

# Article

# Coaching and Mentoring: Practically Speaking

By Ismail Johari Othman

There is an old Malay saying that goes “*kalau hendak melentur buluh biarlah daripada rebungunya*” (figuratively, start nurturing from young age). Respect to the elderly, table etiquette, routine prayers, and basic hygiene are some of the skills imparted to the young. Often, such skills, at least in the beginning, are passed on rather informally at home by parents, granny, uncles, and even neighbours. They usually start in the form of pep-talk and storytelling. As the idea gradually sinks in mind, practice follows over a time to perfecting them. Of course, role modelling helps to expedite the learning processes as the young have the tendency to imitate their elders. Without realising, one has been exposed to coaching and mentoring much earlier than they would have thought.

Alas, such casual yet personalised approaches are slowly missing as one starts to learn formally in groups such as school, higher learning, and even at work (trainings). In all fairness to the learning institutions the numbers are mostly too big to be personalised. Yet, there are the likes of tutorial and buddies in the background offering alternatives. Given the appeal of coaching and mentoring, how to bring

them back to the workplace in today's context? This article will first offer general ideas on coaching and mentoring, the differences between the two, and finally discuss the practical considerations in implementing them.

Whilst there is abundance of definitions given to coaching, the key ideas commonly associated with coaching is about learning partnership, often on specific skills or competencies. The coach essentially through questioning and listening creates the coachee's self-awareness and assists the coachee to explore options on a solution. For record, coach is the person who leads the coaching process; whereas the person on the receiving end is called coachee. As for mentoring, it is primarily about sharing knowledge and skills from a more experienced to a less experienced one – mentor offering guidance, support, and assistance to mentee to facilitate the development of the latter. The person who leads the mentoring process is called mentor and the person who is being mentored is called mentee.

Given that coaching and mentoring is adjunct<sup>1</sup> in nature, both could overlap with each other in some ways. Having said so, the salient differences between the two are as follows. Firstly, in terms of focus. Coaching is more task oriented as compared to mentoring that is more relationship based. Coaching requires coach and coachee to agree on the agenda of their learning relationship in advance whereas mentoring is relatively relaxed in that respect. The focus somewhat influences the time horizon where coaching requires relatively shorter time to complete. Mentoring naturally takes a longer time as the mentor and mentee need time to build the chemistry.

To that effect, coaching is often linked with performance improvement – how better the coachee becomes after being coached. Mentoring on the other hand is skewed to developmental purposes such as providing guidance and imparting tacit knowledge and practical wisdom. In that light, mentoring necessitates a big picture plan for mentor and mentee to gradually move in the same direction. Outcome wise, coaching is believed to be relatively easier to be evaluated and measured. For instance, an increased output could be a tangible way to measure the effectiveness of coaching on the coachee. Often, the relationship element in mentoring could make evaluation complicated, though not entirely impossible.

As far as communication is concerned, mentoring is predominantly one-way as

compared to coaching which promotes the idea of dynamic interaction between coach and coachee. Such interaction is crucial to facilitate self-awareness and co-creation of solution or concluding a pre-determined agenda.

Lastly, mentor is often from within the organisation. Such slant is expected given the relationship nature of mentoring which could involve personal elements and organisational confidentiality. As for coaching, the coach is often from outside the organisation who are paid for their services. It's worth noting that many organisations are gradually developing internal coaches, plausibly due to cost factor which may not necessarily be true.

With the general idea of coaching and mentoring in mind, and their salient differences, the question to the organisation is on whether to coach or to mentor. The following are some of the practical aspects to be considered in making an informed decision.

As profoundly pointed by Peter Drucker "*culture eats strategy for breakfast*"; the upmost aspect that requires consideration is culture. What kind of culture does the organisation have and which approach is more compatible? Perhaps, in an organisation where the culture is generally more open and egalitarian, coaching would be the more appealing choice. Mentoring is often observed in an environment where it takes time for mentee, particularly to open up. This

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<sup>1</sup> It is not a discipline that stand on its own with solid theoretical foundation and framework.

would be due to concern about how others feel and to preserve harmony within the group<sup>2</sup>. Earlier this year, it was decided that the senior leaders in the public service in Malaysia to mentor certain number of their subordinates over a period focusing on leadership, character, world view, and succession planning<sup>3</sup>. Such a move could have been considered due to the cultural aspects given that mentoring has its roots in the public service, officially as early as year 2005. Attention should also be given to certain uniqueness observed on large group. For instance, *maruah*<sup>4</sup> (dignity) and *nama* (reputation) which is a closely related concept, is important to the Malays. Excessive or rapid challenging that could expose someone's shortcomings may not be welcomed to this group. In addition, the age and seniority of the coach and mentor could be sensitive too.

Closely linked to culture is the demography of an organisation. Women are observed to place more value<sup>5</sup> on relationships, teamwork, and consensus building. The more recent study<sup>6</sup> in the United States found out that women outscored men on three out of four "potential" traits namely, curiosity, determination, and engagement which echoes the spirit of personalised learning approach like coaching and mentoring. In addition to gender,

generational composition is equally important, if not more. The upcoming generation are reportedly to be more vocal and critical with a more convergent worldview.

The third consideration is objective why the learning partnership is required in the first place. As pointed earlier, coaching is more suitable at acquiring or improving certain skills and competency, such as when the coachee is given additional responsibility. Mentoring is more relatable with personal development, creating a talent pool, and succession planning.

The next one is timing. Coaching may be more attractive to organisations that are relatively young with limited cultural history. Established organisations with long traditions may want to give more weightage to coaching. Timing could also be linked to the backdrop at point of time. An organisation could find coaching more palatable in a rapidly changing environment where the legitimacy and growth of the organisation is largely at stake, signalling the need for quantum leap.

Finally, it is about affordability. Coaching can be costly especially when involving the very senior level. It can even get costlier if the coaching session turns out to

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<sup>2</sup> Othman, I. J. (2017, April). Executive Coaching and Culture, *RSOG Insight*. Retrieved from <http://www.rsog.com.my>

<sup>3</sup> *Program Pementoran Kepimpinan* [Brochure]. (n.d.) Putrajaya: Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia, Bahagian Pengurusan Psikologi.

<sup>4</sup> Milner, A. C. *The Malays*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Ludeman, K. (2013). Coaching with Women In Passmore, J. (Ed.), *Diversity in Coaching; Working with Gender, Culture, Race and Age* (pp. 199-215). London: Publisher. KoganPage. Print.

<sup>6</sup> McGregor, J. (2017, October 23). How most leadership training programs fail women. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/10/23/how-most-leadership-training-programs-fail-women/?utm\\_term=.bd4cc3310d5d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/10/23/how-most-leadership-training-programs-fail-women/?utm_term=.bd4cc3310d5d) (Accessed Date: 25 October 2017).

be a befrienders-like session and does not address performance as expected. Given that coaches are mostly from outside organisations, matching availability of the coach and coachee can be a challenge. Last minute cancellation should not be discounted. Some organisations even try to do coaching through telephone or one-line applications to save cost and time. Developing in-house coaches is a good idea but the challenge is always optimisation of resources. Mentoring, which utilise existing internal resources, can be applied informally over lunch or coffee or even outdoor recreation – cost saving in both dollar and cents as well as time.

Based on the foregoing, there is no magic formula to determine on whether to coach or to mentor. A more creative way could be to merge the two into a hybrid. One example is group mentor coaching where

a coach leads a group of coachees in one session. Interestingly, the public service in Malaysia defines mentoring as an integrated approach between coaching, mentoring, and counselling in providing guidance, support, and assistance professionally (by the mentor)<sup>7</sup>. The fact that the mentoring programme is supported by the psychological management division of the Public Service Department suggest that the public service in Malaysia considered the cultural influence where learning has always been group-based. A more personalised experience is sadly linked with “correction” of certain behaviours, that all the while falls under the ambit of psychology, traditionally in the form of counselling. As pointed right in the beginning, coaching and mentoring is a natural thing but forgotten, or neglected along the way, apparently for practical reasons.

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<sup>7</sup> Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (2017). *Garis Panduan Pelaksanaan Pementoran Kepimpinan Perkhidmatan Awam*. Putrajaya: Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, Bahagian Pengurusan Psikologi (Translated).