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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 adjunct¹ 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

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

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 would be due to concern about how others feel and to preserve harmony within the group². 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 planning³. 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*⁴ (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 value⁵ on relationships, teamwork, and consensus building. The

more recent study⁶ 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

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

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

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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 (Accessed Date: 25 October 2017).

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 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)⁷. 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.

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

Article

GOOD TO GREAT THROUGH GRIT

By Khairiah Mokhtaruddin

The conventional wisdom for one's success is often based on how talented one is, with the premise that it is talent – innate, something that you're born with – that will take you places. The obsession with segmenting individual potential based on what they do and what we think they can do is natural as it serves to ease our mental processes in decision-making¹. It is likely that the desire to challenge and confirm our beliefs that led to the birth of multiple testing methods, which aims to explain our attitudes, behaviours, cognitive skills, social abilities, and many others. For instance, in the early 1900s, a form of classifying intelligence based on standardised tests replaced the earlier techniques of behavioural observations. Since then, there are numerous cognitive ability tests that exist, such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales², which were initially used to merely identify mental retardation in children but has now expanded to classify one's intelligence.

Given the circumstances, how does one measure talent? Does it require an all-

encompassing test that rigorously measures those who are gifted? Even if it was possible to do so, will it serve to predict whether they would reach their potential compared to others? While it can be argued that talent may mean that the individual achieves success at a faster rate with lower attempt rate, a famed professor of psychology, Angela Duckworth, reasoned that regular individuals who can exercise self-control and perseverance can reach as high as those with natural talents. While there are merits to invest in those who demonstrate potential at an early age based on conventional assessments, there are also additional areas that can be explored to serve as determinants of successful individuals. The premise of this argument is how *grit* – the passion, determination, and perseverance for long-term goals – is powerful in helping one to achieve their potential.

How does one acquire grit? Duckworth offers two ways³. One is that it can be done individually – inside-out. This is done by developing habits of undertaking daily

¹ Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, and Paul Slovic, eds. *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics & Biases*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

² Kirk A. Becker. *History of the Stanford-Binet intelligence scales: Content and psychometrics*. Stanford-Binet Intelligence

Scales, Fifth Edition Assessment Service Bulletin Number 1. 2003

³ Angela Duckworth. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Scribner, 2016,

challenges that exceeds one's skills such as writing a sentence, a paragraph, or a page on one day, and waking up the next to further refine those very same phrases until one reaches a level of satisfaction and confidence to share it with others for further improvement. Sharing it with others and getting the right feedback would entail the second way of acquiring grit – the outside-in. When parents, friends, bosses, mentors, and colleagues can provide the right feedback, guidance, support, and challenge to a task, idea, project, serving one to retreat and take in those comments to enhance it further and repeat the process over again, that's a way of grit acquisition. Another way of acquiring grit from inside-out is to connect one's work, task or job to a purpose that is beyond oneself – not solely for monthly salary but towards improvement of a sector or charity, for instance.

Understandably, the inside-out and outside-in tactics are heavily dependent on the individual and the members within the individuals' interpersonal circle. It is dependent on the individual's character (often linked to morality such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness) and the environment (such as cultural contexts and path dependency – how one experience shapes another). In "The Road to Character", the author offers two ways of looking at character⁴, the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The former can be

summed as what organisations look for in hiring such as self-management and intrapersonal skills. The latter are characteristics such as social intelligence, self-control, and gratitude – the type of qualities people will remember us for when we depart, hence the terminology. Duckworth goes further to add a third dimension to character – the intellectual virtue – inquisitiveness, curiosity, and enthusiasm for knowledge that encourages open discourse and active engagement on ideas.

These dimensions of character, when relating to grit, could unlock the reason why experts become who they are. It is through persistence in practicing that shifts conscious incompetence to unconscious competence, such as practicing a classical piano piece, perfecting corner kicks during football training, and refining writing skills. The luxury of having personal circles to motivate and the internal drive to better oneself daily is surely one of the ways to reach personal great peaks in our lives. Our social exchanges – at work, at home, within the community – adds further definition to personal selves. To see grit in a religious or even vernacular sense could be in how it is always encouraged for one to keep trying in striving towards success. However, for one to keep trying and to persist, they need to persevere – the essence of grit.

⁴ David Brooks. *The Road to Character*, Random House: New York, 2015.

Would grit ever outrank talent? It may. In a world where fixation lies in segmenting information into manageable chunks through tests results, ranks, and metric indices, there is a measurement tool called the Grit Scale⁵, which may provide additional insight into how likely one can reach their potential or go beyond it, with or without talent in the traditional sense. Scales and sense aside, those with grit do not

practice marathons to merely win competitions or to break Paula Radcliffe's record. They are constantly training to beat their personal best. Michael Jordan may believe that "talent wins match and teamwork wins championships", but grit may offer the winning formula for personal and shared success.

⁵ A self-scoring scale that measures how gritty an individual is.



Book Recommendation

By Ismail Johari Othman

I, KKK: The Autobiography of a Historian

Writer: Khoo Kay Kim with Eddin Khoo

The tin mining industry of Perak in the 18th century somewhat accelerated the development of the state and has been documented in many forms by scholars and practitioners including its two illustrious sons, namely Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim and Datuk Mohd Nor Khalid (Datuk Lat). Both diligently captured their observations on the society around them. Unknown to many, both followed their civil servant father serving the state during their formative years. Interestingly, both launched their respective biographies within a space of less than a year. The book recommendation for this issue is about the former. Published by Art Printing Works in April this year and launched by none other than the Sultan of Perak himself, the book walked through the different life phases of Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim until today.

One of Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim's influence in life was his grandmother, which

intriguingly was shared through simple conversations and storytelling. Through these means, Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim learned about his family's history, rituals, and customs. Some of the stories, such as the opium smokers, resurfaced in the latter part of his life when he studied about Chinese communities' dialects in early Malaya. The broader pictures of life such as football, cinema, and society mostly came from his father, who was also his role model as far as discipline and law abiding is concerned. He fondly remembered how his father took a great deal of time to explain things to him. His strict yet very loving mother instilled a sense of responsibility in him by giving him the task to look after chickens and ducks. Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim was open about the recurring arguments between his mother and grandmother, which to him was a case of two very strong personalities – apparently a typical *Peranakan* trait.

Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim seemed to enjoy every moment of his teenage days in Anglo Chinese School and St. Michael's Institution, especially the social life and the life outside the lessons. Teachers evidently played a role in shaping the growth of the students – often to balance their interests. As for Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim, this was the period when he developed interest in debate. Like his peers, he was also influenced by the popular culture then such as Tarzan, Elvis Presley, and P. Ramlee, to name a few. It was during this time that he picked up the smoking habit, an effect of what he called the “social liberation” in the 1950s.

Even before this book was written, Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim has been synonymous with football. He used to be a regular contributor to the media – sharing his thoughts and history about the local football scene. Through this book, one could gain some insights on his coaching perspectives. His father spotted his interest and talent in football. He attended practically every game that his son played, gave critical feedback, and encouraged the latter to read newspaper articles on football where techniques and analysis were discussed. To Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim, the one who received the coaching should have natural talent, a foundation to develop further. On the other hand, given his father who was never a football player, passion and being

critical may be potential factors to be a good coach.

Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim attended University of Malaya in Singapore when socialist movement was at its height in the island city. Having said so, his participation in student politics was limited to attending talks, debates, and discussions. Apart from time at the football field, he frequented amusement parks in Singapore until he became quite adept to waltz, rumba, and samba. It was also here in Singapore, he met scholars like Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Za'ba), D. P. Singhal, and Professor K. G. Tregonning who made considerable impact on Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim's appreciation for certain things that was proven useful in his career towards the later years such as attention to details, focus on society in analysing a situation, and acquiring primary sources in forming opinions.

Finally, discussing the life of Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim would not be complete without mentioning a lady by the name Rathimalar Navaratnasingam (Rathi) given the fact that he passed through school and university without having a girlfriend. Rathi, a pretty and responsible girl that Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim first met in 1962, has been his pillar of strength all along. They are blessed with three sons whom the eldest co-authored this book.

This book is highly recommended to aspiring and evolving leaders who want to explore leadership related concepts in life like influence, coaching, and mentoring. It is also a potential source of inspiration to

career civil servants on how they can make a difference in their family and life through basic approaches like conversations, storytelling, and continuous encouragement.

I, KKK. The Autobiography of a Historian is published by Art Printing Works and can be purchased from leading bookstores at RM50.00.

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