Comparing the strategic purpose of Coaching and Mentoring

Introduction

Executive Coaching and Executive Mentoring are two methods of skills and personal development available to senior leadership, supporting their professional and personal growth. The following section outlines the strategic need for continual personal development using these methods and then critically compares the methods.

The need for mentoring and coaching

Executives and Senior Managers have to affect a balance between their operational accountability and that of the strategic needs of the organisation and their lines of responsibility.
When someone reaches an executive and senior level, one might incorrectly assume that sufficient skills and experience exist for the exec to operate naturally at that level. This is rarely the case though as Execs are promoted into Exec roles from more junior positions, hired in from a different company, or transferred in from a different part of the organisation. In all of these cases, the Exec will need to adapt to a new environment and with it a different range of challenges, needing new and different skills.

Additionally as every business naturally evolves in order to be successful within an ecosystem of competition and changing customer needs, so does the company's leadership team.
A 2019 survey of executives (Executive Development Associates / BTS, 2019) found that modern organisations are rapidly changing their business models through digital transformation and senior leadership need to learn new skills and approaches in order to adapt to this change.
The survey identified that the top five 'hot topics' in executive development over the next two to three years will be:

1. Business Ethics / Integrity
2. Innovation
3. Cognitive Readiness (mental preparation needed to sustain performance)
4. Community Outreach
5. Competitive Positioning

In the same survey, the authors discovered that 22.9% of Executives were most likely to make use of Coaching and 22.5% mentoring, for their personal development.

The similarities of Coaching & Mentoring

Coaching and mentoring can be defined as "learning relationships which help people to take charge of their own development, to release their potential and to achieve results" (Connor & Pokora, 2017). Both Coaching and Mentoring have similarities in the fact that they allow the Client, the personal in receipt of the learning relationship, to drive the outcome of the arrangement and set the topics to be discussed. In this way, an executive will choose a coach or mentor that is suited to both the challenges they face, and one that is a fit in terms of style and approach.

Source: innervoice.guru_ https://innervoice.guru/coaching-vs-mentoring [9th February 2022]

In addition to the results of the survey discussed previously, the strategic challenges an Executive may face are going to be varied but likely to include topics such as

- How to set budget priorities based on market demands,
- How to build a high performing team to deliver a quality product,
- How to maintain motivation and moral through any challenges,
- How to maintain a competitive edge both in terms of market positioning, and in terms or recruiting and maintaining top talent.

All of these subjects, and many more, are discussed as part of a coaching or mentoring relationship because in the heart of each of these topics is a need or desire for change.
Change is one of the core objectives that both coaching & mentoring support. The client recognises a desired outcome and the coach or mentor facilitates a learning environment that supports that desire. Within that learning environment, the coach / mentor works with the client to help then realise their own potential and their own abilities to navigate those changes, thus delivering the required outcomes. For an executive the required change is often at a department or a cross-team and organisational level, rather than with specific individuals and operational levels.

The client sets the agenda for the learning relationship, as they will understand better the drivers for change and the required outcomes. The Coach or Mentor then brings their skills, experience and tools to facilitate the client towards finding the path to that change.
During this process, the facilitator (i.e. coach / mentor) will be building trust with the client and strengthening the relationship. As it strengthens then the client is likely to bring forth a deeper level of reflection & reveal any limiting self-beliefs that have previously hampered the client's ability to self-manage that change.

As the client explores their agenda, an effective coach will support them to understand their own potential and strengths. They help build the client's self-belief they are in control of the change that required. This leads to a more sustainable approach than something solely directive does. Here, the client will likely walk away from the relationship with a deeper understanding of their role in change, and often with changes in beliefs, values and approaches that will extend far beyond the life of the coaching relationship.

In contrast to more directive approaches both the coaching and mentoring relationship is an exploratory one, looking at different approaches and tools and helping the client find the right fit for the personality, their experience and their corporate environment. As an analogy, the client is like a music composer with an idea of the music they would like to hear. The coach/mentor acts like the conductor of the orchestra using different instruments to bring the client's vision alive. During the

coaching relationship, the client gradually learns that they have the skills to conduct their own orchestra.
Whilst there are many similarities between coaching and mentoring, as many differences make them unique in their approach and applicability to a situation.

Defining Coaching & Mentoring

The essence of coaching is to have an exploratory and creative conversation between a coach and a coachee where there is a view to a supporting a particular outcome. The International Coaching Federation defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential." (ICF-Unknown, 2020). In executive coaching this relationship involves a coachee / client who has a strategic responsibility, operating an executive or senior management capacity.
In contrast, a dictionary definition of mentoring is "the act or process of helping and giving advice to a younger or less experienced person, especially in a job or at school". (Cambridge University Press, 2020) In this relationship, the role of mentor is to offer support, guidance and impart their experience to the mentee.

Contrasting Coaching & Mentoring

These two definitions highlight that one of the ways that coaching and mentoring differ is in the information flow in the relationship. In Coaching, the coach will use a line of questioning to encourage the coachee to find his or her own problem solution. In mentoring, the mentor offers some part of the solution to the mentees problem. They bring their own experience and expertise and offer that to the mentee to support their outcomes. In mentoring, there is a transfer of knowledge and in coaching, there is less so.

The knowledge transfer in mentoring means that a mentor will have a specific specialist skillset which the client / mentee, such as business development, working in a similar sector or organisation, or particular technical skills. The client may therefore engage a mentor when there is a recognised skills gap that the mentor supports. In contrast, where there the requirement for knowledge transfer is less apparent, or where a wider view is needed, a coach may be more appropriate.
In this model, mentoring is supporting the mentee to integrate and apply the knowledge of the mentor with their own, and coaching is the coach working with the coachee to recognise their own wisdom and knowledge and helping them find their own ways of applying that.
An executive with knowledge of the industry or a strong peer network may engage a mentor where they would like to explore applying a particular model to their own business. For example, they could engage a peer who has successfully become compliant to a new framework, or who has developed their business in a particular region. This way the mentee learns from the experience of the mentor.

With these examples, a coach may ask the coachee questions that lead the coachee towards their own discovery that they need to expand their business in a particular region, or helping them explore the pitfalls of doing so.

A coach will typically use external tools and models to explore the goals with the coachee, whereas a mentor relies on their own expertise. An exec may find the coaching tools useful when they do not have access to mentors with the required skills. This could the case where there is a particularly niche business or goal that is the subject of discussion, or perhaps where the only mentors may have a competitive interest that preclude them from having discussions.
It is possible that a coach and a mentor work in parallel. A coachee may identify, through coaching, that specialist resources would support them in meeting their goals. One of these resources may be an experienced party such as a mentor.

In summary, the strategic purpose for mentoring for an Executive is when there is a need for a supported progression and where a trusted and experienced Mentor can provide specific advice and guidance. A coaching relationship would suit a situation where a less defined and confined exploration of a goal is required.

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