

14 Jun 2021

Coaching and mentoring

Identify ways to apply coaching and mentoring principles as part of an overall learning and development strategy

Introduction

Coaching and mentoring can be effective approaches to developing employees. Both have grown in popularity, with many employers using them to enhance the skills, knowledge and performance of their people around specific skills and goals.

This factsheet offers a definition of coaching and mentoring, distinguishing between the two and emphasising the need to link with overall learning and development strategy. 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 and people professionals in managing coaching and mentoring activities.

The CIPD is at the heart of change happening across L&D, supporting practitioners in providing insights and resources. Connect with us through our Leading in Learning network.

What are coaching and mentoring?

Coaching and mentoring are development approaches based on the use of one-to-one conversations 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 it also applies to mentoring.

What is coaching?

Coaching aims to produce optimal performance and improvement at work. It 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 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.
- It focuses on improving performance and developing an individual.
- Personal factors may be included but the emphasis is on performance at work.
- Coaching activities have both organisational and individual goals.
- It provides people with the opportunity to better assess their strengths as well as their development areas.
- 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 coaching skills.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring in the workplace tends to describe a relationship in which a more experienced colleague shares their greater knowledge to support the development of an inexperienced member of staff. It calls on the skills of questioning, listening, clarifying and reframing that are also associated with coaching.

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 approach to dealing with the board, presenting to analysts and challenging departmental budgets.

Mentoring relationships work best when they move beyond the directive approach of a senior colleague 'telling it how it is', to one where both parties learn from each other. An effective mentoring relationship is a learning opportunity for both participants, encouraging sharing and learning across generations and/or between roles.

More information on mentoring approaches to develop individuals for key or leadership positions can be found in our [succession planning factsheet](#) and in our report *Attitudes to employability and talent*.

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.

Coaching and mentoring programmes

Our Learning and skills at work surveys show that L&D teams view coaching and mentoring programmes as a priority and are exploring how digital tools can help with this. Designing and managing coaching and mentoring programmes is a key part of the L&D specialist knowledge area of our [Profession Map](#).

The aims of providing workplace coaching and mentoring programmes include::

- Assisting performance management.
- Preparing and supporting people through change.
- Supporting self-directed learning and development.
- Sharing curated resources.

Although coaching and mentoring programmes are widespread within organisations, there are challenges about how best to manage and deliver them. There's often confusion over exactly what each involves, how best to manage the stakeholders in the process, when coaching is (or is not) an appropriate intervention for poor performance issues, and how to work effectively with a complex external coaching industry. While some organisations hire external coaches, particularly when coaching those in very senior management or leadership positions, external mentors can also be an expensive option. 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 an option.

Creating a coaching culture

To develop a coaching culture, it's important to consider a range of 'phases' that are all driven by organisational context. These will include as a minimum:

- What is the organisation's strategy?
- How does the organisation position itself?
- What priorities does the organisation have?
- Who supports coaching and mentoring?

Once these are addressed, practitioners can focus on the practical aspects of working through who will deliver the coaching and how this is to be implemented.

Who delivers coaching in organisations?

Coaching may be delivered by members of staff or by external coaches. The findings from our Learning and skills at work surveys illustrate that line managers are most likely to take the main responsibility for delivering coaching.

Effectiveness of line managers as coaches

Typically, organisations apply coaching as a day-to-day management activity, 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 need for some distance and impartiality in the coaching relationship.

Coaching supervision and support

Coaching can be a challenging activity for both internal and external coaches. Those involved in coaching need structured opportunities to reflect on their practice, either 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's also important to establish guidelines on confidentiality and information flow in the implementation phase 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 professionals working as 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

method?

It's important to consider how coaching is linked with overall learning and development strategies. Among respondents to our [Learning and skills at work](#) 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 need to be considered alongside other types of development interventions. Employee preferences also play a part. There is a danger that coaching can be seen as a solution for all kinds of development needs, whereas it must 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 skills.
- Supporting 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.
- Dealing with the impact of change on an individual's role.

It's also important to remember that sometimes individuals may not respond well to coaching. This may be because their developmental needs are best dealt with by [another type of intervention](#). For example, coaching may not be an appropriate intervention if the individual is resistant to coaching or lacks self-insight. So before coaching starts, organisations need to assess an individual's 'readiness' for this approach. This highlights the importance of the coachee's motivation to achieve the desired outcome.

Coaching isn't a universal panacea and it's sometimes used without a great deal of thought or reflection. By being evidence-based, coaching can be more effective for both individuals and organisations.

The role of people professionals in managing coaching activities

HR and L&D teams 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 identifying appropriate performance gaps, choosing appropriate coaches and

mentors, managing relationships and evaluating success.

People professionals need to understand when coaching and mentoring are appropriate and effective interventions in relation to other options. They also need to explore the relevance, appropriateness and credibility of any models (such as the [GROW](#) or [COACH](#) approaches) that are used. And they need to be clear on how to select appropriate external coaches and mentors by having a clear set of criteria to match the individual and organisational needs.

Our Learning cultures report highlights the importance of creating a positive environment for learning. Line managers play an important part of creating this environment, so it is fundamental that they are developed accordingly. There's more on this in our [management development factsheet](#).

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[The Coaching and Mentoring Network](#)

[European Mentoring and Coaching Council](#)

Books and reports

BEEVERS, K., REA, A. and HAYDEN, D. (2019) *Learning and development practice in the workplace*. 4th ed. London: Kogan Page.

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

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JONES, G. and GORELL, R. (2018) *How to create a coaching culture*. 2nd ed. HR Fundamentals. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

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LANCER, N., CLUTTERBUCK, D. and MEGGINSON, D. (2016) *Techniques for coaching and mentoring*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

PARSLOE, E. and LEEDHAM, M. (2016) *Coaching and mentoring: practical techniques for developing learning and performance*. London: Kogan Page

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Journal articles

AZIZ, H. (2019) Why is humility so relevant for leaders and can it be developed through coaching? *Strategic HR Review*. Vol 18, No 1. Reviewed in *In a Nutshell*.

BERRY, P. (2021) [What people professionals should consider when choosing an executive coach](#). *People Management* (online). 8 March.

KASE, R., SAKSIDA, T. and MIHELIC, K. (2019) Skills development in reverse mentoring: motivational processes of mentors and learners. *Human Resource Management*. Vol 58, No 1. January/February. Reviewed in *In a Nutshell*.

NORMAN, C. (2019) [How to make a coaching relationship work](#). *People Management* (online). 20 February.

SHARMA, S. (2020) [The importance of mentoring through a crisis](#). *People Management* (online). 9 June.

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This factsheet was last updated by David Hayden.