

How to mentor and coach your team

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Contact: info@peopleassured.com

In this article we discuss how to mentor and coach your team, considering:

- What is mentoring and coaching?
- Who does it, when and how?
- What's the value?

Definitions:

Coach: A leader, developer, guide of the team and its individuals - someone who challenges them to grow and perform at their best. A coach provides positive support and feedback and occasional advice. The purpose of coaching is “to produce behavioral change and growth.” (Harvard Business online, 2008).

Mentor: “A trusted friend, counselor or teacher, usually a more experienced person” who shares experience and expertise (Wikipedia.org, 2009) – may work in the same field. Mentoring is a developmental relationship that accelerates learning and professional development.

What do executive coaches do?

In “The CEO’s secret weapon” (Canella, 2009) a range of executive coaches were asked what they did for clients. Here are some of the answers:

- “We help clients build careers, facilitating the internal and external change necessary to take one’s professional performance and satisfaction to the next level.
- “We help clients prepare for critical interviews and presentations or strategize about organizational politics. We focus a lot on communication.
- “I help successful leaders get even better by achieving positive, lasting changes in behavior”

When do you do it?

New-hire: A new hire is often a candidate for mentoring by a more experienced manager. Networking occurs more easily and is a possible reason that those mentored tend to do well in organizations. Pompper and Adams (2006) state that “Joining a mentor’s network and developing one’s own is central to advancement.” The mentor gets to show leadership by giving back and perhaps being refreshed about their own work.

High-potentials: Mentoring is used to help ‘high-potentials’, those deemed to have the potential to move up into leadership roles. This may involve placing the employee in a series of jobs in disparate areas of an organization, all for small periods of time, learning the organization's structure, culture, and methods.

Around promotion: In the period before or after promotion into a new role, mentoring and coaching can help the individual develop and apply the new skills required to succeed.

Major change: When an organization has undergone a major structural or process change (e.g. M&A, outsourcing) new skills may need to be readily acquired and transferred, and new relationships will need to be built.

Reverse mentoring: This occurs when the mentee has more overall experience than the mentor, but the mentor has more knowledge in a particular subject (e.g. new processes, technology).

Who does it?

Mentoring and coaching can be delivered via internal managers or external consultants or a combination of the two.

External (consultant) brings	Internal (manager) brings
A fresh perspective	In-depth knowledge of the organization and people
Strong focus on the individual	Balancing individual and team needs
Effective short-term interventions	Longer-term relationships

The decision on which approach to use depends on individual circumstances and company philosophy. Manager-mentors and coaches provide greater knowledge of the organization and its people. External (consultant) mentors and coaches provide an independent view, a confidential forum for discussion and can bring specialist expertise.

How is it done?

Make it meaningful

The conversation with your client needs to center on what is meaningful to them. At the end of each session “it’s helpful to integrate their learning with the goals they have set, confirming what action, if any, they are committed to.” (Stout Rostron, 2009).

Make it goal or 'solution' focused

Coaching is a goal (or solution)-focused approach. "The ability to elicit clear, well-defined and emotionally engaging goals is one of the most important skills for a coach to possess." (McGuinness, 2007). Developing SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) helps to provide a clear focus for all parties.

Listen (more than you talk)

Often referred to as 'active listening' to emphasize the difference between passively taking in what the other person is saying, and actively engaging with them and showing that you are giving them your undivided attention. The easiest and most genuine approach is simply to become genuinely interested in the other person and curious about what they can achieve.

Question (instead of giving advice or instructions)

Even when a coach/mentor 'knows' the answer to a question, s/he will typically ask the other person for their ideas rather than tell them. This is because one of the main aims is to facilitate another's thinking and get them to use their own creativity and initiative. If you tell someone what to do, you take away a learning opportunity, while conditioning them to rely on you.

Give constructive feedback

"Give your employees constructive feedback about their performance, rather than praise or criticism." (Brounstein, 2000). Identify the topic or issue and give specific examples of what occurred (as opposed to interpretations) in a sincere, direct manner. Make it confidential, in person and timely.

Share knowledge and experience

If you have valuable information or research to share pass it on. This should not be lecturing or suggesting you have 'the answer', but to pass on insights and stories of your experience in similar kinds of situations. You can also seek to connect your client with industry peers to share their experiences, and to exchange information on common problems.

What value does it provide?

Leadership skills development

Coaching is an excellent way to attain a certain work behavior that will improve leadership, employee accountability, teamwork, sales, communication, goal setting, and strategic planning.

Mentoring is a great way to help individuals accelerate their learning and hence increase confidence, motivation and ultimately performance.

Learn something new

Help the client learn something new that is of value, and help them relate to themselves and others at a deeper level. Listen to and understand their current issues and challenges, and begin to observe patterns of thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Address blind spots

It is difficult to observe and be objective about yourself. Coaches help their clients to uncover their blind spots. It is important for the client to gain the learning they need to address blind spots and to build their own internal capacity and competence.

A more committed team

Empowerment is a powerful motivator. When you make a genuine effort to include people in setting their own goals, making decisions and implementing their own ideas, they are likely to become more committed and focused at work.

Better performance

As a result of developing people, coaching leads to better individual and collective performance. The ongoing learning process can lead to continual (self) improvement.

Better working relationships

Coaching promotes trust and collaboration, and leads to better working relationships. It doesn't mean you become everyone's best friend, but working relationships can get easier and more enjoyable.

Summary

Mentoring and coaching are important tools to help your employees grow, develop and perform at their best. It differs from 'command and control' type management in that it involves a higher-degree of collaboration, delegating more responsibility, giving specific feedback, talking less and listening more. People who are coached and mentored will require less direction, make more decisions and be motivated to take on more responsibility.

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