



# CULTIVATING TOMORROW’S LEADERS: SHOULD YOU TEACH, COACH, OR MENTOR?

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You need good people in your department to make your organization shine. Capable deputies allow you to stretch to new goals, and a thriving and successful organization advances the interests of staff, customers, and stakeholders. A key step, then, is simply to hire great staff. Did I say “simply”?

The ideal employee is hard to find in any industry, even harder when what you want is management-caliber staff. You need someone who is not only technically competent, but an adept communicator, savvy with office politics, perceptive of implicit cultural issues, clear on big picture priorities, and a good people manager. And if that isn’t tricky enough, you are contending with the fact that this person is in great demand, even in today’s job market.

So what can you do to meet the staffing demands of your department? The best answer to this challenge is not only to find and keep the perfect person, but also to create a system that identifies and grooms the people already in your ranks who show the most potential. Developing your staff by utilizing the internal human resources you already possess is a sensible way to advance your department’s success in the current “do more with less” era and ensures you have competent managers-to-be waiting in the wings. It also supports the retention of key knowledge and skills within the organization, which can support organizational learning.

## The Leverage in Mentoring

In today’s leadership environment, the word “mentor” has become like flypaper, catching all the assumptions and grand ideas that people throw at it. But what does this word actually mean? What goes into being a good mentor and creating an effective

mentoring program in your department? And how does it foster employee talent?

To understand how mentoring can serve your department, let’s begin by considering some simple definitions,

starting with teaching and coaching, terms sometimes used synonymously with mentoring. In addition to distinguishing these three words, we’ll explore appropriate applications of these concepts to an in-house development program aimed at elevating the caliber and loyalty of your staff. By untangling these terms, you can better assess what is needed in your setting and leverage what you currently have to develop successful and sustainable leadership from within your department.

## Teaching

Teaching refers to instructing and imparting information, knowledge, and wisdom. The teacher/student relationship implies that the teacher has the information, knowledge, or wisdom that needs to be transferred to the student. The challenge for a teacher is to impart relevant information in such a way as to ensure that the receiver absorbs it. This kind of information-sharing is enhanced by the ready availability of off-the-shelf training modules, podcasts, HR manuals, and Internet searches.

**Teaching Application:** Consider what technical knowledge a potential manager would need to be proficient in the job: for example, an IT manager would need working knowledge of the hardware and software systems, vendors, customers, management structures, HR policies, budget process, etc. Now consider who (or what) is best suited to deliver that information and gauge proficiency. In many ways, this aspect of development is the easiest. You are attempting to strengthen the technical knowledge a person would need to serve in a higher capacity. The metrics of competency are easy to observe.

## Coaching

Coaching focuses on the repetitive practicing of skills until mastery is attained. Athletes, musicians, artists, and professionals of all kinds spend lots of time practicing the skills that will make them proficient. Good coaches know how to break down skill sets into distinct, learnable segments that can be practiced over and over until they become second nature. In a coaching relationship, the coach may be teaching some valuable information; however, the

## TEAM TIP

Use the tips in this article to determine if members of your team would benefit from teaching, coaching, or mentoring.



onus is upon the student to learn this new skill by doing it over and over, assessing her performance after each attempt. Potentially more complex than teaching, coaching requires the vigilance to observe from the sidelines while the student practices the skill, patience to revisit mistakes and successes to solidify skill development, and prudence to reevaluate strategy when progress stalls.

**Coaching Application:** Contemplate the skills and attributes you want in a manager that require practice and refinement to achieve mastery. Such skills might include handling a tricky personnel issue, managing project teams, creating and presenting reports for company brass, and running efficient meetings. These skill sets can be more complex than the technical skills referenced in the teaching section above. A proficient manager must be adept at a range of primary skills in order to be effective in any of these scenarios. For example, competency in communication (listening, oral, and written), negotiation, and conflict management as well as political acumen are required to succeed in these tasks. In addition, the discipline to establish goals, work plans, and deadlines, and to hold oneself and others accountable, is equally important.

Before you glaze over at how to accomplish this coaching feat, consider these questions. Who on your staff already does some of these things, including yourself? Who is best suited to coach a promising employee on these sophisticated skills? What small actions can the employee take to acquire and enhance certain skills? What kinds of events and activities can he or she attend that showcase these skills in action? What mechanisms exist that allow for employees to evaluate and be evaluated on their performance of a given task? The opportunities for practice are likely part of everyday business—identifying coaches may be the challenge.

## **Mentoring**

*Mentoring* enables a person to tap into his or her own internal resources in order to mature and virtuously develop as a human being. A mentor/protégé relationship is complex, generally containing elements of both teaching and coaching. More than knowledge transfer and skill acquisition, mentoring denotes cultivating the whole person—one's values, passions, and goals. A mentor commits to a protégé and vice versa because both are looking for a sustained professional relationship that serves a higher purpose. For the mentor, it is the opportunity to influence and support the human resource potential in others: What does this person need to excel, here or anywhere? For the protégé, the relationship supports authentic personal development: With the support of another, am I willing to look within myself for the answers? A successful mentor/protégé relationship necessitates a shared connection and should never be imposed without joint agreement. The rigors of this

progressive relationship require a foundation of mutual commitment, honesty, and respect.

**Mentoring Application:** The human energy investment required for an effective mentoring program can be prohibitive in our 24/7 workplace of weighted quarterly reporting and short-term results. You may ask: How can a leader invest this time when there are so many other priorities? The answer lies in the fact that people are a leader's most important long-term resource. Turnover, incompetence, lost knowledge, and a lack of preparation are expensive and inefficient. The wrong person, poorly groomed, in a position of influence and responsibility can significantly damage any department or organization, requiring years of recovery. Successful mentoring is one of the best, time-tested methods for developing the skills, know-how, self-confidence, and critical thinking abilities that leaders need. Yes, it takes time, commitment, and intention (most worthy things do); however, it does not necessarily take a lot of money. You may already possess the resources in the form of experienced, seasoned staff.

Good mentors see their role as drawing forth the wisdom and inherent knowledge of the protégé. A mentor enhances this process by asking good questions, pushing protégés to look inside themselves for the answers and any personal biases or assumptions that may obfuscate their success, thus deepening capacity and broadening awareness. The mentor is not in the relationship to talk about his own successes, give unwarranted advice, or otherwise tell the protégé what to do. Instead, he prompts the protégé to go deeper for the greatest learning, adding insight where appropriate. The focus must always be on the protégé; a mentor who wants attention for his own accomplishments must find acknowledgement in other venues. A good mentor is prepared to relinquish the field to a new cadre of star players, content to sit back and be the coach who relishes in their success—which ultimately becomes his own.

Accomplished mentors become a self-sustaining development system for their departments and organizations, ultimately preparing new mentors by their efforts. You will find that some protégés leave for different organizations or vocations, while others stay to become future stars. Regardless, your department will reap the many benefits of added bench strength. And, instead of being the director who is trying to locate and recruit these high-caliber employees, you will be the one cultivating them. ■

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