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Coaching and mentoring

Learn how to use coaching and mentoring as part of an organisation's overall learning and development strategy

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For organisations looking to develop their employees, coaching and mentoring can be effective techniques. Indeed, coaching is growing in popularity, with many employers using this development technique to enhance the skills, knowledge and performance of their employees around specific skills and goals.

This factsheet offers a definition of coaching and mentoring, distinguishing between the two techniques and emphasising the need to link with overall learning and development strategies. It looks at those typically responsible for coaching, both internal and external to the organisation, and how to develop a coaching culture. Deciding when coaching is the best development intervention is key to harnessing its potential. Lastly, the factsheet considers the central role of line managers, HR and L&D practitioners in managing coaching and mentoring activities.

CIPD viewpoint

The deployment of coaching and mentoring arrangements is now embedded among employers as a widespread development tool and performance management technique. Indeed the flexibility and, when delivered optimally, relatively low cost of these techniques makes them a particularly appropriate learning intervention for difficult or uncertain economic times.

However, though now maturing as a routine aspect of management and learning and development, there's still a lack of understanding about how best to use coaching and mentoring and in which specific situations such arrangements will be most effective. It's important that the HR and L&D function understands when each type of arrangement is appropriate and makes sure that all parties are fully equipped for their role in mentoring or coaching. The importance of developing appropriate skills among mentors and coaches is crucial in this respect. Attempts to assess and position the value of such arrangements may be hindered by a lack of clear evaluation techniques so it's important to use effective methods to evaluate coaching or mentoring impact.

What are coaching and mentoring?

Coaching and mentoring are development techniques based on the use of one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual's skills, knowledge or work performance.

It's possible to draw distinctions between coaching and mentoring although in practice the two terms are often used interchangeably. While the focus of this factsheet is on coaching, much of also applies to mentoring.

What is coaching?

Coaching targets high performance and improvement at work and usually focuses on specific skills and goals, although it may also have an impact on an individual's personal attributes such as social interaction or confidence. The process typically lasts for a relatively short defined period of time, or forms the basis of an on-going management style.

Although there's a lack of agreement among coaching professionals about precise definitions, there are some generally agreed characteristics of coaching in organisations:

- It's essentially a non-directive form of development, though this isn't a hard and fast rule.
- It focuses on improving performance and developing individuals' skills.
- Personal issues may be discussed but the emphasis is on performance at work.
- Coaching activities have both organisational and individual goals.
- It provides people with feedback on both their strengths and their weaknesses.
- It's a skilled activity, which should be delivered by people who are trained to do so. This can be line managers and others trained in basic coaching skills.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring involves the use of the same models and skills of questioning, listening, clarifying and reframing associated with coaching.

Traditionally, however, mentoring in the workplace has tended to describe a relationship in which a more experienced colleague uses his or her greater knowledge and understanding of the work or workplace to support the development of a more junior or inexperienced member of staff.

One key distinction is that mentoring relationships tend to be longer term than coaching arrangements. In a succession planning scenario, for example, a regional finance director might be mentored by a group level counterpart over a lengthy period to develop a sound understanding of dealing with the boardroom, presenting to analysts and challenging departmental budgets, all in a supportive environment.

Mentoring relationships work best when they move beyond the directive approach of a senior colleague 'telling it how it is', to one where both learn from each other. An effective mentoring relationship is a learning opportunity for both parties. This is particularly productive when used to encourage inclusive working practices and equal opportunities, for example where a senior female or ethnic minority leader mentors a more junior colleague from a similar background. Reverse mentoring (where a more junior colleague mentors a senior leader) can also be effective in encouraging sharing and learning across generations and/or between role levels.

More information on the use of mentoring to develop individuals for key or leadership positions can be found in our [succession planning factsheet](#) and in our report on participants' perceptions of talent management programmes [The talent perspective](#).

CIPD members can make use of their mentoring skills in helping young job seekers into work through our [Steps Ahead Mentoring](#) campaign. Our research published in [Volunteering to learn: employee development through community action](#) also demonstrates that such schemes and other volunteering opportunities can help build coaching and mentoring skills.

Distinction with counselling

It can also be difficult to draw a clear distinction between the concepts of coaching or mentoring and that of counselling, not least because many of the theoretical underpinnings of coaching are drawn from models associated with counselling.

Prevalence of coaching

Coaching has become an increasingly popular tool for supporting employee development and it's clear from our research report [L&D: Evolving roles, enhancing skills](#) that coaching is seen as an increasing focus for organisational learning.

The main aims of workplace coaching are:

- to assist performance management
- to prepare and support people in leadership roles
- to support learning and development.

Although coaching is now widespread among employers, there are continuing issues about how best to manage and deliver coaching arrangements in an organisational setting. These include confusion over exactly what coaching involves, how best to manage the stakeholders in the process, when coaching is (or is not) an appropriate intervention and how to work effectively with a complex and fragmented external coaching industry. While some companies hire external coaches, particularly when coaching those in very senior management or leadership positions, line managers are often expected to operate internally in a coaching capacity in the workplace. Peer coaching, particularly by those with a known specialism is also becoming more common.

Developing a coaching culture

The issue of coaching and culture is addressed in depth in our study [Developing coaching capability in organisations](#). It found that the implementation of coaching tends to take distinct phases in organisations starting with the initial phase through to the development of critical mass and a period of self-sustaining growth known as the tipping point.

These phases of coaching are all driven by the organisational context, with key issues including:

- What is the business strategy?
- How does the company/ organisation position itself?
- What priorities does the organisation have?
- Who supports coaching and mentoring?

Who delivers coaching in organisations?

Coaching services may be delivered by external coaches or by full- or part-time internal coaches who may be line managers or members of the HR or L&D department.

The findings from our 2015 [Learning and development survey](#) illustrate that line managers are most likely to take the main responsibility for delivering coaching, followed by other internal coaches. Coaching is less frequently directly delivered by external coaches although proportions using external practitioners are higher among smaller companies.

It's worth noting that external parties often play a consultancy role - with a majority of employers in our 2011 research into the state-of-play in coaching reporting that external coaches and consultants are used in the design and development of coaching programmes - as well as often providing a coaching service to executives. Find the full details in our report [The coaching climate](#).

Effectiveness of line managers as coaches

In some organisations coaching is now used as a day-to-day management tool, embedded into one-to-one meetings and performance conversations. An issue that is often raised is how effectively managers can coach their own staff, given the power relationship and the obvious need for some distance and impartiality in the coaching relationship.

Our [Coaching at the sharp end](#) report looks in more detail at the role of line managers in coaching at work and how they can undertake this role effectively.

Coaching supervision and support

Coaching can be a challenging activity for both internal and external coaches and those involved in coaching need structured opportunities to reflect on their practice, which may be in one to one or group sessions. Such opportunities can provide support and help coaches continuously to develop their skills, while they can also act as an important quality assurance activity for organisations and a source of organisational learning about issues addressed in coaching sessions.

Where a combination of coaching responsibilities exist, it can be helpful if internal and external coaches share supervision arrangements and have opportunities to discuss coaching generally. This enables external coaches to attain a better understanding of the organisation and to share their perspectives on what is happening within the organisation.

It is also important to establish guidelines on confidentiality and information flow early on to develop trust between the individual and coach as well as other stakeholders (for example, managers and/or the HR function).

Coaching as a business partner skill

Increasingly [HR and L&D business partners](#) are expected to demonstrate coaching capability. This particularly relates to the ability to coach business leaders to help them identify and solve particularly business challenges.

When is coaching the best development intervention?

It is important to consider how coaching is linked with overall learning and development strategies. Among respondents to our [Learning and development survey](#), coaching is seen as one of the most effective approaches, as are 'in house development programmes' which usually include a large coaching element.

However, coaching is just one of a range of interventions that organisations can use to meet identified learning and development needs. Its merits should be considered alongside other types of development interventions, such as training courses or on-the-job training. Employee preferences should also be kept in mind. There is a danger that coaching can be seen as a solution for all kinds of development needs, whereas it should only be used when it is clearly seen as the best way of helping an individual learn and develop.

Some examples of situations where coaching is a suitable development tool include:

- helping competent technical experts develop better interpersonal or managerial skills
- developing an individual's potential and providing career support
- developing a more strategic perspective after a promotion to a more senior role
- handling conflict situations so that they are resolved effectively.

It's also important to remember that certain individuals may not respond well to coaching. This may be because their developmental needs are best dealt with by [another type of intervention](#), or it may be because their attitude may interfere with the effectiveness of coaching. For example, coaching may not be an appropriate intervention if the individual is resistant to coaching or lacks self-insight. So before coaching commences, organisations need to assess an individual's 'readiness'.

Coaching isn't a universal panacea. Our report [Coaching: the evidence base](#) explains how coaching can sometimes be used without a great deal of thought or reflection. We suggest that coaching can often be used like 'organisational aspirin' as a universal cure-all solution. The report explains how by being evidence-based, coaching can be more effective for both individuals and organisations.

The role of HR and L&D in managing coaching activities

HR and L&D departments have a central role to play in designing and managing coaching and mentoring within an organisation. The quality of coaching and the results it delivers depend on choosing appropriate coaches (line managers, other internal coaches or external consultants), managing relationships and evaluating success.

HR and L&D practitioners need to understand when coaching and mentoring are appropriate and effective interventions in relation to other options. They also need to be clear about the different types of coaching and diagnostic tools/models and when each is appropriate. They should understand how to select appropriately qualified external coaches and mentors where required and match consultants to both the organisational culture and to the needs of particular individuals.

Finally, HR and L&D practitioners often hold the responsibility for setting up contractual arrangements with external parties, as well as developing mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching activities.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[The Coaching and Mentoring Network](#)

[European Mentoring and Coaching Council](#)

Books

BIRD, J. and GORNALL, S. (2015) *The art of coaching: a handbook of tips and tools*. London: Routledge.

BRANN, A. (2014) *Neuroscience for coaches*. London: Kogan Page.

CLUTTERBUCK, D. (2014) *Everyone needs a mentor: fostering talent in your organisation*. 5th ed. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

HAWKINS, P. (2012) *Creating a coaching culture: developing a coaching strategy for your organization*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

JONES, G. and GORELL, R. (2015) *50 top tools for coaching*. 3rd ed. London: Kogan Page.

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Journals

DUNNETT, R. (2012) Mentoring matters. *Director*. Vol 65, No 6, February. pp50-53.

HABIG, J. and PLESSIER, F. (2014) Measuring the impact. *Training Journal*. March. pp64-69.

MARRIS, B. (2012) Leaders - when are you coaching, mentoring or consulting? *Human Resources (New Zealand)*. Vol 17, No 4, October/November. pp12-13.

MURPHY, W.M. (2012) Reverse mentoring at work: fostering cross-generational learning and developing millennial leaders. *Human Resource Management*. Vol 51, No 4, July/August. pp549-574.

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This factsheet was last updated by [Andy Lancaster](#), CIPD's Head of Learning & Development.

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