



Values Based Leadership
Developing Inspirational Leaders

Coaching vs. Mentoring

By Karen Frost

Do you know if you need a Coach or a Mentor? Some of the most frequent questions I am asked by People Managers relate to the differences between coaching and mentoring. “Do I need a coach or mentor?” and “What is the difference between coaching and mentoring”? Where the mystery and confusion comes from is the interpretation in the definition of each. For example, what is generally regarded as coaching in the private sector and predominantly in the UK, is often referred to in the education sector and in North America as mentoring.

So rather than getting hung up on the definitions dependant of where you are in the world and which part of an economy you are working in, I think there is a better way of looking at it. In their widest sense, both coaching and mentoring are a series of conversations to help someone achieve their goals and maximise their potential. These conversations could use a variety of approaches from a person being managed, taught, coached, mentored, counselled, or even using the therapeutic professions. So I like to consider both coaching and mentoring as a continuum of approaches sat somewhere in the middle, rather than as distinct and separate from each other.

To further help with our understanding, I much prefer to move towards thinking about coaching and mentoring as Directive versus Non-Directive in what’s actually happening in the relationship. The more Directive approach to coaching and mentoring is about offering feedback, giving guidance and even instructing an individual of the best way forward. The more Non-Directive approach is where a coach and

mentor may be mainly listening to gain understanding or asking questions to raise awareness.

Case Study 1: I was recently coaching the Chief Executive of a Multinational Fast Food Chain who had moved from the other side of the world to take up his new position in the UK. The cultural differences between his culture of origin to the UK culture, and the change of leading a fast moving Pan-Asia business to a North European business, meant I needed to take quite a specific approach. So to begin with I needed to be more Directive and offer ideas, advice, make suggestions and up-skill this CEO; particularly in terms of the cross cultural nuances and the more traditional British approach to business. But as we moved through the first 90 days of his new position, the coaching relationship developed and the CEO needed me to listen and ask more intuitive questions to help him develop his leadership style and be able to reflect well on the day to day activities of his business.

Case Study 2: A few years ago I worked with a Chief Executor of a UK based charity. This CEO had ‘come through the ranks’ and had gradually developed leadership and management skills throughout his career. At our first session he confessed to me that for the first time in his career he felt alone – almost as though there was now an imaginary ‘tripwire’ across the door to his office and that staff from all sections of the charity had stopped talking to him, thus creating a feedback vacuum. My role was, therefore, to be Non-Directive to enable the CEO to come to terms with the loneliness of leadership and to find alternative strategies



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to this issue, and to listen to how he was currently leading, and share learning and give feedback and advice on style where required. I believe I was both a coach and a mentor in each of our sessions.

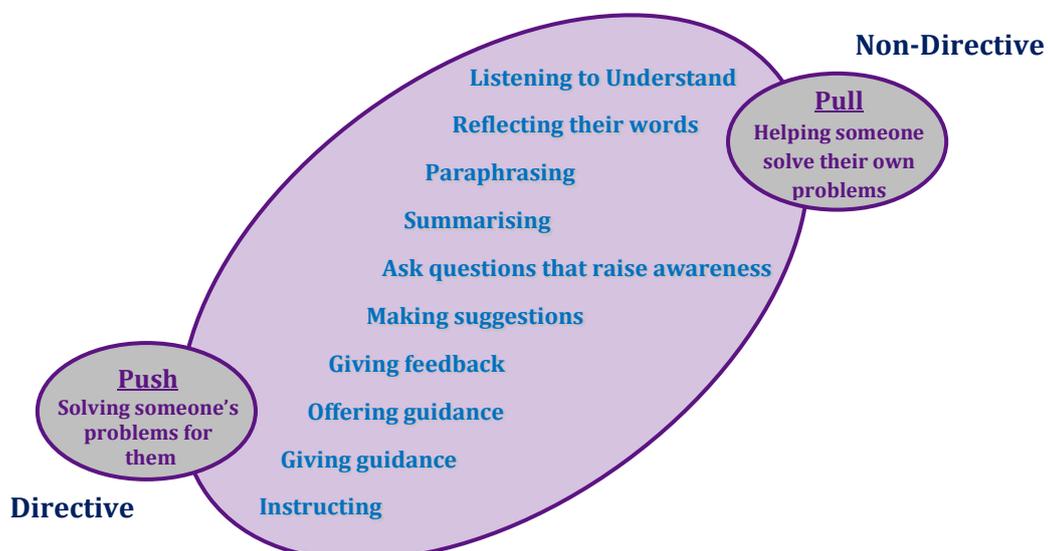
Case Study 3: My final example is a current client who is the Commercial Services Manager of a highly successful and expanding SME. She thought she was at a crossroads in her career and elected to have some coaching to give her the space to consider all aspects of her current job before making any sort of decision. It was clear that, with this backdrop to the coaching relationship, I needed to listen and be predominantly Non-Directive to give her the opportunity to explore her options. Within a couple of sessions, this approach allowed her to understand that there were a number of areas of her job where she didn't yet have the skills to take her to the next level. I asked her questions and encouraged her to reflect, which helped her realise that she needed to learn these skills before making a decision about her future at her current organisation. She identified that, without developing her skills, she would simply move jobs and within a few years would likely find herself at the same crossroads. Her decision was to stay with her current organisation and learn the new skills, and as such our relationship changed.

Now we have an agreement that our coaching sessions will be half Non-Directive, where we continue to explore to raise her self-awareness, and half Directive, where we focus on me giving her advice and support in the skills she wants to develop. To help with the language, we call the Non-Directive approach the 'coaching' part of the session and the Directive element of the session 'mentoring'. This works for us, but as I said at the beginning, so long as the definitions of what you are doing are fully understood, then it is more about moving along the continuum to do what is best for your client.

So when a Senior Manager is looking to employ the support of a coach/mentor – there are a couple of key requirements to consider:

1. Identify what the specific needs of the Senior Manager are. Do they need a Non-Directive approach to raise their awareness and to come to decisions or do they need a sounding board/advisor to help them? Or, indeed, do they need both in the one person?
2. Do they need a short-term intervention to get them through a 'crossroads' in their career or an advisor and confidant who has the experience and skills to ask a powerful

Directive vs. Non-Directive





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question when required or knows when to give a sound bit of advice.

The key thing is not what the support is called; simply that it is the right person for the job. When working in the education sector I call myself a Mentor; in the private sector I refer to myself as a Business Coach. The context is different, the issues are similar. I simply use all the approaches from Non-Directive to Directive, as and when required, to enable the person I am working with to be the best they can possibly be.



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