

The mentoring/counseling/coaching debate

Call a rose by any other name and perhaps it's a bramble?

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Consider this:
“In practice, mentoring is merely an aggrandizement of the term coaching and counseling is best left to the professionals. The tragedy of mentoring is that it has been hijacked and mugged by the so-called coaching profession who are in it only for financial gain.”

There is lively debate among academics and practitioners in the field of helping people to learn and develop about what is meant by the terms mentoring, coaching and counseling. (Such debate often features in our MSc in Mentoring and Coaching at Sheffield Hallam University.) There is the same debate among practitioners in the different social and business sectors that employ one to one “helping” activities. Increasingly, the different sectors are exchanging experiences and knowledge and the parameters of the discussion are widening and deepening. The main purpose of the paper is to add to the debate and contribute some suggestions on how to move the issue of terminology in “helping” activities forward as well as to raise a number of issues to fuel other debates.

Background

Whatever it is called, “helping” is a growing phenomenon. The reasons for this are many but are not within the scope of this paper. However, “helping” activity is increasingly employed in many educational, social and occupational settings. In the educational sector, the term mentoring is used for both professional development and pupil support. In the UK, mentoring in the education sector is taking many different forms with volunteers from business and the community working with youngsters, paid professional learning mentors working in a school and pupils “peer mentoring”, “buddying”, “peer tutoring” or “peer educating” fellow pupils.

Some organizations refer to the activity in general terms as “coaching” although there are variations here – performance coaching, life coaching, business coaching, facilitative management to mention just a few terms. Others call it “mentoring” and some, counseling.

Terminology

I feel concern for anyone starting to explore one to one helping because of the sheer confusion over the terminology!

A seemingly simple thing as to what to call “helping” behavior becomes a real challenge simply because language and the meaning of words is closely linked to social contexts. Therefore words have different and sometimes, quite subtle meanings in different contexts.

There are three main terms used to describe “helping” behaviors – counseling, coaching and mentoring.

In some contexts, counseling has a specific meaning. Within the health service, for example, it is linked to therapeutic interventions by a trained, skilled and highly professional person. Whereas in some business settings the term “business counselor” is associated with helpful support and advice. In the legal profession, one might receive wise counsel from a lawyer.

In sport, a coach has a specific job to help improve and develop a range of skills to boost the sportsperson’s performance, although we now have many famous sports coaches suggesting that they are really mentors! A manager might be a coach of his or her team members, focussing on improving skills and performance. However, there is a rapidly growing field of “life coaches” who claim to focus on helping people understand and improve their lives holistically. There is a movement of “person centered coaches” in business who deal with the “whole person” in the workplace.

In a social setting, a mentor may be someone who offers career advice but in another context a mentor has been described as “the highest level educator”. The mentor can deal with holistic development, may be a role model, a critical friend, but equally in other contexts, so may a coach!

“Mentoring is a complex human interaction.”

The language of helping is being put under considerable commercial pressure and being subject to extreme “spin” by those with vested interests. Language is part of a power struggle and there is a power struggle in the field of “helping”. There are those in the business world who find the concept of mentoring, for example, too vague, too soft and not focussed on “the real world” of hard rationality. To these people, the term coaching is far more acceptable. It sounds harder edged and related to business performance, but then there are those who suggest that coaching is more holistic, dealing with whole people and that mentoring is more about supporting and changing dominant values and culture.

Psychologists have started to become involved and concerned and are beginning to flex their professional muscles in the field of non-therapeutic helping. Groups of interested people are forming and they are laying down standards, codes of ethics and rules for supervision. There is an increasing professionalization of “helping” and the more this trend continues the more the different power bases of those with the alleged high moral ground will assert themselves and perhaps “muddy the waters” as competing interests confuse the users and practitioners.

A personal view

I think its quite straight forward.

Counseling is a highly skilled one to one helping activity which has an overt therapeutic purpose. It can take many forms and there are many approaches. In the main, the agenda for the discussion is the client’s. Counseling also has a focus on the individual.

Coaching is also a skilled activity and its focus is on performance and skill enhancement. It can be both group and one to one. In the main, the agenda for discussion is with the coach. Coaching also has an organizational focus and it is often a power relationship with the coach being the holder of the delegated organizational power. Power has the potential to distort the relationship and real and deep conversation may not occur in this context.

“ There is much evidence that one to one helping activity is both increasing across all sectors and that it has a key role in any learning and development strategy. ”

The term mentoring may be associated with induction, career and personal development, personal and career support and change. Mentoring is often relevant when learners are making transitions at key points in their lives. The agenda is the mentee's and mentoring may have both an organizational and an individual focus.

Although within mentoring, contexts and practices vary considerably, a central feature of all mentoring activity is the relationship between the mentee and the mentor. This relationship can make a significant contribution to professional, academic and personal development and learning as the mentee integrates prior and current experience through supportive and challenging dialogue. The relationship can also do the opposite.

Mentoring is a complex human interaction. Its forms depend on the intended purpose of the relationship as well as the social context and the quality of the relationship between the individuals. It is a difficult concept but it is deeply human, normal and very ordinary. In simple terms, it is two people talking with a purpose for the main benefit of one of them (although the other may benefit as well).

Another way of thinking about mentoring is in terms of the skills employed. An experienced mentor will use the full range of counseling and coaching skills as appropriate to the situation and the mentee's needs. In my view, mentoring is a unifying "helping" behavior. It is the umbrella for universal non-therapeutic "helping", although some may say that coaching is this!

Conclusion

There is much evidence that one to one helping activity is both increasing across all sectors and that it has a key role in any learning and development strategy. If we cannot agree universally on the terminology it becomes difficult to know if we are engaging in the same activity, what is being done, how effective it is, if it is value for money or if it is being done to an appropriate standard. If you are an HRD specialist, an educationalist, a social worker or a line-manager this variation in meaning can become very significant.

I believe that we will never get universality, but I also believe that in whatever setting the terminology is used, there needs to be a common understanding of meaning within that setting. It is therefore necessary for the terms to be discussed by the users so that the overlaps in meaning are understood and the differences are appreciated within that context.

It is inevitable that different power groups will fight their particular corners and peddle their particular meanings. It would also be helpful if those who engage in "helping" in whatever context, in whatever way, enabled a clear understanding of what they mean by the terms they use. In this way, users could make informed judgements about the nature of the "helping" on offer.

Therefore, the name does matter but perhaps what matters more is the meaning we place on the name. If we are buying a rose we should at least know what type of rose or we could end up with a bramble!

Keywords:

**Mentoring, Coaching,
Counseling, Helping,
Terminology, Development**