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“We need a coach to develop a skill; we need a mentor to develop a professional life.”

- Michael Ellegood, P.E.



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PROJECT MANAGEMENT

FEATURED ARTICLE:

Coaching and Mentoring—What’s The Difference?

by Michael Ellegood, P.E.

Coaching and mentoring are terms often used interchangeably. But, in fact, they are very different—different in intent, in relationships and in duration. Let’s examine each of these:

Intent: In a coaching situation, the coach is attempting to effect change in another individual in a specific and defined area. For example, a design firm is attempting to groom a promising project manager and works with her (or him) to improve her verbal communication skills. Perhaps it is recommended that she participate in Toastmasters or a more senior member of the firm engages her in technical conversations to improve her ability to express herself in a one-on-one discussion. Coaching is typically an effort to improve a shortcoming that is understood by both parties. It is very tactical in nature in that it is intended to bring specific change in a specific area.

Mentoring, on the other hand, is very strategic. Often mentoring is unspoken but is intended to develop, over the long term, a new generation of leadership not for the specific job, but to develop an individual’s career.

Relationship: A coaching relationship typically lasts as long as the coaching is needed. In the earlier example of developing communications skills, the relationship will last until the desired skill, in this case communications, is attained. The mentoring relationship is one that lasts for years, even decades as the mentee continues to grow and develop the myriad skills needed to move into senior management.

Duration: As earlier implied, the coach lasts only as long as he or she is needed. The mentor on the other hand will last, in some cases, a lifetime.

How to choose a coach: Recognizing that skill improvement is needed in a defined area or areas, simply identify a subject matter expert who can develop a trusting relationship with the person, define the desired change, and go to work.

How to choose a mentor: It is far more complex process than simply choosing a coach. The long-term association that is established transcends the work environment and becomes a personal relationship extending to balancing work with social, family, and other considerations. In an ideal mentoring relationship, a deep trust and bond is formed. Most often, the individual’s direct supervisor is not the mentor but rather someone that the individual can go to for advice and counsel, a senior member of the organization that has “been there, done that” and can help the mentee through the challenges of professional life in an organization.

We need a coach to improve a skill; we need a mentor to develop a professional life. ●



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