

Coaching at Work

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INNER WORKINGS

The line between internal coaching and mentoring seems to be getting fuzzier, alongside a dramatic increase in their use as developmental interventions, report **Sara Hope** and **Emily Cosgrove**

The use of internal coaching and mentoring as developmental interventions in organisations has increased substantially over the past decade. The drivers can be very different, their backgrounds diverse. Yet, they all seem to combine some organisational understanding with a degree of objectivity, confidentiality and capability.

A subtle blend

One approach involves a subtle blend of internal coaching and mentoring.

Many definitions of coaching include the facilitation of growth in both internal experience and external behaviour. However, organisations have varying interpretations of the differences in practice between internal coaching and mentoring.

The domain of what internal coaching encompasses, the activities and responsibilities of

internal coaches, and the kinds of recipients, are so diverse that it is difficult to place boundaries around the construct.

Managing expectations

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges for anyone setting up an internal coaching or mentoring programme, is managing the expectations of those coming to the relationship. When Sara Hope researched the experience of clients working with an internal coach, she was surprised by the breadth of responses to the question: *“What is the purpose of an internal coach in your business?”*

Responses included: “To be a neutral provider of advice and assistance; Giving wise feedback, pointing people in different directions; The job of an internal coach is to steer them to more of a development discussion.”

One of the key reasons for developing internal coaching rather than using externals is

because internal coaches know the way things are done around here’.

Clients often choose to work with an internal coach because of the value they gain from being asked awareness-raising questions and from being listened to. However, it is also because of the perception that the coach ‘understands my world’.

As an internal coach, Hope was often asked for her input, guidance and to share her experiences. Working with internal mentors and mentees, Emily Cosgrove often hears the same request. It is in this area that we see the cross-over and close alignment between internal coaching and mentoring.

The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) defines mentoring as a “developmental process, which (i) may in some forms involve a transfer of skill or knowledge from a more experienced person to a less experienced... or (ii) in other forms may be a partnership for mutual learning between peers or across differences such as age, race or discipline”.

This definition highlights the relatively recent shift from sponsorship mentoring, where the mentee is more like a protégée, to developmental mentoring where

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INTERNAL COACHING MENTORING



their role is to drive the relationship and take ownership of the outcomes.

The dual aspect of enabling someone to develop and improve performance, as well as skilfully share experience and wisdom, can be common to internal coaches and developmental mentors. Both also rely on building rapport and trust, the importance of confidentiality and the skills of listening and asking questions among many similarities.

Questions and challenges

A number of factors come into play in an internal coaching or mentoring relationship.

First, there are the meanings. What is the organisational understanding of the label, internal coach or mentor? For any intervention to succeed, it is hugely important to clarify and communicate this understanding and its associated expectations.

Second, there are the internal coaches/mentors themselves. What is their training and experience, and their role?

Third, there is the line manager of the coachee/mentee and their expectations around outcomes.

Fourth, there are the expectations and understandings of the coaching/mentoring client. What does coaching or mentoring mean to them?

These questions – and challenges – highlight the importance of contracting in the relationship. Clarity upfront about areas such as roles, responsibilities, purpose, ways of working, expectations and confidentiality, is critical to building a good relationship. If the relationship is to offer the anticipated value attached to ‘sharing experience and wisdom’, it is particularly important to fully explore each

Top tips: Sharing internal knowledge

- Include CEOs/senior managers/directors in the internal coaching and mentoring pool
- Share the organisational understanding of what internal coaching or mentoring means
- Consider why, when and how an employee comes to have an internal coach or mentor
- Enable the coaching/mentoring client to get the most from the relationship by exploring what it means and what their expectations are before starting the relationship
- Facilitate the ability for coaching/mentoring pairs to have adequate time to explore their expectations during the contracting conversation before ‘getting stuck in’
- Support pairs to review expectations and re-contract on a regular basis, both within the relationship and externally

stakeholder’s perception and expectation around this.

Supporting clients also aids learning. Cosgrove says: “Often, resource and time is spent on training internal coaches and mentors about their role, but little is done to help manage the expectations of the other person in the relationship. A coachee or mentee needs to take ownership of the relationship, to be open and honest, and willing to become more self-aware. They will need to welcome challenge as well as support, be prepared to think and reflect, and be committed to the process.”

Hope and Cosgrove are seeing organisations managing the challenge of coaching and mentoring client readiness and engagement in different ways. Often the route is determined by context and what feels right for the organisation’s culture.

Some are establishing formal programmes, structured internal coaching and mentoring schemes, and putting processes in place to enhance the understanding of what clients can expect from the relationship. Examples include codes of ethics, and handbooks that detail roles, expectations and competencies. Three-way contracting meetings are also used to help manage

expectations of the client, line manager and coach.

The increasing shift towards organisations building their own coaching capability brings with it the need for more conversation and understanding at every level around the different expectations.

Some organisations are refraining from using the terms ‘coaching’ and ‘mentoring’, focusing instead on enhancing dialogue and conversation across the business. Hope says: “What I see is that by freeing up the mind to pay attention to the shared skills of listening and asking great questions, leaders are enabled to realise the tremendous value of just having a great conversation.” ■

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● **Emily Cosgrove** is director of *The Internal Mentor*. She welcomes any mentoring conversations.

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● **Next issue:** Sara Hope will look at another aspect of internal coaching