with leaders developing a unique, creative leadership presence. He has over 20 years consultancy and coaching experience. Previously Director of PricewaterhouseCoopers; Executive Vice

President of global consultancy Extraprise; Managing Director ActionCOACH's UK SC and currently Managing Director of The Academy of Executive Coaching. Richard also has experience as a mentor for at risk teenagers.

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