

# Coaching vs mentoring: The difference and when to use which method

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As a leader or manager, you have a lot of responsibility to guide and develop your team. One of the most effective ways to do this is through coaching and mentoring. However, it can be challenging to know when to use each approach.



Image: Supplied

Both coaching and mentoring have their unique benefits and can be effective in different situations.

Research from BetterUp reveals that employees who received personalised coaching in the early days of the pandemic were more likely to develop an internal “resiliency buffer” they could tap into during the resulting times of tumult and change. After two cohorts of 1,000-plus people over several months, researchers learned that coached individuals were four times as resilient as those in the uncoached cohort.

In this article, we’ll explore the difference between coaching and mentoring to help you decide when to adopt which management style, so you can become a better leader and manager.

## Coaching

Coaching is a process of empowering a team member by taking them outside their comfort zone and focusing on them finding their own solutions. Nancy Kline says:

“ A brilliant coach is the one who brings out the brilliance of others. ”

This is the process of stretching them outside their comfort zone whilst holding them in a space where they feel they can be vulnerable to exploring different options without judgment. This is an opportunity for them to find the answers themselves and contribute to better performance and achievement of their goals.

People often believe that coaching is used when an individual needs to develop or improve new skills. It is more than that. Coaching is when a manager adopts a management style where they become less of the 'expert', meaning not being as directive and telling the team member what to do, but instead asking questions for them to explore alternatives. It is almost as if at that moment they are in a relationship of equals.

A misconception is that coaching requires a long time, yet a manager can still empower their team member in a short time. It is critical to have a clear objective or goal that needs to be achieved.

Coaching can help individuals overcome challenges and obstacles that are preventing them from achieving their goals. The manager adopting the coaching management style will ask powerful disruptive questions to get them from point A to point B quicker than what they would have done on their own. It is a hands-on approach that requires a high level of engagement from both the coach and the individual being coached.

In a more formal coaching session, the manager works with the team member to identify goals and then supports them in developing an action plan to achieve their goals. Holding the team member accountable is an important part of the process.

A popular framework to use is the GROW model. The acronym stands for:

- Goal: what do you want to achieve?
- Reality: what is happening now?
- Options: what could you do?
- Will: what is the way forward?

## When to coach

Coaching is particularly effective in the following situations:

- When some specific challenges or obstacles need to be overcome.
- When an individual needs to develop their confidence or overcome self-doubt.
- When an individual needs to develop or improve new skills.
- When a clear objective or goal needs to be achieved.
- When immediate feedback and support are required to improve performance.



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## Mentoring

A mentor is someone who shares their knowledge, skills and/or experience, to help another to develop and grow. Mentoring is a process of guiding and supporting individuals in their personal and professional development. Mentors must have first-hand experience, knowledge and insights and a keen mind to help others.

Often mentoring forms part of a formal process in a business. On the other hand, many people find mentors outside their organisation and often have more than one mentor.

Mentoring is usually focused on long-term career growth by sharing lessons and insights from their own career.

Mentoring is particularly effective when the company is looking at the development and retention of younger talent in the organisation or grooming someone as a successor for a specific role. Mentoring is more directive than coaching and no qualification is required.

Mentoring is often used in functional areas (only) but works best when the mentees' holistic development is considered. Social mentoring is a trend we see rising. Traditional mentorship is typically viewed as time-consuming and focuses solely on the professional aspect. Social mentoring helps people negotiate life's complexity while also promoting personal growth, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills.

As with coaching, mentoring is a relationship-based approach that requires trust and open communication between the mentor and the mentee. This is why reverse mentoring is a popular inclination, whereby the mentee becomes the "expert" and mentors the manager on a topic, for example, digital tools or technology trends.

## When to mentor

Mentoring is particularly effective in the following situations:

- When an individual needs guidance and support to achieve their long-term career goals.
- When an individual needs to navigate complex organisational structures.
- When an individual is looking for a role model or mentor in their field.

Coaching and mentoring are both valuable tools for leaders and managers to develop their team members. Knowing when to use each approach can help you be more effective in empowering and supporting your team.

## ABOUT ANJA VAN BEEK

Anja van Beek is an independent leadership consultant, talent strategist and coach.  
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