

# COACHING & MENTORING: Delivering the Promise?

*One of our mentors Ed Davis has recently published this succinct article on the factors for success in mentoring and coaching programs.*

*Professor Ed Davis\* HR In Focus Issue 31 - February 2011, Newsletter of HR Partners.*

Bold claims have been made about the benefits to be anticipated from organisational investment in coaching and mentoring. Those coached and/or mentored will experience a lift in their skills and this will be reflected in improved organisational performance. Is this happening? Is the promise kept?

A necessary starting place in this discussion is to clarify the meaning of the terms. The Macquarie Dictionary refers to a coach as 'a person who trains athletes for games, a contest (or)...a private tutor who prepares a student for an examination'. A mentor is 'a wise and trusted counsellor'. Many of the books and papers on this subject bring out this difference. Management coaching is often seen as

having a focus on a particular skill and it is the role of the coach to assist the subject to improve their performance in this sphere.

Mentoring is seen as much broader. It involves a process in which the mentee might identify and explore a range of issues and possible paths to their resolution, aided by their mentor. Wendy McCarthy writes: A mentoring relationship is one where a wiser and more experienced person assists another person to grow and learn.<sup>(1)</sup>

In practice, coaching and mentoring substantially overlap. Mentors will inevitably coach during parts of their sessions and coaches will mentor. It is perhaps unhelpful that the term 'executive coaching' most often refers to the mentoring of senior managers! My focus here is on the mentoring of top and senior managers by an external person. Further, the mentoring is face-to-face rather than by phone or use of the net (e-mentoring).

The fast pace of change and the nature of

the pressures on managers have leant a special relevance to coaching and mentoring. Many managers, at all levels, struggle with the technical, strategic and leadership challenges that they face. They also face tests in relation to their management of themselves (their health and well-being) and their family and other relationships. Some have people at work that they can talk to and confide in; many do not. Many do not find it easy to discuss pressing issues with their own supervisors, peers and reports. They prefer to avoid admission of possible failure or lack of skill. The external mentor is therefore a safer confessor and source of advice.

A recent study on coaching and mentoring provided a detailed list of the benefits that might be gained.

These included:

- Professional development of mentees
- Improved performance and goal attainment
- Improved mentees' understanding of their organisations
- Mentee feedback on organisational practices

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- Improved performance management systems
- Higher quality communications and improved teamwork
- Mentee appreciation of the organisation's investment in them.<sup>(2)</sup>

In brief, this study found profound benefits for the mentees and their organisation. Many other studies too have stressed the gains for organisations in terms of the development of leadership talent, talent retention and overall improved performance.

It is not however plain sailing. A number of conditions must be met to afford coaching and mentoring the opportunity to work their magic. There are financial and time costs involved. The costs will appear immediately; the benefits may well be lumpy and spread over the medium and longer term. Some investments may appear to backfire as mentees leave the organisation and take their skill enhancement elsewhere. Many organisational leaders are under pressure to deliver short term results; in this light investment in coaching and mentoring might not appear a priority or one which may be the more easily abandoned. Top level commitment to the coaching and mentoring of their senior staff is a very good platform for the delivery of significant benefits.



**Professor Ed Davis**

There are further essential ingredients. It is vital that the mentee wishes to be involved in the process. If, for instance, the mentee believes that the assignment of a mentor is a disciplinary signal from their supervisor, they may feel distrustful and inhibited. It is unlikely that the process will deliver for them. It is also critical that the mentor is appropriately skilled. The mentor will need developed interpersonal skills that enable them to build trust; they will need to practice high level communication skills so that they listen to what is said, and observe and understand the body language of their mentees. Mentors will benefit from their own experience at senior levels of organisations; this will assist in framing questions for mentees to guide them to identify a range of strategic options and possible outcomes.

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My reading of research in this area and my own experience of being mentored and of mentoring across a range of levels and industries has convinced me that many managers benefit to a very substantial degree from the process. Indeed for some it is life-changing.

Mentors will need to commit their time, energy and enthusiasm and this should be visible to the mentee and contribute to the encouragement which mentees associate with the process.

It is important too that mentors avoid some pitfalls. They should avoid the temptation to dominate the discussions; these should be led by the mentee. They should avoid telling the mentee what to do; it is most often better for the mentee to weigh up various paths and determine their own considered path. The mentor should be non-judgemental so that the mentee understands it is safe to discuss their own failings, mistakes and feelings. A further necessary skill is that the mentor should understand the limits of their own competence. There will be occasions when mentees might sensibly be advised to seek medical assistance or professional counselling.

Coaching and mentoring are not substitutes for other relationships in the workplace. It is important that the normal pattern of discussions between managers and their supervisors are retained and in the best of circumstances enriched. The process too should not become addictive. The aim is to enhance the all- round skills of the mentee so that they are able to operate effectively without coaching support.

My reading of research in this area and my own experience of being mentored and of mentoring

across a range of levels and industries has convinced me that many managers benefit to a very substantial degree from the process. Indeed for some it is life-changing. Many senior managers have reported to me that they have been amazed at the turn-around and development that they have witnessed in those mentored. Perhaps most heartening is where partners and other family describe the profound changes that they have seen and welcomed. There is a magic in mentoring but it requires commitment from the top, the mentor and the mentee.

(1) Wendy McCarthy, *One 2 One; The Guide for Mentors*, [www.mccarthymentoring.com](http://www.mccarthymentoring.com)

(2) John McGill, *The Impact of Executive Coaching on the Performance Management of International Managers in China*, PhD thesis, *Work and Organisational Studies*, University of Sydney, 2010, unpublished.

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*This is where we've been in the past few months...*

*Brisbane Festival of Ideas: Is gender back on the Agenda*

*Mater Education Centre National Leadership Conference in Brisbane, August: Mentoring: Taking the Long View*

*Radio National: Interview on Governance and Mentoring*

*Family Planning New South Wales Annual Conference: Presenting the McCarthy Green Scholarship*

*This scholarship enables a Registered Nurse/Midwife working in an Aboriginal community in NSW to fully complete the FPNSW Certificate in Sexual and Reproductive Health (Nursing), which is accredited by the Royal College of Nursing Australia. The clinical module can be completed in FPA centres in Sydney, Dubbo or Newcastle.*

*Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals Annual Conference: Everyone needs a mentor. Key note speech*

*Panel Discussion at the National Press Club in Canberra: Leadership: Does gender make a difference with Natasha Stott Despoja, Christine Nixon, Governor General Quentin Bryce AC, ACT Chief Minister Kate Gallagher. Hosted by Professor Virginia Haussegger, ANZSOG Institute for Governance University of Canberra*

*HESTA: National series of workshops on Leadership and mentoring for Unions and Employers: July – October.*

*Property Council of Australia: Executive Women's Series lunch, Brisbane, August.*

*Mentoring workshops for Qantas and Property Council of Australia*