Eight Coaching

Myths and Misconceptions

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David Clutterbuck explores some of the myths and misconceptions that have arisen in the world of coaching and mentoring, and encourages us to challenge our assumptions.

Since I first got ensnared by the world of coaching and mentoring, part of my learning has been to focus less on what is assumed and taken for granted and more on the question ‘What do we have evidence for and how valid is that evidence?’

In the 1990s, I began to explore critically the academic evidence around mentoring and found that:

• Most studies were so dependent on a specific context that it was not tenable to extrapolate from them to create generic conclusions; or they mixed contexts, such as relationships within the reporting line and outside of it, making the data equally invalid

• The instruments, which were supposed to measure mentoring quality, were based on the unvalidated assumption that mentors who exhibited a wider variety of behaviours from a prescribed list, were more effective than those who exhibited fewer of the behaviours. (If you think about it, doing a few things really well can easily trump doing a lot half as well!)

• Evidence from large-scale quantitative studies by US academics produced opposite

conclusions to evidence from practitioners drawing on real applications and case

studies. In recent years, some colleagues and I have been taking a critical perspective on the related and heavily overlapping discipline of coaching.

Here are eight of the common assumptions which we have been questioning, together with alternative perspectives from our own observations and evidence-gathering.

1. ***Coaches need to set clear goals at the start of an assignment.***

Consider the contrary evidence:

• A Harvard study of 200 coaches found that, for almost all of them, the original goal

morphed into something different as the client better understood their values and their environment.

• Over-focus on narrow goals blinds people to other possibilities, encourages riskier

behaviour, and is associated with *lower* performance in, for example, career

progression.

• Coaching is often about helping the client work out what they want to do. Having achieved that, they are often smart enough not to need a coach to help them do it.

• Most models of coaching place goal-setting as a middle step, after understanding context.

**2. *Coaching needs to be solutions-focused*.**

The need to find a solution within the session often comes from the coach (wanting to feel useful) rather than from the client, who may simply want to get his or her head around an issue so they can take their time working out the right solution. A clear danger in solutions focus (which, of course, does have many uses) is that the client agrees to a solution before they are ready to do so.

1. ***Coaching is non-directive; Mentoring is directive.***

Professional mentors often say exactly the opposite. Neither statement stands

up to scrutiny. There are actually many approaches to both coaching and mentoring

with varying levels of directiveness, but the mainstream of both is non-directive. AoEC founder and president John Leary-Joyce describes mentoring as ‘coaching plus’ – the plusses being possession of contextually specific knowledge and/or experience; being a role model; and a greater influence on networking. Mentors use their wisdom to help another person develop wisdom of their own – telling people what to do isn’t part of the skill set or role.

1. ***Coaches should take copious notes***

If you do, you cannot be attending fully to the client. Neuroscience tells us that we cannibalise the bits of the brain we need for active listening when we try to capture words on paper or screen. Pausing every now and then (having captured one-word notes from time to time) and asking the client ‘What would you like to capture from what we have just been saying?’ is far more effective. It’s also more clientcentred

– are your notes really more valid or important than theirs?

1. ***A good coach can coach anyone in anything***

A contrary view is that coaches need to have enough contextual knowledge to frame

really insightful and empathic questions and to ensure the safety of the client and themselves. As an example, a coach ignorant of insider dealing rules working with a bank employee was implicitly colluding with unethical and potentially illegal ehaviour because he lacked appropriate subject knowledge. There’s also the matter of credibility. Whether we like it or not, very senior executives often expect their coaches to have experienced what it is like to work at their level in a business. One of the clear lessons of *The Leadership Pipeline\** is that people have to go through a significant mindshift at each stage, from managing self, through managing others, managing managers, to managing functions and so on.

1. ***Coaching is a process***

The research into coach maturity tells us that coaches also go through radical mindshifts about their professional practice. One of the key transitions is from thinking of coaching as something you do, to acknowledging that it is something you are. Coaches at the third level of maturity integrate immense personal learning and reflection into a personal philosophy that aligns with their sense of being.

1. ***Number of hours of coaching is a good guide to coach efficacy***

Actually, the results from coach assessment centres involving hundreds of coaches indicate that there is no significant correlation. There is even less correlation between coach competence and level of fees charged!

1. ***The client is the focus for coaching*.**

It is increasingly apparent (though we lack good empirical evidence) that coaching someone without paying attention to the systems of which they are a part and which influence their behaviour is less effective than working through the client to change the systems as well. This isn’t always possible, of course, but focusing

too much on the client alone creates a selflimiting belief on the part of the coach, and this is likely to be played out through the client.

As coaching matures, it’s gratifying to see all the three main professional bodies taking a more evidence-based approach to coaching practice, although arguably Europe is in the vanguard compared with the USA (as it is, for example, in the widespread use of supervision).

As individual coaches, we can enhance our own practice by identifying assumptions we make about how we coach and what good looks like – then asking ourselves these questions:

• What evidence do we have for this assumption?

• Is this assumption always true, or just sometimes true?

• What are the contexts and situations when it might not be true?

• Is the evidence in support of this assumption itself based on other assumptions which might themselves be questioned? We can also open ourselves up to other

perspectives – for example, by selecting supervisors who come from a discipline we are relatively unfamiliar with; or by developing a portfolio of memberships of organisations or social networks that will direct us toward different ways of looking at the familiar.

The work of Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and others tells us how easily our

minds are tricked into believing something is true because it fits with other assumptions we hold. Sometimes, of course, we have to take things on faith. But, given that one of the core competencies of an effective coach is curiosity, doesn’t it make sense periodically to challenge some of our most deeply-held assumptions about coaching?

\* Charan R., Drotter S., & Noel, J. 2011. *The*

*Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership*

*Powered Company.* John Wiley & Sons.

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