

## What's the Difference Between Coaching and Mentoring?

Written by: Dr. Nanette Miner, Leadership Development and Workplace-Learning Strategy Consultant, The Training Doctor

Each month I conduct four to five interviews with small to mid-sized construction management and civil engineering firms, to discuss how they are addressing leadership development and succession planning in their firms. Three times a year I summarize the most recent data and present it to a small group of invited executives (you can request an invitation to the next Executive Round Table here: [www.trainingdr.com/events](http://www.trainingdr.com/events)).

The purpose of this article is to clear up a common misconception I hear when speaking with CEOs, COOs, or HR folks in these firms: There is a significant difference between coaching and mentoring. Both approaches can contribute to your employees' professional development, but not in the same way.

### Coaching

Coaching can be done internally or externally. A supervisor can be a coach. A peer can be a coach. Or an expert coach can be brought in from outside the organization to provide coaching. In all cases, coaching is focused on the work that one is currently doing and how to do it better.

A supervisor may spend 5 or 10 minutes a day with their employee, giving them tips or refining how they do their work. For example, salespeople receive frequent coaching as they proceed from prospecting to closing a sale. Each



step in the sales process requires dialog or actions that the manager is generally more expert at, and therefore can provide performance tips, aka coaching.

Sometimes peers are used as coaches. An employee who has been on the job for two or three years can offer suggestions to a new employee for doing their work more efficiently or accurately. A peer coach can also offer warnings, such as "This is the step that trips most people up, so be sure you double check..."

Often, at a more senior level, executive coaches are brought in from outside the company to be a sounding board or a thinking partner for a leader in the organization. One executive that we work with has bi-weekly meetings with an external coach so that he is better able to communicate with his two partners,

as the three are geographically separated from one another. Prior to coaching, misunderstandings caused by the coachee's poor communication skills were common, and resulted in organizational setbacks on more than one occasion.

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## Mentoring

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Mentoring is more about influence, guidance, or direction than it is about performance on the job. Often, when interviewing CEOs, COOs, or HR individuals about how they are developing their future leaders, I hear “We use mentoring.” When I ask them to tell me more about the mentoring process, I am met with silence. This is my first clue that they are using the term incorrectly. Mentoring requires a loose but formal process of purposeful interactions and planning for the mentee's development and achievement. Taking someone under your wing or designating yourself a “mentor” does not automatically create a mentoring relationship. A mentor is someone who has a 30,000-foot view of their mentee's career and career trajectory, s/he helps the mentee to identify career opportunities, champions them to others in the organization, and acts as a role model.

The significant differences in mentoring and coaching are these:

1. Mentoring is not a daily or even weekly activity; it is more a long-term strategic process.
2. Mentoring has nothing to do with work performance; it is about strategizing, career positioning, and being a sage sounding board.


Additionally, a mentor may or may not necessarily work in the same organization. Sometimes it is more beneficial for a mentee to have a mentor that doesn't have insider information about their company because there are no preconceived notions about possibilities or barriers.

## WHICH IS BETTER?

You know that old phrase: It's like comparing apples and oranges? The same can be said of coaching and mentoring. Neither is better than the other because they are significantly different. Ideally employees have both a coach and a mentor. The coach works with them on a daily or weekly basis to improve work performance and the mentor works with them periodically to strategize career trajectory.

## YOU NEED BOTH

If you would like to up-level the performance of your organization, ensure that each of your managers has coaching skills such as asking open ended questions, setting goals and expectations, and giving constructive feedback.

If you would like people to stay with your organization long-term, ensure each has a mentor who helps them to navigate their career. 



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## About the Author

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Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for *Chief Learning Office magazine*, *Forbes*, and *MBA World* and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as *Inc. Radio* and *America's Workforce Radio*.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is *Future-Proofing Your Organization*.

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