

Coaching vs. Mentoring: The Difference is in the Details

By Monica Horvath

Scientists working as part of a large, corporate team will one day inevitably find themselves at a group-building retreat where they are asked to complete Myers-Briggs personality profile tests. A striking result of this exercise is that although there is much variety in work modalities, such as the visionary idea generators versus the meticulous project-finishers, a common trait of the most successful scientists is an astute management of their own strengths and weaknesses. For some of these lucky individuals, this self-awareness may have crystallized naturally. But many scientists, even individuals already entrenched in the corporate world, require help in goal definition, prioritization, strength assessment, and plan development in order to attain the greatest efficacy in their professional lives. At one time or another all scientists have found mentors along their career paths. However, there is another personal development paradigm that can be highly effective, although it is deployed in an entirely different fashion. Professional coaching is a service where a coach and a client collaborate to develop a highly-individualized program for increasing job performance and reaching career goals.

Coaching vs. Mentoring – The Basics

A quick investigation into the distinctions between mentoring and coaching will reveal that this is a highly debated topic. Some individuals feel as if the two terms are to be used synonymously, whereas others see them as completely separate paradigms. But a closer examination reveals numerous important distinctions.

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Lois Zachary, a consultant with Leadership Development Services (<http://www.leadsevs.com>), gives a Mentor’s perspective on the difference between mentoring and coaching in her book, *The Mentor’s Guide*. “Coaching is always part of mentoring, but coaching does not always involve mentoring. Coaching within the context of a mentoring relationship has to do with the skill of helping an individual fill a particular knowledge gap by learning how to do things more effectively.” Coaches seem to agree. “While mentors may use coaching techniques and coaches may provide mentoring in some situa-

tions, coaching and mentoring are not the same thing,” asserts seasoned management coach and consultant, Moira F. Breen.

Breen earned a Master’s degree in biochemical pharmacology and embarked on a 15 year career in research and development in the pharmaceutical industry, which included international positions with GlaxoSmithKline. Knowing all too well the demands that scientists face in both their professional and personal lives, Moira created a coaching consultancy to aid individuals with career transition and management and leadership development (<http://www.mfbreen.com>). While she views mentoring as either a volunteer activity or part of a strong interpersonal relationship between two individuals at different career crossroads, coaching is uniquely an occupation. “Coaches receive training in techniques and processes designed to support the development of others, and they have chosen this work. Although it is still a relatively young profession, standards have been developed and are being adopted quite rapidly to protect clients and ensure the quality of coaching clients receive.” Bodies such as the International Coach Federation (<http://www.coachfederation.org/ICF>) draft guidelines, devise codes of ethics, and develop certifications and other credentialing metrics for professional coaches.

While coaching comes with the aspects of accreditation, mentoring is unique in that the mentor and protégé often share vocations and therefore can advantageously discuss very specific, technical issues pertinent to their common field. Often there is a master and apprentice relationship, and this phenomenon does not have a regular counterpart in coaching. A coach is not ‘senior’ to the client, and in fact, it is not even necessary that both individuals come from the same field. Breen states, “It is not necessary for the coach to have carried out the specific role and responsibilities that the client performs or wishes to develop because coaches are not training their clients. My clients have included lawyers, dentists, veterinarians, architects, and directors of nonprofit organizations, not only those in senior management roles in the pharmaceutical industry similar to my own experience.”

That being said, Breen does concur that many clients choose coaches with ties to their own field since they may be familiar with the work conditions and can provide expertise based on their own experiences. This is the point where coaching may overlap with mentoring and consequently create confusion in distinguishing these two tools. Breen clarifies, “A coach may ap-

propriately provide these services to a client but they are not strictly 'coaching,' and the coach should be aware that they are stepping out of that role to meet a different need." Breen explains that coaches do not use their own journeys as a starting point for client development, but instead work with the client to elicit creative strategies to meet their goals. Mentoring, in comparison, draws more heavily on a mentor's experiences given that the career path being discussed is usually shared by both participants. This dissection of these two career development models underscores their complementary natures, for each fulfills different needs.

Embracing New Communication Paradigms

Most would agree that the information technology age has created new communication challenges in a scientist's life, particularly in the area of balancing home versus work. But the silver lining in this cloud is that such advances have also allowed scientists to take advantage of new mentoring and coaching models that would not have existed ten years ago. Private chat rooms, email, VoIP (voice over internet protocol), video conferencing, and an explosive volume of Web 2.0 tools provide new methods for the coach and client to connect and therefore give scientists across the globe greater access to coaching opportunities.

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Serial entrepreneur, Jane Chin, Ph.D., knows this quite well. She leverages a "one-person microbusiness" strategy to reach a wide range of scientific professionals and deploys a series of Web sites (including <http://www.janechin.com> and <http://www.phdcareerclinic.com>) to support each niche. Chin's journeys have taken her to bench science, pharmaceutical sales, pharmaceutical medical affairs, and then eventually to medical science liaison positions with several companies. She is the wizard behind the Medical Science Liaison (MSL) Institute (<http://www.mslinstitute.com>), and has a particular interest in helping shape MSL programs and individual MSL effectiveness. She asserts, "I really don't think these communication methods are responsible for creating new needs for those seeking coaching today versus 10 or 15 years ago. More professionals are seeking coaching now because they are competing in a fast-paced, technologically-connected world, and professionals find that they need to continually focus on learning and development to thrive in today's job market. Having an email and telephone coaching option allows professionals to have greater flexibility to schedule time for their personal development."

The availability of this technology makes effective communication more important than ever. Since one's work environment may now extend beyond local or regional milieus into the national and even global realms, many on-site meetings are replaced by new communication methods that present unique challenges. Video conferences, for example, can be hampered by satellite glitches and sound feedback as well as the fact that individuals are usually not accustomed to seeing themselves on video. During teleconferences, body language is not available as a cue and new protocols of "faceless" etiquette must be learned to avoid confusing cross talk. But this isn't to say that today's scientists don't still have just as many issues with face-to-face communication as they did in less technologically rich

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times. Having grown up in the West Indies and worked in several countries, Breen is acutely aware of how the intricacies of communication are highly shaped by culture. Even "company culture" can vary dramatically, leaving professionals who lack naturally strong skills in rough waters, especially as business increasingly traverses international borders. She affirms, "Face to face communication presents most people with just as many challenges and risks, and goes wrong just as frequently. Communicating effectively is one of the most important skills in any role which involves interaction with others... the larger and more complex the organization, the greater the potential for complexity in culture."

This need to embrace new communication paradigms, however, is one area where mentoring and coaching find firm common ground. Although mentoring is traditionally performed in person and associated with some element of on-the-job training, new models have arisen that embrace all that internet technology has to offer. For example, MentorNet, the E-Mentoring Network for Diversity in Engineering and Science (<http://www.MentorNet.net>), seeks to pair mentors and protégés regardless of geographical constraints. MentorNet's One-on-One programs match protégés from well over 100 participating campuses and affiliated partners to counterparts in industry, government laboratories, and higher education. MentorNet's mission is to further the progress of women and other underrepresented groups in scientific and technical fields through the use of a dynamic, technology-supported mentoring network. Participants work through an email-based curriculum that prompts advice and discussion for individuals in early phases of their careers. Although some participants may choose to take phone calls or even meet in person, MentorNet provides scientists greater accessibility to the advice and experience of a national network of established scientists, which is only possible given the borderless nature of the internet.

Developing Priorities

Although the information age has created a multitude of gadgets to remind scientists to nurse their workloads, priority management is a challenge regardless of the decade. Mentors can uniquely provide knowledge and domain-specific suggestions, but a coach attacks the problem in a different yet complementary manner. Breen discloses, “I help clients on moving towards completing the things that are important to them instead of the things that are not. I help clients develop strategies to handle anything they decide to handle but nothing that is highly specific to keeping up with advances of knowledge in their field.” In other words, coaches concentrate more on eliciting what is really important to the client and assigning priorities in that manner.

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In defining one’s priorities, Chin asserts that a coach can help blast through procrastination by getting to the root of a client’s problem—overcoming fear. “People may not always be attuned to how fear drives their indecision, even though they may hear about fear all the time. When a client comes to me and says, ‘I have a problem with procrastination,’ I find after discussing further, there is fear hiding behind the procrastination.... The problem is that either we may not always be aware of the ‘right’ prioritization best-aligned with our values, or, we know, but we are held back by fear.” Chin emphasizes that prioritization can be a very difficult task and is not merely a matter of acting tactically to define a ‘to-do’ list bracketed by time and resources. Scientists must think strategically in prioritizing in order to meet career goals. “This is where I’ve found coaches to be very helpful. I’ve personally worked with coaches as sounding boards for strategic input and for holding me accountable to the tactical output.”

Mentoring vs. Coaching – It’s Not Either/Or

Although coaching and mentoring have many areas of overlap, their modes of execution are quite distinct. Coaching services seek to elicit one’s priorities and goals through a series of self-discovery exercises, and the coach should not a priori have a set opinion on what those goals and priorities should be. Mentoring, on the other hand, is a process whereby the advice and direction given to the protégé should take advantage of the mentor’s own experiences. Another key difference between the two is that while a mentor/protégé pair almost always work within the same general field, coaches and clients can sometimes operate most effectively without this commonality. Such

an arrangement forces the client to leave the comfort zone of shared technical ground, which as a result may elicit career-shaping strategies and tactics that may not have been apparent if both individuals utilized the same domain of knowledge. But ultimately, the ball is in the court of the driven professional to decide whether one’s path could benefit from professional coaching as a complement to the myriad mentoring relationships that are built over a career. ■



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