**What Is Coaching and What is Mentoring:**

**Seven Roles in Organizational Settings**

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The concepts of coaching and mentoring are often overlapping and there are many disagreements about what constitutes coaching and mentoring—especially when coaching and mentoring are delivered in an organizational setting. Considerable time can be taken (and perhaps wasted) debating over definitions of coaching and mentoring. I propose that another approach might be taken—that of determining which of seven distinction roles are served by coaching and mentoring in a specific organization.

I offer the following exercise as a catalyst for personal reflection as a mentor or coach or as someone leading a coaching or mentoring program inside an organization. This exercise can also serve as a catalyst for group discussion among members of an organizational planning team for mentoring and/or coaching serves. The outcomes of this personal reflection or group deliberation as much less important that the process itself—generating considerations regarding the nature and purposes of specific mentoring and coaching strategies and functions.

**Instructions**

Clearly, there is no one right way to do either coaching or mentoring in organizations. Which of the following seven roles is being offered by coaches and/or mentors in your organization (or as a mentor or coach in which of these seven roles are you most often serving)? Which of these roles would you consider to be coaching? Which of these roles would you consider to be mentoring? And which of these roles could be either coaching or mentoring depending on the specific context.

1. Wise Counselor: the coach/mentor possesses substantial wisdom, experience and/or expertise in an area where the client/protégé faces new challenges—either because the client/protégé is beginning a new job, has been assigned a new set of responsibilities, or wishes to significantly “upgrade” their current level of knowledge or skills in this particular area. Typically, the wise counselor offers some specific advice to the client/protégé and may even do some teaching or training; however, there are several distinctive features about this form of coaching/mentoring which makes it something other than just teaching, training or advice giving. The role of wise counselor as mentor or coach is unique in that the coach/mentor focuses on the specific needs and interests of the client/protégé. The coach/mentor will often follow up on the advice or instruction that has been offered to see if it has been successful employed and if it needs to be modified or extended, given the application of this training, teaching or advice in a real-time setting. The role of wise counselor as coach or mentor also is distinctive, in that the coaching engagement or mentorship is sustained beyond one specific challenge. Whereas the seventh role (Information Transfer) is short term, the role of the wise counselor is typically one of assisting a client/protégé to become self-sufficient and an ongoing learner who at some point “out-grows” the need for a coach or mentor.
2. Empathic Listener: as in the case of the wise counselor, the empathic listener typically possesses substantial wisdom, experience and/or expertise in an area where the client/protégé faces new challenges; however, unlike the wise counselor, the empathic listener typically does not offer advice, teaching or training, but rather encourages the client/protégé to find his/her own solutions to the problems being faced or to find his/her own courage in meeting these challenges. Because the coach/mentor has faced similar challenges himself/herself, the coach/mentor can be empathic—which is something more than just nodding one’s head and showing emotional concern for the client/protégé. This empathy is based on a full understanding of and appreciation for the challenge, and is often accompanied by a full description of the challenge by the coach/mentor. The coach/mentor often articulates the emotions that are appropriate in facing this challenge—emotions such as fear, apprehension, confusion, and even excitement. As in the case of the Wise Counselor, this type of coaching engagement or mentorship is usually long term; yet, it is a relationship that should not be needed forever. The client/protégé gains enough self-confidence and experiences a sufficient number of successes that he/she is no longer in need of this empathic listener.
3. Defending Ally: in the game of American football there is a distinctive role played by one or two of the men situated on the “front line” (they are called “guards”). One of the functions served by these men if they are both fast and strong is to run in front of players who are carrying the football, and to block or even knock over the opponent who is trying to tackle the ball carrier. This person is called the “pulling guard.” A similar role is often played by a coach/mentor. This person protects his/her client/protégé when this person is seeking to advance a specific project, introduce a new idea, or simply begin a new job or new project. As a defending ally, the coach/mentor may offer advice or do some teaching or training (like the Wise Counselor); however, the defending ally usually does something more. He/she may join the mentor/protégé at critical meetings, speak on behalf of the client/protégé where appropriate, or at the very least make a few phone calls to round up support or at least appreciation for the client/protégé’s initiative. As in the case of the other forms of coaching/mentoring, the role of defending ally should be bounded. The client/protégé can eventually run forward without a defender, learning how to avoid or successfully confront organizational challenges without the assistance of a coach/mentor.
4. Big-Thinking Inspirer: serving in this role, the coach/mentor helps the client/protégé expand his/her horizons and aspirations; the coach/mentor not only helps to articulate a broader vision, but also helps his/her client/protégé believe more fully in his/her ability to achieve more ambitious goals related to a specific project or even to a broader life plan. The big-thinking inspirer may encourage the client/protégé to “follow your bliss” or “dream the impossible dream.” Typically, as in the case of most other coaching or mentorship roles, the big-thinking inspirer bases his/her optimism and encouragement on real-life experiences—so that the dreams are not “pipe-dreams” and the “bliss” is something more than a denial of reality. This type of coach/mentor can be of great value for a client/protégé for many years. We can all use some of this inspiration throughout our life.
5. Friendly Critic: this coach/mentor role along with the sixth role (Gentle Proder) is often identified as being in some sense “negative” and the opposite of the fourth role (Big-Thinking Inspirer). In fact this type of coaching engagement or mentorship is not negative, but rather is based on a deep sense of empathy (as in the Empathetic Listener) and a willingness to “go to bat” for the client/protégé (as in the Defending Ally). The difference in this instance is that the coach/mentor makes use of his/her wisdom, experience and expertise to challenge the assumptions, expectations, strategies and/or tactics of the client/protégé. This type of coach/mentor typically urges caution, the gathering of more data and/or the pilot testing of a new idea. Often the empathy is complimented by a bit of skepticism and the willingness to provide support (“going to bat”) is complimented by a statement of conditions that must be met before this support is provided. The coach/mentor is “friendly” and supportive, but also believes firmly that his/her client/protégé is in need of some critical “push-back.” As in the case of the Big-Thinking Inspirer, we can benefit from this type of coaching or mentorship throughout our life.
6. Gentle Proder: as in the case of the Friendly Critic, the Gentle Proder is working on behalf of the client/protégé—and is looking after the interests of the client/protégé. In this instance, the coach/mentor is not being critical of the ideas offered by or perspectives held by the client/protégé; rather, the coach/mentor is concerned that the client/protégé moves these ideas into action or translates a specific perspective into a set of specific, actionable steps. This type of coaching engagement or mentorship is particularly appropriate when the client/protégé is something of a “dreamer.” The client/protégé is someone who is not in need of a dream or big picture, but rather is in need of moving forward—of being both realistic and productive. This is another type of coach/mentor who is likely to be of value throughout one’s career. Don’t we all need a nudge at certain points in our life?
7. Information Transferer: this final coaching/mentoring role is often not considered legitimate (as a way in which coaching or mentoring is to be done). Yet it is commonly found in organizations. This seventh function is particularly common when the coaching/mentoring relationship is informal and short-term. The client/protégé simply asks someone with wisdom, experience or expertise in a particular area to share or “transfer” information that is relevant to a specific challenge being faced by the client/protégé. It is a “real” coaching engagement or mentorship relationship if the coach/mentor takes the time to become more fully acquainted with the challenge being faced and if the coach/mentor follows up to see how the information being transferred has been used. This seventh coach/mentor role differs from the first role (Wise Counselor) in that both the scope and duration of the coaching engagement or mentorship is typically much smaller and shorter than is the case when the coach/mentor serves as the Wise Counselor.