

OPINION
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COACHING OR MENTORING?
 By *Tim Slapak*



Personal development is not just about knowledge and skills, it can also bring about changes in attitude and behaviour, and that requires a more specialised approach and more effort. Mentoring and coaching are two of the most effective methods for achieving this. But in sales development, ambiguities often surface about what is coaching and what is mentoring.

When negotiating development contracts, customers and suppliers often disagree on whether mentoring or coaching should be carried out, what to expect from either of them, what a mentor will do, what a coach will do, and what the differences between them actually are. Even practising coaches and mentors sometimes argue about these issues.

It isn't simple to distinguish the differences between them, because they overlap considerably. And in textbooks we sometimes come across very similar definitions of the two activities. In fact, while they are related, they are not identical.

It's important to distinguish clearly between mentoring and coaching, and choosing the right mentor/coach, and the right direction for a personal development project is also crucial.

WHAT IS COACHING?

Coaching offers a process of continuous support, helping those who are being coached to determine and achieve their own professional and personal goals. The coach's professionalism lies in dealing with clients effectively, improving their levels of competence, encouraging them to take responsibility for achieving their goals, while at the same time helping them choose the most effective ways of getting there.

It is a relationship based around mutual collaboration, and a good coach will be one that is keen on self-improvement, willing to refine their approach as necessary. It's easy enough to achieve certification – attend a coaching course, obtain a certificate and declare yourself a coach – but to be a good one you need to engage in a process of continual learning and development.

There is a difference between certification and accreditation in the coaching sector. Accreditation is a process culminating in an award, usually by a professional body, it requires CPD criteria to be fulfilled, adherence to a code of ethics, detailed references from clients, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

WHAT IS MENTORING?

The word 'mentor' can be traced back to Homer's *Odyssey*. Before setting off to fight in the Trojan War, Odysseus, King of Ithaca, entrusted his close friend and adviser, Mentor, to take care of his son

Telemachus, to be his teacher, guide, and protector. The word means pretty much the same thing today, with the mentor providing the voice of wisdom, guiding the less experienced party towards their goals through a mixture of teaching, dialogue and challenges. Mentoring is defined in textbooks as a professional relationship in which the experienced person (mentor) helps the other person (mentee) to develop specific skills and knowledge for professional and personal growth.

TO MENTOR OR TO COACH?

In the negotiation of development contracts, the decision of whether to go for mentoring or coaching can be a tricky one for customers and suppliers. David Megginson and David Clutterbuck in their book *Techniques for Coaching and Mentoring* explain how we should distinguish between specific methods for developing people. For example, the aim of improving performance skills requires a different type of development from improving attitudes or behaviours.

The mentoring process is suitable for developing specific skills and knowledge leading to professional and personal growth in a less experienced person. The mentor's role here is that of adviser, assessing how they start the process, providing them with constructive criticism, and imparting specific expertise. The coaching process on the other hand aims to develop the competence of the salesperson, give them responsibility for setting their own goals, and finding ways to achieve them. The coach does not advise, criticise or rate the person being coached. The coach does not have to be an expert in the profession of the person they are coaching.

The two disciplines may not be identical but they have overlapping traits, and one single goal – to have a positive impact on their clients.



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