Coaching v. mentoring

Joe Adams joins in the big debate

Take a look in the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* and you will see very similar entries for coaching and mentoring:

Verb to coach: "To train or instruct (a team or player)."

Verb to mentor: "To advise or train (someone, especially a younger colleague)."

The Institute of Directors uses time frames as an indication of the difference between the two disciplines: "Mentoring implies a longer, less formal and structured relationship which, nevertheless, can be extremely powerful and beneficial over the medium- to long-term."

But, for those in the know, there is a wealth of difference between coaching and mentoring, which extends far beyond age and experience or length of relationship as the defining factors.

Before exploring the specific distinction between coaching and mentoring, it is important to define what we mean by these terms – and the background to their emergence on the training and development agenda.

Growing trend

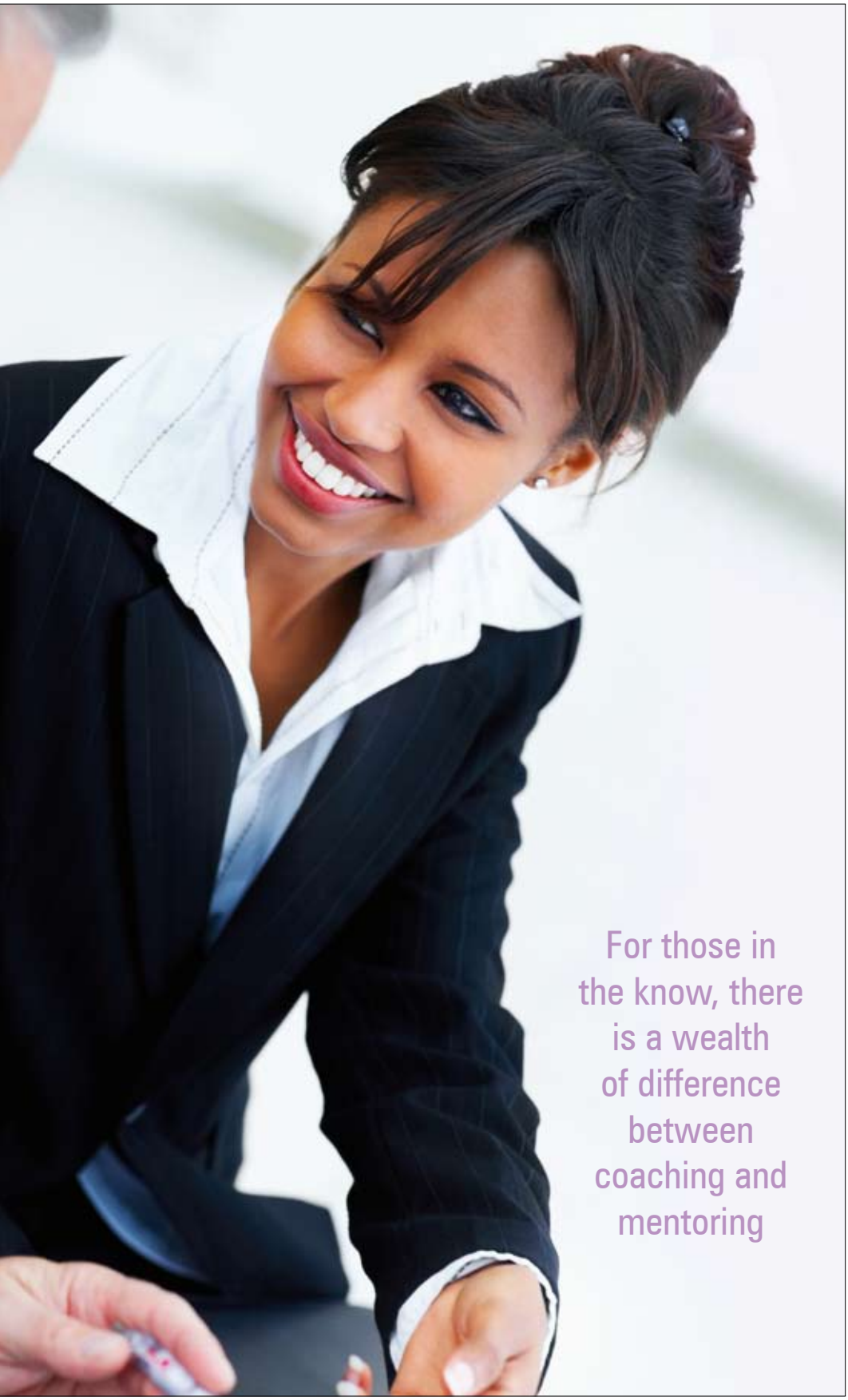
The term 'human resources' appeared about 25 years ago as an offshoot of the personnel department, at a time when the recession hit and a specific resource was required to deal with the treatment of redundancies.

As a result, HR was historically associated with the negatives rather than positives of handling a company's 'people power'. However, as HR has become established as a dedicated function that aids the growth and development of an organisation's employees, there has been a shift in perceptions and an acceptance of the significant value a good HR team and its proposed strategies can add to the business.

Coaching and mentoring has really come to the fore in the last 12 years and this surge of interest can be attributed to a number of trends. Senior executives had become converts to the benefits of training and invested heavily in training for their teams – but overlooked the blatant need to ensure they themselves were reaching their full potential by extending their own personal growth and development.

Age became acknowledged as an unacceptable barrier to success and, consequently, more rising young stars hit the corporate headlines as their entrepreneurial flair led them to achieve senior roles.

Regardless of age, it also became apparent that there is no 'handbook' to becoming a CEO, just an acceptance of the huge responsibility associated with this role – a responsibility that many felt ill-equipped to deal with simply because they did not have the 'life experience' behind them to help formulate the right strategies destined to benefit the business.



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This, combined with a recognition of the positive impact sports coaches and acting coaches could have on performance levels, led to the growth of an industry specifically geared to providing similar guidance and motivation to succeed in the business/executive arena.

The IoD states: "Coaching is taken for granted in the world of sport, where individuals and teams have a coach to provide motivation, enhance skills and refine performance. Ultimately, coaching aims to bring out the best in an individual to enable the team to work better as a whole. The same can be said of business and its leaders."

Common goals

The common goal shared by both coaching and mentoring is that the individual must demonstrate a desire to achieve personal growth through a process of self-realisation/actualisation. In the simplest terms, this means that the individual needs to get closer to knowing who he is – by improving his understanding of who he is and what he stands for, he will be better equipped to deal with situations.

The IoD defines this as: "Executive coaching services work most effectively when the individual has clarity about the issues to be addressed. These might be personal 'gremlins' perceived to obstruct performance – certain issues that are best addressed on a one-to-one basis rather than in a formal director training session – or knowledge, skills and behaviours that the individual will need in order to progress into a future role."

The process of coaching or mentoring enables an individual to come to terms with his strengths and weaknesses and to have a clearer understanding of his specific role within the business. Having a closer handle on his 'life's purpose' via on-to-one training will push him to setting goals to help him arrive at his chosen destination – in essence, candidates are encouraged →

to develop their own personal mission statement for the business.

To coach or to mentor?

The fundamental principle of coaching is that it is question-based. The coach does not need to have any specific 'sector' experience but instead needs to be suitably skilled in asking 'open' questions and avoiding closed ones.

Coaching therefore extracts all the various options available to the coachee through questioning, encouraging him to select the option he feels best fits the issue. As a result, he effectively takes ownership of the exercise because he ultimately decides upon which course of action is most appropriate.

In contrast, mentoring is solutions-based. Because the solutions to an issue are identified and presented by the mentor, it is much faster paced than coaching. The mentor is able to guide the conversation in a manner that will enable the mentee to profit from the mentor's experience in context with his issue.

Traditionally, because of the intrinsic need for the mentor to assume the role of storyteller and draw on the experiences that have shaped his corporate life to demonstrate relevance to the situation the mentee is in, it is likely that he will have the gravitas of CEO or MD status.

As mentoring has become more widely acknowledged as a highly effective people development tool, the number of 'mentors' stepping up to the role has increased. Sadly, there are many who are simply not qualified to take on such a significant challenge. There is a growing concern that candidates from an HR background who present themselves as prospective mentors – but who are unable to offer the essential 'corporate life' experience so critical to a mentor's ability to achieve results – are undermining the relevance and saliency of mentoring, since they are incapable of delivering the true benefits of a good mentor.

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It is perhaps by acknowledging that mentoring is a 'speedier' process that it is possible to understand the increasing value – and therefore appeal – of mentoring over coaching in the business world, where so frequently tangible results are required in the shortest possible time frame.

Mentoring will help the individual get quicker results but, with the right coaching, it is possible to achieve the same results. It is largely down to the CEO to decide whether a course of coaching or mentoring is the appropriate route to take to achieve the desired outcome.

Where does coaching/mentoring add most value?

While coaching and mentoring clearly has application to all levels of staffing, ranging from the new recruit to established senior players, where will an investment in coaching or mentoring reap highest rewards?

An investment in this type of training and development is most relevant from middle management up but will have most potency at the very top. Instilling added confidence, a renewed hunger for personal achievement and effectively clearing any obstacles that threaten the route to success are an absolute priority for effective leadership – and ultimately every company will allocate the majority of its leadership responsibilities to the top tier of management.

Mentors and coaches are regularly placed under increasing scrutiny to demonstrate a return on investment and no more so than in these times of economic downturn. There is an argument that says, if a business is in trouble, surely the most critical priority is to ensure that its leader is fully equipped to steer it back to corporate success.

Ultimately, whether the trainer invokes a programme of coaching or mentoring, the underlying requirement is for the individual to take time out to examine his thinking to ensure he makes the right decisions for the good of the business. Giving due consideration to the importance of deliberation and the art of examining issues to find the desirable solution is at the heart of good coaching and mentoring.

Perhaps the following words from Martin Luther King Jr best encapsulate the very essence of both disciplines: "Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions." ■

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