

PEER RESOURCES

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WHAT MAKES MENTORING DIFFERENT FROM OTHER BUSINESS ROLES?



Mentoring, coaching, supervising, and managing share a number of common elements. Yet the most often asked question is: "How are they different?" In this brief article Rey Carr identifies five key points that distinguish mentoring from other forms of business interaction.

The Quality of the Relationship

Mentoring is primarily about creating an enduring and meaningful relationship with another person. While the relationship may be short-term, the focus is primarily on the quality of that relationship and the factors that affect relationship quality, such as mutual respect, willingness to learn from each other and the use of deeper interpersonal skills. While mentors might provide advice or suggestions, they have no stake in whether the partner actually uses or integrates such information into their work or personal life. Mentors and their partners typically look forward to their meeting together and make every effort to preserve their meeting time.

While the effectiveness of coaching, supervision and managing might all depend on the quality of the relationship, the primary goal for each of these activities is typically more performance or productivity oriented rather than relationship oriented. Not attending to the advice of a supervisor or manager may jeopardize an employee's career.

The Opportunity for Mutual Learning

Mentoring is distinguishable from other activities because of its emphasis on learning in general and mutual learning in particular. Whereas learning is important in other activities, both the mentor and the partner take responsibility for maximizing the learning activity. Too often mentoring is presented as an "altruistic" venture where the mentor gives time, energy, and wisdom without receiving anything in return. In today's business world, altruism is still important, but the mentor must also experience concrete value.

Certainly the best coaches, managers and supervisors are open to learning from their clients and employees. However, their interaction is less focused on learning from their clients or subordinates. Instead their focus is more on establishing standards, behaviours and expectations and ensuring that such elements are carried out properly. In addition because they are typically paid to perform these roles, managers, supervisors, and coaches continue to carry out their responsibility regardless of any other concrete benefit that accrues to them.

The Developmental Changes

Mentoring in most formal programs has a beginning, middle and end. It is typically time-limited and subject to a mutual agreement between the parties. In addition the nature of the mentoring relationship changes over time. During the initial phases of the relationship the mentor may take more responsibility for facilitating the content and process through asking questions and actively listening. As the relationship progresses, however, the partner begins to take on more and more responsibility for what transpires and the mentor shares perspectives and knowledge. As the partner grows, the need for the mentor may lessen, thus causing attention to how and when to terminate the relationship in a productive manner.

All good managers, supervisors and coaches want to see their clients or subordinates grow and develop in their careers and performance. However, they are normally in charge of when such a relationship will terminate. In addition their focus remains static and they do not necessarily perceive themselves as developing as a result of employee contact.

The Voluntary Nature

Most mentoring relationships are informal and take place in many cases without the direct, conscious knowledge of the participants. In newer, more formal programs, individuals volunteer to be involved in a mentoring relationship. It is typically not part of their formal job description or performance requirement; they are not paid for their involvement; and while they may provide feedback to each other, there are no formal assessments or performance reports conducted or forwarded as part of a participant's career progress evaluation. Mentoring experts often recommend that a mentor and partner be far enough apart in a chain of command so that no formal evaluation responsibilities become relevant.

Managers, supervisors and for the most part coaches are all paid for their involvement with other employees. Except for coaches they have evaluative responsibilities and are often required to provide detailed performance reports.

The Big Picture

While mentoring can focus on a narrow band of performance issues or knowledge, it typically is more open to examining broader perspectives. It is often more inclusive of a wider range of topics, including vision, goals, motivation and passion, all reviewed from both a personal and professional perspective. A mentor is more likely to share what he or she has learned from his or her own experiences and what meaning that learning has had as well as what actions have happened as a result.

While coaches, managers and supervisors might be interested in the whole person approach, they are more often than not, interested specifically in results or outcomes. Focusing on the larger picture might only be a tool to produce better results. And in some cases, workplace policies or legal issues restrict the range of topics that can be discussed.

Mentoring, coaching, supervision and managing also have many factors in common: they all use and rely on the same interpersonal skills; they all involve learning; they all have an impact on career development; and in common practice, the roles are often used interchangeably. Supervisors and managers, though, are typically official job title designations. Not surprisingly it may turn out that the better managers and supervisors are in carrying out their roles, the more closely they will come to be called coaches and mentors.