Executive Coaching VS. Mentoring: What Does the Research Know so Far?

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Abstract
Most employee development programs in organizations today rely on formal mentoring programs and on training for specific skills. There is a well-established body of literature on mentoring (both formal and informal mentoring), its facets, stages, and benefits for organizations. However, the modern emergence of executive coaching as an alternate tool in organizational development is yet understudied. There is a growing need for academics and practitioners to understand the definitional and operational differences between coaching and mentoring as employee development tools, as well as starting an agenda for comparing the outcomes and benefits that each differ on. Our paper proposes to review the extant literature on both streams of research in this endeavor.

Key Words: Mentoring, Executive Coaching, Coaching
1. Introduction

Executive coaching and mentoring are two concepts that are often used in organizations in reference to employee development or training. Many organizations and even scholars (Ferrar, 2004) assume coaching and mentoring are interchangeable concepts, yet this is an erroneous assumption and can lead to problems in their application and in clinical/consulting practical (Joo, Sushko, & McLean, 2012).

2. Literature Review

Leadership development is an important topic for most organizations. Starting from non-managerial employees to the executive suite, organizations today are investing their resources towards building employee skills and competency in leadership. The two streams of work, one on Mentoring and the other on Executive/Leadership Coaching are the primary dyadic leadership development tools organizations are relying heavily on. As such it behooves scholarly work to not only examine these constructs in details, understand the overlap and to differentiate one from the other, but also examine the scholarly work that has promulgated the two streams, albeit at different paces.

2.1 Mentoring

Mentoring, as a stream of research focused on a dyadic relationship, has received a lot of attention from various fields of study ranging from youth programs (for e.g., Rhodes & DuBois, 2008) to organizational sciences. However, Kram’s (1985) seminal piece on mentoring provided the groundwork for a starting, albeit no field specific, definition to the academic world: …a developmentally oriented relationship between a younger or less experienced individual, the protégé, and an older or more experienced individual, the mentor (Kram, 1985; Rhodes, DuBois, & Karcher, 2005), as cited in (Eby et al., 2013)

Kram’s (1983) work also expanded on what mentoring is through her exposition of the phases of mentoring that became the groundwork for much of the later academic work (Humberd & Rouse, 2016). However, a newer and more organizationally oriented definition explains mentoring as: a unique work relationship through which protégés receive career ad psychosocial support from mentors, expediting their progress and development within a particular job, organization, or career path.

Mentoring as an academic field is relatively more mature and well developed as can be evidenced by a myriad of meta-analysis (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby et al., 2013) that dot the landscape of mentoring research proving that enough scholarly work has been done in the field to warrant a thorough examination of both the theory and the observed effect sizes. Current research has explored the stages, antecedents, the correlates, such as identification and personality, and the outcomes of mentoring (Bozionelos & Bozionelos, 2010; Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Niehoff, 2006).
2.2 Coaching

Executive Coaching on the other hand has sometimes been criticized for being tenuous, and without any academic backing. From leadership coaching, to life coaching, practitioner work and popular books are rife with various perspectives and definitions on what coaching is. For our purposes we focus on coaching as it relates to leadership training in organizations. This executive coaching (EC) emerged in the 1990s in response to the need for training and leadership development for middle and senior level managers (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Joo et al., 2012). Similar to mentoring, there is no dearth of definitions on what executive coaching, nay coaching is (Joo, 2005; Joo et al., 2012). However, Joo’s (2005) review of the coaching literature took all the various perspectives and definitions to reach a comprehensive definitions of what coaching is, he defined it as, “A process of a one-on-one relationship between a professional coach and an executive (coachee) for the purpose of enhancing coachee’s behavioral change through self-awareness and learning, and thus ultimately for the success of individual and organization.” Despite the incongruence across scholars on the definition, this facet of coaching as a developmental activity presents as a common thread (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Joo et al., 2012).

Compared to the field of mentoring, coaching though is a relatively nascent field of study and there is a documented dearth of scholarly work in this field (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Despite its practitioner roots going back to the early 1940s, the research in this area only began in the late 1990s (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Moreover, Joo’s (2005) review found that most articles published are in practitioner publication outlets and not in academic outlets. Furthermore, it finds its roots and overlap in the fields of clinical psychology and therapy (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). What distinguishes EC (executive coaching) from these fields is, (a). the training and licensing required (Feldman & Lankau, 2005), and (b). the temporal length of the coach client relationship (Joo et al., 2012; Levinson, 1996)

3. Limitations and Conclusion

Although Executive coaching and mentoring both have roots in the dyadic leadership literature, both have definitional differences and similarities. Both are dependent on an interpersonal interaction, however, where coaching is a systemic, focused issue/problem centered endeavor, mentoring at the same time, even when it is formalized is more people centered and involves intra-organizational resources (Joo et al., 2012). However, despite the strides made in the mentoring literature, the literature on coaching is still in its infancy and can use the systematic approach of the mentoring literature and the evaluative rigor of clinical and counseling psychology that it borrows heavily from (Ely et al., 2010).
This essay is only an initial and a very succinct attempt at gathering and reviewing the research on the two connected concepts, albeit with disparate literatures, of mentoring and executive coaching. As this review suggests, there is much more research that is still needed to understand not just the overlap, but also their synergistic application for organizations that seek to reap the varying benefits of the two. This paper does not make any prepositions; an even more in-depth exploration is needed into these two streams of literature to do so. The endeavor for future research is to provide such direction and use mentoring research’s strides in examining personality and coach-client fit to explore the impact these factors in executive coaching.

References


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