

Career Directions

Coaching and Mentoring

At some stage in your career you may benefit from a relationship with a coach or mentor. Coaching and mentoring are strategic relationships that promote professional development, career satisfaction and, ultimately, practice. Although there are similarities between the two, understanding their differences will help to ensure that you choose the right strategy for the right purpose. This section will describe both concepts and provide you with tips on how to find a coach or a mentor.

Coaching¹

Coaching is a collaborative relationship undertaken between a coach and a willing individual, the client. Coaching is time-limited and focused in nature, and uses conversation to help clients achieve their goals. Coaching is not advice-giving, nor is it teaching or directing. It is a collaboration in which the coach acts like a midwife, supporting, encouraging, and helping the client through the experience — while acknowledging the client as the person actually “making it happen.” To facilitate these conversations, a coach must have the ability to listen, discuss and question; to clarify core values, beliefs and sense of purpose; to identify gaps between a client’s vision and reality; and to encourage, motivate and instil confidence.

When might you need a coach?

There are times in our careers when we’re just not sure what the next step should be. It is during these times that we can benefit from a coaching conversation. Most often we know what we want to accomplish, but our self-limiting perceptions get in the way of our ability to realize our personal vision. These inner voices plant the seeds of self-doubt and fear, and whisper you can’t do that or what if. A coach can help you face your fears, stretch your capacity and move forward.

It takes courage to say, “I don’t know what to do next.” But once you acknowledge your fears, the possibilities for moving forward are limitless. Most of us know what we want to do and be — all we need is a safe place and some support to achieve our goals. That’s why knowing when to seek the services of a coach is as important as knowing how to select one.

¹ Adapted from *Donner, G.J. & Wheeler, M.M. (2009). Coaching in nursing: An introduction. Indianapolis: STTI.*

Finding a Coach

Now that you have a purpose for a coaching conversation, you'll need to find a suitable coach. Since coaching is really a conversation built on mutual trust, the coach must be someone whose expertise and approach you value and trust. Some health care organizations include coaching services as part of their human resources offerings. Professional organizations may have coaches available for members, and some community organizations also work with coaches. For more information on donnerwheeler coaching services, visit www.donnerwheeler.com.

Mentoring²

Mentoring is a longer-term relationship in which someone with more experience and wisdom supports and encourages another as that individual grows and develops professionally and personally. The focus in mentoring is on the relationship and on the ongoing development of the mentee — the person who receives help, guidance and support from the mentor, who is someone with more experience and/or influence. Given the nature of the relationship, it's no surprise to learn that mentoring relies heavily on the wisdom, maturity and experience of the mentor.

A successful mentoring relationship is founded on mutual trust, shared values, interests, commitment, respect and excellent communication skills. Individuals may be engaged in one or more mentoring relationships at the same time or over the course of their careers.

It's important to note that a mentoring relationship should mutually benefit each party. While mentors are able to share their knowledge, expertise and wisdom, they can and do also learn from their mentees. Access to new knowledge, different perspectives and newer generational issues are a few of the bonuses afforded the mentor. And for the mentee, acquiring a mentor can provide the additional support and guidance necessary to achieve career goals.

Why do I want a mentor?

You may be at a stage in your career where you are faced with new challenges and/or role responsibilities. You have a career vision and have developed a career plan, and a part of both of these is the identification of a mentor as a resource. In answering the question "Why do I want a mentor?" you will develop a clearly articulated purpose or intention for this mentoring opportunity. Purpose informs all phases of the mentoring relationship and is the touchstone for evaluating it on an ongoing basis.

Remember, you need to know what you want in order to ask for it — and in order to get it.

² Adapted from *Cooper, M. & Wheeler, M.M. (2007). Building Successful Mentoring Relationships Workbook.*

Finding a Mentor

Mentors can come from within or outside your profession. Most often mentors are experienced professionals with a good network who are able to share their knowledge and foster leadership skills in less-experienced colleagues. Consider approaching a person informally, someone you think can help you to achieve your goals. You might choose a mentor who is from a different profession or discipline than yours, but it should be someone with whom you can develop a relationship. Look for a person who is well-respected generally, someone who has patience, enthusiasm and a sense of humour. Also consider the potential mentor's leadership style — it should fit well with your own — and ensure that he or she has the time and willingness to devote to you, along with the skills to advise, teach and counsel you. Remember, a good fit matters when it comes to learning styles, too.

Another approach to selecting a mentor is through a formal program, where there is usually a pre-selected pool of registered candidates from which you can choose. At play in a situation like this will be a systematic method for matching mentors with mentees. Whatever the method of selection, both mentor and mentee will ultimately make the final decision regarding the fit of their mutual goals, learning needs and learning styles.

Does your workplace, professional association or professional network have a formal mentorship program? Check it out!