

What is coaching? Is it like mentoring? Or counselling? Is it just a fashion? What good does it do? In a light-hearted look at the topic, **Jan Brause** separates fact from fairytale and reality from red herring.

True or false?

If you work in HR or training and development, then you won't have been able to escape all the information about coaching. I was first introduced to the concept of coaching in the late 1980s, when it was relatively new to the UK market. And, being an open-minded, eager-to-learn-and-develop HR and training manager, I fully embraced the learning arena – a tennis court in fact! When we talk of coaching it is often sports coaches that come to mind. Coaching adds value in many aspects of our professional and indeed personal lives, but there is a growing confusion among clients and businesses about what coaching actually is or, for that matter, is not.

Now, isn't it great to have friends who share your passion for making a difference to others? It was while chatting to one of those friends about what makes an effective coach that he challenged me to identify what coaching *was not about*. There have been so many articles espousing the benefits of coaching, so here is an alternative look at the subject. This article attempts to dispel some myths and add some clarity.

Key learning points

This article is intended to raise awareness, clarify the different perspectives and challenge thinking about coaching. It is a personal view and as such requires readers to consider whether they agree or disagree with some of the suggestions and form their own conclusions.

MYTH No. 1

Coaching is the same as mentoring

Actually it isn't. Mentors over the centuries have been gurus and individuals who have had lots of experience in the areas in which they are supporting others. Mentors have been there, done that and got the T-shirt so can support their

'mentees' in every way possible. Mentors are experts in a particular field and often advise.

So, how is this different to coaching? Well, coaches do not necessarily have to have any specialist experience in order to coach others and their role is not to give advice. The coach's skill is in questioning, listening and challenging in a totally non-judgemental way in order to help others to reach conclusions that will work for them. It is possible for mentors to be coaches and for coaches to be mentors, but the roles *are* different.

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MYTH No. 2

Coaching is the same as counselling

Coaching certainly isn't counselling. By using a model to overcome situations that have influenced where we are now, counsellors focus on past experience to improve future performance. A counselling stance is often therapeutic; some counsellors may disagree, but I am entitled to my opinion. Coaching works from the premise that past experience doesn't have to be a predictor of future performance. Coaching therefore emphasises *the now* and *the future* – who you are now and where you want to be in the future. The emphasis is on change and taking ownership of that change rather than reflecting on the past and what has made you who you are.

MYTH No. 3

Coaching is not quantifiable

In my experience, where clear goals and outcomes are agreed at the start of the coaching process, progress is easily measured. However, the measures can take many forms. I have worked with several clients who have achieved quantifiable results including:

- promotion to a more senior position
- increased revenue for their business, and
- saved time ...

... and these don't include the personal changes that are often less easy to quantify such as:

- more motivation
- clarity of purpose
- reduced stress, and
- increased confidence.

The key to quantifying coaching is establishing what changes need to be made at the outset and constantly revisiting them during the coaching process.

MYTH No. 4

Coaching is a 21st-century fad

Coaching is not new; it has merely been reinvented over the last 20 years and, because it delivers results, I reckon it is here to stay. There has been a shift in our perception of management, reinforced by concepts such as Emotional Intelligence, Accelerated Learning and Neuro Linguistic Programming. I have seen this shift in the range of organisations I have encountered over the last 20 years. Directors and managers of businesses are themselves embracing the concept of coaching and seeing the value it adds for them and their businesses. The new associations and growing organisations embracing coaching can't all be wrong, can they?

MYTH No. 5

Coaching is for softies

Now, if your concern is that coaching is a 'tree-huggy' affair (apologies to tree-huggers out there), I have to challenge you to consider the growing market for executive coaching. We have already mentioned the quantifiable benefits of coaching, so why would it appeal to softies? Coaching isn't a soft option. If you are on the receiving end of coaching and feel this way, either challenge your coach or change him/her! A coach should help you to stretch your own boundaries, get you out of your comfort zone and, at times, make you feel slightly uncomfortable. Remember the old adage 'No pain, no gain'? Well, in my opinion it applies to coaching as well as exercising!

MYTH No. 6

Coaching is a serious business

Coaching is certainly serious in terms of the results it can achieve, but that is where the seriousness ends. There is lots of research out there that suggests we learn more when we are having fun.

Now, you may think I am contradicting myself having talked about 'no pain, no gain' in Myth No. 5, but the coaching process does need to include some serious fun. Laughter strengthens the immune system and produces endorphins in the blood which are directly responsible for improving moods and reducing stress. Humour also engages the emotional centres in the brain, and this helps with memory and retention. After all, even 'painful' things

often have their funny side after the event. A good coach will help you to build serious fun into the coaching relationship. What more would you need to help you on your journey of change?

MYTH No. 7

Coaching can't be used on poor performance

I beg to differ here! The times I have had people say to me, 'If someone isn't performing, then they just have to be told what to do.' If someone isn't performing there is usually some underlying reason – lack of motivation, lack of focus, unclear goals and objectives. Getting a big stick out and beating someone for this might deliver short-term results, but it isn't going to get long-term commitment. Questioning and challenging are at the heart of good coaching and used effectively can win over even the poorest of performers.

MYTH No. 8

Coaching is just like training

This probably depends to a degree on your interpretation of training. Let's assume for these purposes that training means imparting knowledge and skill to others. A great example to consider would be managing time. ➤

11 myths about coaching

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- Now, who wouldn't want to know how to make better use of their time, but I have seen so many people attend time management workshops, come back armed with new electronic or paper-based systems and tips for change, and yet still have the same old time management issues (apologies to all you time management trainers out there). The issue is often nothing to do with the systems we use, but more to do with our deep-seated patterns for self-discipline, decision making, motivation or procrastination – habits! Coaching gets to the heart of these habits, helping us to explore and change them. Then, and only then, can we put our new-found skills to effective use.

MYTH No. 9

Coaching needs to be done face to face

The absolute beauty of coaching is that it can be done in such diverse and flexible ways – telephone, e-mail, tele-classes, group and face to face. It all really depends on the needs of the individual and his/her coach. This is why coaching also appeals to people with busy schedules, as it can be anything from a 30-minute telephone call to a two-hour face-to-face meeting. Longer than this and it can become unproductive for both parties.

MYTH No. 10

Coaches don't need coaches

Oh yes they do! I am a firm believer that not only should we practise what we preach but also we should constantly strive to update our skill, knowledge and general capability. Despite some opinions, coaches are human beings and as such are subject to all those human traits – egotism, depression, lack of confidence.


If you are an experienced coach you will know that, at times, coaching sessions can be incredibly emotionally demanding. If you have worked with a quality coach then you will know that s/he is highly attentive to what is going on with you. The skills required for this level of coaching need honing and updating, and sometimes coaches need a coach to help them deal with those difficult coaching situations.

MYTH No. 11

You can't coach yourself

Actually you can, and no I am not contradicting myself again. We all benefit from the objectivity of someone else, particularly during times of change. Self-coaching demands a certain kind of clarity of thought and we still need to have some of the coaching skills in order to do this – skills such as listening, questioning, challenging, being non-judgmental (now that's a hard one when coaching yourself).

We are often our own worst critic. How many times have you called yourself derogatory names when you have made a mistake? Well, the first piece of good news is that without mistakes there is no progress and the second is that changing our language can help – you know ... that voice in your head that says 'Oh, I'm so stupid, what did I do that for?' Change it to 'OK, I've done that; now how can I use it?' or something equally positive that works for you.

Coaching to me is absolutely about improving the performance of others by helping them to recognise and develop strengths they don't necessarily know they have. 

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