



When mentoring meets coaching

Lee Dunn, Mentor with XSectorMentor ®

Explains Lee Dunn, Mentor with XSectorMentor ® and Head of the Scottish Digital Academy with the Scottish Government.

I've worked across various professions through a variety of roles over the years. The one common theme at the heart of my career has been learning, or rather the personal and professional development of people and how we interact and relate to each other. Although learning can be an individual event, most of us learn more effectively when we speak with other people and where we collaborate and co-construct new knowledge.

I often hear colleagues talk about mentoring and coaching interchangeably. But what do they actually mean and what's the relationship between the two? One can consider them to be informed by the same ideology; a more knowledgeable person imparts experience and information to another, and that through that exchange there's a transactional process that allows learning to take place.

Mentoring is perhaps seen as the traditional norm, whereby the more knowledgeable mentor is well versed as a subject matter expert and usually has several years' experience working within a particular profession or environment. They use this knowledge to provide information, advice and guidance to the mentee. Typically, this



process will manifest naturally as a hierarchy via a superior or line manager, or often a peer who has 'seen it all before'. There's nothing wrong with this approach and its inherent human behaviour, instilled within us from the moment we're born. The problem here is that the cycle of knowledge needs to be repeated several times before we become programmed to think or behave in a certain way. Indeed, individually we apply that process daily. We learn from our mistakes as well as our achievements.

Coaching still involves a transaction, however the coach doesn't need to be a subject matter expert, nor do they need to have any knowledge of the professional or environmental working conditions of the person they're coaching. Instead, knowledge is constructed through verbal interactions and body language, with increased confidence and productivity based on an ability to think critically and to listen to and to react to the exchange of information. This itself allows new knowledge to be built, however the coach is not providing their experience or advice but rather leading the coached to draw their own conclusions. This can happen quickly through a coaching conversation in the communal kitchen at work, or it can be a more in depth and structured series of interventions designed to explore a particular issue, problem or goal.

There is a clear marriage between mentoring and coaching and it's easy to see why the two are confused when we talk about them. I'm not particularly enamoured with one word or the other, but rather to the process itself. Psychological safety and fostering positive communication with empathy is an effective way to realise the values that most of us share and to build the capability and talent within our workforce.

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If you believe that mentoring that connects professionals from across sectors and professions to share knowledge and ideas and develop professionally could benefit your company, please contact andrew@xsectormentor.com.