

Human Resources Management:

Coaching, Mentoring and Succession Planning

Table of Contents

- Coaching and Mentoring in the Cultural Sector**2
- Coach or Mentor – What’s the Difference?**3
 - Performance Coaching.....3
 - Mentoring.....4
- Coaching in the Cultural Sector**6
- How to be an Effective Coach**.....8
 - What Do Your Employees Expect From You as a Coach?9
 - Do’s and Don’t’s of Coaching.....10
- Succession Planning**.....11
 - Mistakes that Organizations Make13
- Informal Peer Mentoring**14
- Appendix I: Are You a “Natural” Coach?**.....15
- Acknowledgements**16

Coaching and Mentoring in the Cultural Sector

Both coaching and mentoring have been practiced in one form or another since people started working together. But it's only in the last few decades that they have been widely recognized and used in the business world for their impact in leveraging both personal and organizational development.

Due perhaps to the pace, changing workloads and smaller size of most cultural organizations, a systematic approach to coaching and mentoring has not taken hold to the same extent. But it's in the cultural sector that these activities can reap particularly significant benefits, for these reasons:

- Valuable skills and knowledge in the cultural sector are often acquired in less formalized ways than in the corporate sector. Skills such as integrating artistic with business needs without compromising either, or winning the confidence and support of private and institutional funders. Since there often isn't formal training available in these skills, the best way for employees to acquire them — without going through the lengthy, trial-and-error process that their superiors may have had to follow — is through being coached and mentored by those superiors.
- Not only are there fewer courses and resources available for acquiring these skills in the cultural sector, but most cultural organizations can't afford the cost of implementing a formal training and development program — either the events themselves or the time away from the workplace that these initiatives usually involve. Internal coaching and mentoring programs are far less expensive and can reap the same or far superior developmental benefits, both for the employee, the coach/mentor and for the organization.

These notes are intended to help you understand the coaching and mentoring roles of a manager, and to provide guidelines to help you fulfill that role in your organization.

Coach or Mentor – What’s the Difference?

Confusion between the terms coaching and mentoring continue to persist. Although there are some key differences between coaching and mentoring, the edges are undoubtedly blurred.

This of course doesn’t help you when you’re trying to implement the concepts in your organization. So, although we will later use one term to refer to both these activities since the skills to do them well are so similar, let’s for the moment call them “*performance coaching*” and “*mentoring*” and suggest distinctions between them.

Performance Coaching

- **Focuses on achieving specific performance goals – either improvement goals, or “stretch” goals to build on recognized strengths – usually within a limited time period.**

If your goal is to help other people improve their proficiency and competence at performing a specific task, then your role is as a performance coach. Sometimes performance coaching involves passing along knowledge, but that’s only a small part of the activity. As a performance coach, your real goal is to help a person improve the way they perform in a specific area.

Like any other skill, performance coaching is a process that you need to learn and practice in order to use effectively.

Here are the essential rules of coaching:

1. **Set expectations.** Clearly state your expectations and goals and explain why they’re desirable both for your employee and the organization.
2. **Carefully watch their performance.** Observe and determine the individual’s needs in these areas: knowledge of what to do, skill at actually doing it, their interest and confidence level, and any barriers limiting their performance.
3. **Coach them.** Choose appropriate improvement methods: giving advice, showing them what to do, involving other “good” performers, creating challenge, inventing better tools or removing barriers to performance.
4. **Assess the result.** Look at the outcome in relation to your goals. Raise or lower targets based on the person’s current performance level.

Mentoring

- **Follows a more open and evolving agenda, and deals with a range of issues including career guidance and passing on in-depth knowledge of cultural matters and management.**

It usually exists because of the mentor's lengthy experience and wisdom in a particular role in the cultural community, and their track record of success.

There are two types of mentors:

1. The **Role Model** in a cultural organization is usually a senior person who has "been there, seen it, done it". They may have been in senior positions in two or three cultural organizations or even different cultural sub-sectors. They pass on the benefit of their lengthy experience of what works and what doesn't. They need good listening skills and the ability to withhold judgement and advice, until it's needed. This can be very frustrating for the mentor who is itching to pass on their accumulated wisdom and many of these mentors spoil the role by trying to give more than is wanted. In doing so, they risk taking the ownership of the relationship totally away from their employee. Employees can end up feeling that something is being done to them, that they are *being mentored*.

Good role models tend to be very well connected in the cultural community and able to introduce the person to new sources of information and specific learning resources, often outside their organization. If the relationship works well, it often leads to an enduring friendship.

2. **Facilitative Mentors** operate at a more focused level than the role model. They help people explore their own issues, build their own insights and self-awareness and develop their own unique ways of handling how they interact with key colleagues and the organization. They use current issues to look at recurrent patterns of thinking and behaviour, asking penetrating questions and stimulating the person to take control of issues they have avoided. They build the employee's confidence through greater self-understanding. In short, their strength and contribution is in *facilitating* the employee's growth.

IMPORTANT: The skills involved in being an effective performance coach or mentor (either type) are very similar and the term “coach” is often used to refer to both of these roles. The labels are not that important – it’s the process that counts.

For ease of communication then, for the remainder of this module we will use the term “coach” to mean either performance coach or mentor.

Also for ease of communication, because we are focusing on coaching as a management skill, we will use the term “employee” to refer to the person being coached. In reality, though, there are many effective coaching experiences that do not involve a manager-employee relationship.

Coaching in the Cultural Sector

One-to-one development of employees can be a powerful organizational and personal development tool, not to mention its value to the cultural community as a whole to have knowledge and skills preserved and transferred to the next generation of cultural managers.

Of critical importance is the relationship between the coach and employee. Both people must feel comfortable with the “chemistry” and also be confident that the coach has the necessary skills and experience to make a significant contribution without taking control.

Not everyone wants to be a coach. Many have the talent to be an effective coach, but in many cases the *personality match* is what dictates success or lack of it. Depending on the coaching need, very often the best coach for an individual may *not* be the employee’s immediate boss. It may be an even more senior manager, a peer manager, a subordinate (a process called “reverse coaching”), or someone outside the organization.

For cultural leaders who are interested in developing the people in their organization, coaching can be a very effective process. Coaching another person may be described in terms of relationships, and this is often viewed as the most critical aspect of successful coaching.

Good coaches usually have one or more of four “mind-sets” about coaching their employees. Which one(s) apply to you?

1. **Arranger.** You may warm to the process of setting an employee up for success, of putting mechanisms in place that help move them forward. You like to create growth experiences for them by helping them have the resources they need, or by teaming them up with other employees who have complementary talents.
2. **Self-assured.** You may have an inner conviction that you have experience that is of particular value to offer to a specific employee, that can help them know the right things to do, and that you can be a role model for them.
3. **Developer.** You may take particular pleasure in facilitating the growth of another person, and in building an on-going relationship with them. You take great satisfaction from seeing another person succeed, even more so if you have helped contribute to their success.

4. **Relator.** Perhaps your satisfaction as a coach comes from caring enough to do things with your employee *for the employee's own good*, not necessarily with your organization's priorities as your driving force. As your relationship develops, you both recognize what is confidential to the relationship and then are strict about maintaining that confidence. At the highest level of coach-employee relationships, the coach shares confidences and risks with the employee. Trust grows.

If you recognize yourself in one or more of these areas, you will probably enjoy using your coaching talents. The results? You keep coaching. Your employees keep growing. And your cultural organization is the richer for it, through improved work satisfaction, retention and employee contribution.

Appendix I suggests some questions to ask yourself to determine if you're likely to be a "natural" coach.

How to be an Effective Coach

Good coaching is a real skill — almost an art — and it's easy to go “off-track” if you don't keep the features of effective coaching front-of-mind. Follow these guidelines to make sure that you're maximizing the coaching experience, both for your employee and for yourself:

- Don't blame or criticize — stay as neutral as possible.
- Give completely honest answers.
- Be easy to approach at any time. Don't be intimidating or superior.
- Know what you're talking about — be seen to be good at your own job.
- Actively question the employee.
- Take an enabling, open and facilitative approach.
- Give constructive and positive feedback.
- Provide subtle guidance, but ensure that your employee makes the important developmental decisions.
- Be interested in the person you're coaching. Show genuine concern.
- Be willing to debate, argue, discuss.

You can see from this list that a first-class coach is an exceptional and valuable person.

Excellent coaches somehow get the balance right between over and under helping, and do this deliberately. If you're very sensitive to your coaching role, you will know when you're providing more guidance than you “should” and will do this only when it prevents your employee from floundering or becoming needlessly frustrated. That said, the most competent coaches know when to “under” help, to avoid unhealthy dependence upon them, and when best to allow their employee to find their own way.

To be a really effective coach you need to call on all your interpersonal skills, since coaching is about developing a relationship that will allow your employee to grow and improve. It's essential to realize just what a responsible role it is, and that it's not an opportunity for cloning. Be very careful to avoid the attitude of “Just do things the way I do them and you'll be fine.” If you see coaching as an exercise in imprinting your employees with the way you do things, you are abusing the coaching relationship. The very best coaches actually enjoy being challenged by their employees as they become increasingly less dependent, and see it as a relationship during which, as it matures, they will concede as many times as they win an argument.

Thus to be a good coach you have to have a real interest in others, and specifically in their development and learning. This is crucial, as it's this that will drive your ability to put the issues and concerns of your employees ahead of other things that the rest of us find more important. Your role as coach is essentially to accelerate the rate at which a person learns.

What Do Your Employees Expect From You as a Coach

Here are behaviours that employees like to see in their coach:

- Organized, patient and understanding.
- Enthusiastically persuasive.
- Down to earth and realistic.
- A good listener, helpful, happy to sit back and observe when appropriate.
- The coach is prepared to get things done for them urgently, to help them progress.
- An organized and efficient worker – good at their job.
- Can be laid back and relaxed about work.
- They can ask their coach anything at anytime of the day, within reason (they always make time).
- Offer a very different perspective on life and work that might otherwise not have been considered.
- Able to make them feel relaxed, by showing they understand their perspective.
- Open to other points of view.
- Can relate to their experiences, good or bad.

Some examples of coach behaviours that employees don't like:

- Poor at keeping in touch about coaching activities.
- Lacking in knowledge and/or integrity in the field in which they're coaching.
- Intolerant and impatient.
- Dictatorial and influential
- Likes to be in control, in the limelight.
- Sometimes butts in and doesn't listen fully to what is said.
- Too critical over issues that don't really matter.
- Intimidating, hard to approach.
- Unfriendly.
- Takes no interest in their aspirations.
- Is vague about the employee's chances of success.
- Indecisive.
- Disloyal (e.g. expresses a willingness to "jump ship" when the right opportunity presents itself).

Do's and Don't's of Coaching

You should:

- Ensure that the personal chemistry is right before you start
- Ensure that you are in agreement about the purpose of the relationship and what you (and the other person) hope to achieve
- Be committed to the relationship
- Have realistic expectations about results, both in terms of timing and changes.

And here's a light-hearted way to look at how **NOT** to coach:

- Start from the point of view that you — from your great experience and broader perspective — know better than your employee what's in his or her interest.
- Be determined to share your wisdom with them - whether they want it or not. Remind them frequently how much they still have to learn.
- Decide what you and your employee will talk about and when. Change dates and topics frequently to keep them on their toes and prevent complacency creeping in.
- Do most of the talking, and check frequently that they're paying attention.
- In subtle ways, make sure they understand how much less important their concerns are compared to the major management issues you have to deal with.
- Neither show nor admit any personal weaknesses. Expect to be their role model in all aspects of career development and personal values.
- Never ask them what they should expect of you. You know best what to deliver.
- Show how well-connected you are by sharing confidential information they don't need to know.
- Discourage any signs of levity or humour - this is a serious business and should be treated as such.
- Take them to task when they don't follow your advice.
- Never, never admit that this could be a learning experience for you too.

Succession Planning

The issue of replacing valuable managers in the cultural sector is becoming increasingly serious. As the population continues to age, many predict that there will be major shortages of top-notch people employees to fill cultural management roles.

Whether your replacement needs are the result of retirement, transition, trial and error, or tragedy, considering the issue of succession *now* can help you accomplish these staffing changes smoothly, with minimal disruption to your internal processes and a seamless transition for everyone who deals with your organization.

In very small organizations, having a structured approach to succession planning may be unrealistic. But the larger your organization becomes, the more sense it makes to be looking ahead to who may fill vacancies as they occur, and to identify what coaching may be required to groom existing employees for more senior positions.

What can you do? You can take an organized approach to identifying potential gaps and develop tactics for filling those gaps.

Succession planning is one of those “proactive” initiatives that many cultural organizations simply don’t have the time to undertake. You’re already working as hard as you can to simply maintain a fully staffed and functioning operation today. The problem is that, if your organization is growing and you don’t make some time now to address this issue, you may be hit with it head-on in the not-too-distant future. You may find yourself with no one internally who can move into a vacant position because:

- your organization is too small to be able to recruit internally for most positions

OR

- you haven’t identified and adequately developed your “high-flyers”.

It’s a reality in small cultural organizations that they simply don’t have enough staff to be able have internal candidates for most newly-vacant positions. But looking ahead as your organization grows, you would be well-advised to consider succession planning seriously.

What does it take to effectively plan ahead for staff succession? There are a number of keys to success:

1. **Commitment from top management and/or your Board.** You can’t embark upon a successful succession planning program in a vacuum. To be successful, senior decision-makers must be committed to have at least a degree of a forward-looking succession plan in place, and willing to commit the resources needed (e.g. time and finances for staff development).

2. **A vision.** What skills will your organization need 1, 3, 5 years from now? Your vision can be well-focused if you take the time to examine the workplace and employee trends in the cultural sector. Take time as well to discuss this issue with other cultural leaders – what skills will cultural employees and managers need in the future and how will you ensure they are there when you need them?
3. **A realistic understanding of your existing staff and their mobility.** How many of your valued managers might leave in the short-medium term? Do you have staff who might be ready, willing and able to step into those positions? When you look at the gaps that your organization may face, can you identify how you'll fill those gaps? Do you have this information “in your head” or in some kind of database that can be accessed at will by anyone with the need to know?
4. **Objectivity.** As you look at your staff, focus on key positions, regardless of the traits of the incumbents. For example, one of the key positions in your organization may be that of Director of Development, and the incumbent is a very loyal, productive 30-something who you feel “will likely be with us for the long term.” That’s a dangerous assumption. Top performers in many roles in the cultural sector – and Development specialists are probably top of the list – are in great demand and can leave at any time.
5. **An open mind.** Too often succession planning focuses on “the cream of the crop” – those employees who, for whatever reasons, can clearly and readily be identified as up-and-comers. You’re limiting your potential if you stop with these employees however. Sometimes hidden talents can be found in the most retiring or “invisible” workers. Some employees may self-identify, others may need some encouragement. Your succession plan should include education of and communication with existing staff so they understand where the gaps might develop and are in a better position to step forward and say: “I’d be interested in doing that.”
6. **A development program.** If you determine that your organization will need people who are skilled in a certain area and conclude that this talent doesn’t currently exist, you’re left with two choices: recruit talent from outside or develop opportunities for interested existing staff with identified potential to learn the skills they will need. Once gaps have been identified, the next step is to determine how those gaps will be filled either through recruitment or development of existing staff. That development might involve in-house training, attending cultural conferences or workshops, special project assignments, outside technical courses, etc.

7. **On-going attention.** As we've already seen, it can be tempting to overlook the need for succession planning in the face of more immediate needs. Again, the involvement and ownership of this issue by top management can help keep it at the forefront of the organization and ensure that it has the ongoing attention and action that it deserves.

Mistakes that Organizations Make

There are a number of mistakes that organizations may make as they start to plan for succession. Following are some key areas that can create problems and hamper your succession planning efforts:

- **Keeping the plan a secret.** How many promising employees might you have lost to other cultural organizations because they had no idea you had them in your sights as “promising”? The more you can involve the entire organization in your efforts, the more successful you will be.
- **Underestimating the talent within.** Why is it that we frequently overlook the talent that we have within our organization in favour of recruiting from a vast pool of unknowns?
- **Narrow-minded thinking.** Overlooking employees who are thought to be too young, too old, too rough around the edges or too different.
- **Focusing exclusively on hard skills.** Organizations are finding that soft skills (usually interpersonal) are often more important in determining an employee's success than the more traditional hard skills or technical abilities that we tend to value. Consider organizational culture and teamwork needs in addition to specific job-related requirements when considering succession possibilities.
- **Not offering appropriate training and developmental opportunities.** Don't leave employees and their managers to fend for themselves in building their skills. Even if yours is one of the many cultural organizations who have severely limited financial resources for training, do everything you can to make some kind of staff development a part of your program.
- **Expecting employees to self-identify.** Identification of employees with potential to fill future needs is a joint responsibility between the organization and its employees.
- **Considering only upward succession.** Lateral succession may be an option in your organization as well.
- **Developing a one-size-fits-all program.** Offering generic leadership development programs is an ineffective way to deal with succession planning. Individual succession plans should be developed based on specific organizational needs, and specific individual skill and training needs.

Informal Peer Mentoring

In this module we've been focusing mainly on manager-employee coaching. But in closing it's worth mentioning another very effective form of mentoring of which you could be part: informal peer coaching. This may apply when:

- you wish to set up a coaching relationship for yourself with a peer in (or outside) your organization

OR

- you suggest to an employee that they set up a coaching relationship with one of their peers.

Apply the following guidelines for your own peer coaching relationships, and give them to any employees who want to set up a coaching relationship with their peers:

- Clearly agree on the parameters of the relationship - which aspects of life and career it's OK to discuss and which aspects may not be.
- Agree on the logistics and format for coaching conversations — how frequently will you meet or talk, how many coaching sessions will you have and over what time period? It's highly recommended to agree on a finite length for the relationship — at least to start with — as this offers an easy exit for either party.
- The coach needs to be committed to making some change in their work life — even if it's only one small step at a time.
- The coach does not have to be an expert or advisor. They do not have to have the answers. The agenda belongs to the person being coached — the coach is there to facilitate, not influence, the person's decisions.
- Agree measurable actions and monitor progress.

In exploring the different applications of coaching, it's clear that coaching has a role to play for many of us in developing our careers, regardless of where we fit in a hierarchy. The important feature is that both individuals are clear about the nature and parameters of the relationship and share a common expectation.

Appendix I: Are You a “Natural” Coach?

Check these qualities:

- I listen to the whole issue before commenting.
- I always find time to help.
- I always question thoroughly to find the real issues.
- I always give honest opinions.
- I have a good range of networks and contacts that can be utilized appropriately.
- I am not intimidating — I’m easy to approach at any time.
- I know what I’m talking about — I’m good at my own job.
- I look for the reality within which my employee works.
- I always focus on my employee’s needs during a coaching session.
- I don’t get irritated by an employee who doesn’t get the point quickly.
- I’m a positive role model in terms of my own achievements.
- I can help an employee believe in their potential.
- I’m open to new ideas.
- I know when to introduce options which may not have been considered.
- I can challenge assumptions skillfully.
- I’m a positive person.
- I’m an active listener.
- I’m non-judgmental.
- I feel comfortable about having my views challenged.
- I’m enthusiastic about coaching.
- I’m very knowledgeable about developmental issues.
- I don’t expect an employee to be like me.
- I’m prepared to learn along with my employee.
- I can give feedback skillfully.
- I can allow an employee the freedom and confidence to make mistakes.
- I have sound judgement.
- I am able to distance myself, and maintain objectivity.
- I am keen to allow employees to make their own decisions wherever possible.
- I take an interest in the individuals who report to me — I value their views and what they say.
- I can give the space for an employee to express their feelings in safety.
- I can draw out an employee’s ideas and I’m willing to use them.
- I have a true passion for developing others, and really believe in the value of development.
- I can avoid the temptation to direct conversation back to myself and my issues and experiences.
- I can challenge constructively and directly to get to the heart of the matter.
- I don’t talk about my own achievements too much.
- I have a genuine desire to empower.

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