

Coaching versus mentoring: Are there any differences?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on two major concepts in entrepreneurship training, namely coaching and mentoring. A study of these concepts reveals at least two schools of thought: (1) coaching and mentoring are two parallel, distinct activities that can be used to support each other and (2) coaching and mentoring are not separate activities – coaching is considered part of the mentoring activity *or* mentoring part of the coaching activity. Data from 36 university-based training programmes and 450 coaching and mentoring cases at 7 Swedish universities were analysed. We used a check-list to gather information on 21 items linked to these four distinctive groups: (1) Structural issues (mission, form, and task), (2) Process issues (connection to programme content, meeting environment, problem solving, assessing the opportunity or idea, operative role, confidentiality, and networking), (3) Relationships (extent, meeting, initiative, homework, documentation, and follow-up) and (4) Character of the coach and mentor (background and experience, engagement, integrity, social skills, and role or ethics).

Coaching and mentoring differed markedly, for example, in mission, problem-solving, and use of generalist versus specialist competence. Similarities occurred in the areas of opportunity or idea assessment, meeting environment, operative role, and confidentiality agreements. The authors are convinced that the coach and the mentor have different roles for supporting the young individual to be a better entrepreneur. Coaching and mentoring are parallel activities that complement each other.

1. Introduction

Today, entrepreneurship is considered a highly relevant skill, to be developed through lifelong learning. Fostering an entrepreneurial mindset and providing training and educational activities - starting with basic education - will contribute greatly to economic growth. So policy initiatives that focus on promoting entrepreneurship in European countries have multiplied in number over the past decade (Benneworth, 2007; Kirwan et al, 2008). We have also witnessed a broadening of the entrepreneurship concept; it no longer focuses solely on encouraging new start-ups but is concerned with other businesslike situations, such as in the academic and public sectors.

Promoting entrepreneurship can be done in various ways - but according to the literature, these issues seem to be important in most entrepreneurship support situations (Klofsten, 2008):

- Inspiration of entrepreneurial behaviour and promotion of attitudes toward change.
- Provision of skills and tools germane to business development.
- Development of skills to handle environmental relationships with customers, financiers, and other stakeholders.

Crucial to the entrepreneurship training process is the use of coaching and mentoring (Sullivan, 2000; Regis et al, 2007). Regardless of whether it is called coaching or mentoring,

many young entrepreneurs in all types of work environments are looking to improve their skills, personally *and* professionally. Choosing to work with a skilled coach or mentor can help individuals achieve their goals and increase their effectiveness in the particular job or task with which they are involved (Evered and Selman (1989).

Over the years, coaching and mentoring have been well covered in numerous articles and books with a wide range of aims and scopes; for example:

- ‘Coaching and mentoring for employee development’ (Minter and Thomas, 2000)
- ‘The teacher as a coach’ (Fiet, 2000)
- ‘Coaching executives’ (Bane and Kopelman, 1997)
- ‘Organisational mentoring’ (Murray and Owen, 1991)
- ‘Mentoring for network development’ (Higgins and Kram, 2001)
- ‘Learning and mentoring’ (Sullivan, 2000)
- ‘Web-based mentoring for women’ (Packard, 2003)

What emerges in a comparison is that both functions involve pairing a junior individual with a senior one outside the junior’s direct chain-of-command. Murray and Owen (1991) viewed coaching as the core of the mentoring process while Regis et al (2007) considered coaching to be a process where the mentor contributes to increase the specific knowledge and the “protégé’s comprehension about navigating in the corporative world” (p. 8). But the tendency is to use them interchangeably with a high degree of overlapping (Coenders 2001).

2. Aim and scope

In a longitudinal qualitative analysis, this article discusses two major concepts in entrepreneurship training, namely coaching and mentoring. We are particularly interested in differences, similarities, and interrelationships between the two processes. We believe there is a strong theoretical and practical value of studying the coaching and mentoring processes in entrepreneurship training. The theoretical rationale is that there are relatively few longitudinal studies of coaching and mentoring processes in general and on entrepreneurship training in particular. Numerous of books and articles have been written on coaching and mentoring, but most of what has been published emanates from consulting and tends to be anecdotal and practical. There seems to be no consensus on what the differences (or similarities) between these functions are or how they might be interrelated.

From a practical viewpoint, coaching *and* mentoring are strong tools, which enable young entrepreneurs to address various thoughts, opportunities, ideas, and business-related issues in a personal way with a senior colleague. More systematic qualitative research in this field would help us to better understand the processes of coaching and mentorship (i.e., relationships, matching skills, and time and resource issues) and allow us to raise relevant research questions and develop practical tools to improve those processes.

3. Method and data

The data analysed below come from the Entrepreneurship and New Business Programme

(ENP) for training individuals to start new technology-based or knowledge-intensive businesses. The model was developed at the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIE) at Linköping University, with the help of a network of local enterprises. This programme has spread to many districts in Sweden and, in recent years, been internationalised. Since the beginning of 1994, 55 programmes have been carried out, which have resulted in more than 500 new businesses and a dozen or more new business areas within established organisations. Today, these firms and organisations employ over 2,000 people. The ENP programme was previously analysed and data were published in various articles (i.e. Klofsten, 2000 and 2008).

Coaching *and* mentoring have been crucial to support young entrepreneurs, and both functions are used as parallel and complimentary activities in the ENP programme. The major goal of activities has been to support entrepreneurs in developing their first business plans; the activities themselves are test planks on a more general level where various business issues could be addressed. The design and content of the ENP programmes support and develop the entrepreneur, the idea (technology), and the environment (company) in parallel.

When recruiting participants for the programme, two factors have been important: *(i)* whether the participant can realistically devote the time that is needed to the training programme and has the drive and spirit to be an entrepreneur and *(ii)* whether the entrepreneur has a venture idea, on which a business plan can be developed. As will be shown later, both factors strongly affect the coach and mentor's interaction with the young entrepreneur.

In this study, we used data from 36 of the 55 ENP programmes carried out so far. The 36 entrepreneurship programmes cover 450 coaching and mentoring cases at 7 Swedish universities. Data were collected from these main sources:

- 360 written evaluations of participant's judgement of the training programme where comments of the coaching and mentoring could be commented upon.
- Documentation from meetings in 520 coached projects.
- 60 personal interviews with participants.
- 40 personal interviews with mentors.
- Other programme documents, such as protocols for choosing award winners of best business idea and business plans.

We analysed coaching and mentoring using a check-list to gather information on 21 items linked to these 4 areas: (1) structural issues (mission, form, and task), (2) process issues (connection to programme content, meeting environment, problem-solving, opportunity or idea assessment, operative role, confidentiality, and networking), (3) relationships (extent, meeting, initiative, homework, documentation and follow-up), and (4) character of the coach and mentor (background and experience, engagement, integrity, social skills, and role or ethics).

4. Analysis and discussion

The table below shows that there are similarities *and* differences between coaching and mentoring. Concerning structural issues, the coach and mentor are there to guide and support

the entrepreneur, often in a situation where the individual is stuck and can't see how to commercialise an idea. The entrepreneur gets feedback that someone else believes in the idea. Both roles aim to support the entrepreneur in creating a business-oriented platform for long-term survival and growth where fragments are put together.

But coaching and mentoring also have structural differences. Coaches work much closer with the training programme's programme management, which monitors them to a higher degree than mentors. A coach is also responsible for assuring that participants really put theory learnt at the different workshops into practice. The coach will also check that the young entrepreneur uses the mentor and stays focused. A coach has process thinking and is at the same time keen on what's going on in the entrepreneur's mind. The mentor is given more freedom to act and transfer personal experience and advice based on similar business situations.

There are several process-oriented issues to consider. When a coach or a mentor becomes involved in an entrepreneurship training programme, it is clearly stated that financial involvement in any of the businesses being supported is not allowed during the programme. So neither can have an operative role in entrepreneurs' businesses; the balance between involvement and non-involvement is a difficult one. During entrepreneurship training, it is very important that the entrepreneur and not the coach or mentor is in the driver's seat. This rule creates a neutral arena of positive leaning, which encourages openness and avoidance of particular financial interest. Through their relationships with the business world, the coach, and especially the mentor, is expected to support programme participants with contacts and act as door-openers – providing access to resources the young entrepreneur doesn't have. Neither the coach nor the mentor should assess the opportunity or idea - their task is to support what the entrepreneur has in hand. It's up to the entrepreneur to decide to take the idea further or close down the project.

The process that the coach is acting from and the work task given to the participants are strongly connected to the content of the entrepreneurship training programme (workshops and other educational activities). The coach provides guidance whereas the mentor suggests experienced-based solutions. A mentor also has the mandate to process questions not directly connected to the programme content. When meeting a coach or a mentor, the young entrepreneur has the opportunity to discuss various questions, to be able to realise personal goals. It is not uncommon that the discussion turns to issues not directly related to the business; some could deal with sensitive matters such as family issues or personal relationships.

Table: Similarities and differences between coaching and mentoring

Item	Coaching	Mentoring
Structural issues		
Mission	Make the idea more concrete and understandable - develop a first version of a business plan	Improve the quality of the first business plan – create a foundation for doing profitable business
Form	Process orientation	Situation orientation
Task	Develop a structure and a platform through guidance	Transfer personal experiences of doing business and solve specific problems
Process issues		
Connection to programme content	Strong connection	Weak connection
Meeting environment	Neutral	Neutral
Problem solving	Guidance	Suggest
Assessing the opportunity or idea	No role	No role
Operative role	No	No
Confidentiality	Orally agreed	Orally agreed
Networking	Door opener	Door opener (more active)
Relationships		
Extent	Scheduled meetings	Non-scheduled meetings
Meeting	Individually	Individually or in groups
Initiative	Schedule based	Demand driven
Homework	Yes – a natural part of the process	No demand - not a natural part of the process
Documentation	Yes – a natural part of the process	No demand - not a natural part of the process
Follow-up	Yes – a natural part of the process	No demand - not a natural part of the process
Character of the coach and mentor		
Background and experience	Generalist	Often a specialist with a background in a particular industry
Engagement	High	High
Integrity	High	High
Social skills	High and credible	High and credible
Role (ethics)	Neutral and independent	Neutral and independent

There are several differences between coaching and mentoring in the relationships with the individual. The coach takes the initiative to meet the individual and at the start of a programme a schedule is handed out. In this particular case there are three meetings during the half-year programme. Each meeting takes about 1-1.5 hours and there might also be sporadic mail or telephone contact between the meetings. To get the most out of the meetings it is important that the participant has done the homework and that the coach documents and follows up the development and progress of the entrepreneurs continuously. The coach will support the programme leader with status reports based on the documentation from the coach meetings. A participant is expected to initiate meetings with the mentor at least three times during the training programme. Sometimes the mentoring meetings are organised in smaller groups of participants due to efficiency reasons – good mentors are busy people. To limit the mentor's administrative work, homework between meetings, documentation, and a follow-up procedure are not required.

When recruiting coaches and mentors it is crucial to get people who show engagement, integrity, and a high level of social skills. The meeting between the participant and a coach or mentor might be the only moment where the young entrepreneur meets a person in a business situation who does not have a personal interest in the project and is in a totally neutral arena. This can lead to the entrepreneur opening up in a way that normally would not occur. A coach should preferably be a generalist with a business-minded approach. The mentor should be a generalist with a background in a particular industry and have the ability to work in-depth with the entrepreneur's business issues. The mentor's experience of industry complements the process skills of the coach.

5. Conclusions and practice

This paper focuses on two important concepts in entrepreneurship training, namely coaching and mentoring. Particular interest was paid to differences and similarities between these processes and how they are interrelated. We based the analysis on various structural, process, and relationship issues and issues dealing with the personal character of the coach and mentor. We have shown that there are differences and similarities connected to all four of these functions. These major conclusions were drawn:

- There are structural differences between a coach and mentor, and they are related to mission, form, and task. There are notable process differences due to their connection to programme content and problem solving. The relationship with a coach is to a larger extent schedule based and meeting the mentor is demand driven. Coaching is based on generalist competence whereas mentoring comes from a specialist. Since coaches have several tasks, in relation to the entrepreneur and to programme management, their work is similar a project manager's, but with no decision-making responsibilities, only guidance.
- Similarities are due to process items such as opportunity or idea assessment, meeting environment, operative role, and confidentiality. The extent of the relationship is basically the same and there are similarities when it comes to personal engagement, integrity, social skills, and role (ethics).

The authors are convinced that the coach and the mentor have different roles for supporting the young individual to be a better entrepreneur. Coaching and mentoring are parallel activities that complement each other.

Another angle of this subject is if differences exist between the sexes in coaching and mentoring entrepreneurs. An ongoing debate in Sweden is why women start so few firms and why few firms started by females expand. Perhaps coaching and mentoring processes could be developed and become important tools to better support the female entrepreneur.

A crucial factor in all coaching and mentoring processes is to respect the individual drive and engagement of the entrepreneurs. The more active the entrepreneur is in relation to the project, the more easy and efficient coaching and mentoring will be. Experiences from CIE's ENP show that the entrepreneur's active participation makes the work between the coach and mentor more synchronised. The success of coaching and mentoring is highly dependent on the relationships created with the entrepreneur.

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