

Feature articles

What's happening in coaching and mentoring? And what is the difference between them?

David Clutterbuck



David Clutterbuck is a Senior Partner at Clutterbuck Associates, Burnham, UK.

In many ways, coaching and mentoring have made significant strides in the past decade, although from time to time it has seemed they have also made substantial steps backwards.

In the area of research, executive or developmental coaching is at last beginning to establish a body of empirical evidence, as studies attempt to explore what makes this particular helping environment or process unique and effective. It is obvious, when reading any of the major textbooks on the process or psychology of coaching that virtually all the evidence base comes from analogy with other disciplines, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, gestalt therapy, counseling and so on. Evidence for the effectiveness of coaching has tended to be anecdotal and far from rigorous; but now there is increasing interest from both practitioners and academics in establishing an evidence base that is truly coaching-focused and involves both qualitative and quantitative data.

In mentoring, the dominance of US quantitative studies has led research down a number of blind allies. Not only is much of this research flawed, for example by conflation of direct reporting and off-line relationships and other definitional failures, but it has focused on a model of mentoring, which itself is increasingly irrelevant. Sponsorship mentoring, in which the power and influence of the mentor is typically the driving force of the relationship, is shunned by many national and corporate cultures, in favor of developmental mentoring, which emphasizes mutuality of learning and the importance of helping mentees do things for themselves. Like developmental coaching, developmental mentoring works on the quality of the learner's thinking – giving advice and helping the learner network are secondary activities, brought into play only when the mentee lacks the experience or perception to progress through their own resources. Once again, however, we are beginning to see studies that explore developmental mentoring and a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The new research perspectives challenge received wisdom and demonstrate the dangers of wholesale extrapolation from other disciplines. For example, my colleague David Megginson and I have both been examining the role of goals in the coaching or mentoring relationship. Most training emphasises the importance of establishing clear, SMART (specific; measurable; achievable; relevant and time bound) goals at the beginning and ensuring deep commitment to them. The research shows a very different picture. With the exception of very specific, short-term task-related goals, the narrower the goal at the beginning, the less the chance of achieving it. Relationships that deliver value for the mentee or coachee have a broad sense of purpose, or wide goals, which are shaped and refocused as the relationship develops.

At the same time as we begin to clarify what makes for effective coaching and mentoring, however, the very popularity of the approach has resulted in greater confusion. Almost every related profession has participated in a land-grab, trying to stake out its own coaching territory, with definitions, rules and practices based on its own particular perspectives and interests. Terms used in one country can have a very different interpretation in another. For example, while life coaching in Australia tends to be associated with humanistic psychology, in the UK and much of Europe, it is more likely to stimulate associations with fringe medicine.

Increasing dialogue between organizations representing coaching and mentoring, stimulated in Europe by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, is beginning to break down some of these artificial barriers. It is becoming clearer that coaching and mentoring need to be defined differently in different contexts and that this is a potential strength as much as a current weakness. There are, of course, still many dogmatic statements about the distinctions between coaching and mentoring (I and my colleagues have not been immune to this in the past either!), but it is increasingly accepted that both coaching and mentoring may, in specific contexts:

- be relatively directive or non-directive;
- require and draw upon the helper's experience;
- be of long or short duration;
- involve giving advice;
- work with goals set by the learner or for the learner;
- deal with significant transitions the learner wishes to make; and
- address broad personal growth ambitions.

If there is a generic difference (please note the if), it is that coaching in most applications addresses performance in some aspect of an individual's work or life; while mentoring is more often associated with much broader, holistic development and with career progress. This does not mean that we should ignore the differences. On the contrary, clarifying them in the context of a particular program or relationship is fundamental, in my view, to achieving mutual commitment to the chosen process.

Other encouraging signs of maturation within coaching and mentoring are the expansion of supervision and the increased expectations of coach competence by organizational clients. Supervision is required of all active EMCC members and by most other professional coaching associations. It is, in my observation, often carried out extremely poorly, especially in some organizations providing pools of executive coaches; or it has relied on supervisors from other professions, who may or may not have a deep insight into the different demands of the coaching or mentoring conversation and relationship. However, there are now a number of academically accredited courses to develop supervisors specifically for coaching and mentoring. As more coaches and mentors – both professional and line managers using these approaches in their relationships within organizations – become exposed to effective supervision, it should have a substantial and positive effect on the quality of coaching delivered.

The wider availability of trained supervisors is well-timed. Major employer organizations have registered increasing concern and frustration with the variable quality of coaching offered. In facilitating assessment centers for selecting coach pools, it has been depressing to observe how many candidates expect to work at senior levels with only minimal qualifications and a

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near-complete lack of CPD. One of the particular weaknesses is having only a narrow portfolio of responses or techniques, with which to address the client's issues; another is a lack of basic psychological understanding necessary to manage and work within boundaries.

Within mentoring, program quality is an issue. In a recent survey, for example, we found a strong desire among program managers for opportunities to benchmark the design and support of mentoring initiatives and systems.

In the coming years, I expect to see a great deal more research that gives a stronger theoretical underpinning and body of good practice for both developmental coaching and developmental mentoring. There will almost certainly be some merging between professional bodies in the field and greater cooperation between them in general as the uniqueness of different perspectives is recognized and accepted. The trend to ensure that all managers have coaching and mentoring skills is likely to accelerate, with some of those managers going on to acquire higher levels of competence and hence providing internal support for less experienced coaches and mentors. Poor quality coaching will become increasingly marginalized, but will still exist; however, greater awareness by organizational clients as to what to look for may discourage entry into the field by those, who are not prepared to commit to considerable personal development for themselves.

In short, we have a long way to go before coaching and mentoring consolidate as well-established developmental methods; but we are also a long way along the road.

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Corresponding author

David Clutterbuck can be contacted at: david@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk

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