

Sharpening our edges: the benefits of mentor coaching

Supervisor and mentor coach **Clare Norman** presents the case for including mentor coaching as part of our ongoing learning and development.

To a greater or lesser degree, coaches are learning junkies; after all, it is part of our DNA to be curious. We can be like magpies, collecting many new and shiny ideas for our practice. But when we are planning our continuing professional development (if indeed we do plan consciously), we often forget one thing. In terms of the learning impact, and the changes in our behaviour it leads to (or not), not all learning is weighted equally. Research by Olivero et al shows that behaviour changes by just 20% as a result of attending a course or conference.¹

Yet we continue to invest our hard-earned cash in training.

Supervision takes us a step further, in that we work on issues in which we have an emotional investment, issues that are focused on our own work and relevant to our stage of development.² We do this in the context of a secure relationship, which enables us to learn.³

But even though supervision is tailored to our needs, due to its self-reported nature, it doesn't always get to our blind-spots about how we coach.⁴

This is where mentor coaching can fill the gap. It shines the light on those blind-spots, making the invisible visible, the unheard heard, the unsaid noticed.

Mentor coaching, a term coined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), is 'observed coaching with feedback against a set of competences, that sharpens the coach's all-round presence'.⁵ The mentor coach listens to a coach's coaching and enables him/her to reflect on how their coaching matches up to a benchmark set of competences. This may be conducted one to one, where the coach and mentor coach listen together to a recording of the coach's coaching, stopping and starting that recording to notice what was said or unsaid and how that might be enhanced. Or it may take place in a group setting, where the mentor coach facilitates a group of coaches, who take turns to coach one other person in the room, with the rest of the group observing in order to provide feedback to the coach about what they notice. The coach takes away ideas to experiment with in their ongoing coaching, and the observers take away experimentations for their own coaching.

In the case of the ICF, mentor coaching is required for credentialing purposes, to enhance the coach's competence before they submit their application and to prepare them to submit one or more recordings of their coaching for assessment. →



Because it is part of the credentialing process, some coaches approach mentor coaching as a tick-box exercise: something to get through, just to say they have met the official ICF requirements. However, as we work with an experienced mentor coach, what becomes clear is that we can always sharpen our coaching edge, no matter how experienced we are. In my mentor coaching experience, coaches get much better at contracting for and closing their sessions in a way that sets the client up for success in between sessions, giving much more focus to the sessions and the continued work outside the coaching. They also improve the way they create space for good-quality thinking, the way they ask questions, and the way they offer useful observations based on their own experience of the client, all within the context of being fully present. They unlearn some coaching behaviours that are not serving their clients, and replace those with new behaviours that are more useful. For example, some coaches become more skilled in highlighting the essence of what they have heard, rather than parroting back everything that their client has said – getting out of the client’s way so that they can continue to think from where they left off before the summary instead of being taken back into their ‘story’.

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Other coaches change the way that they add value to their clients. Even coaches who have studied with reputable training companies can come to mentor coaching feeling a responsibility to offer advice as a way of demonstrating their value to their clients. This is especially the case with coaches who were consultants or advisors of some kind in a previous life (or indeed alongside their coaching practice). They leave realising that they are responsible for the process of enabling the client to tap into their own wisdom, which they are more likely to follow through on, and therefore create value for themselves.

This is how mentor coaching adds value to us as coaches; enabling us to sharpen our edge where we may have been taking short-cuts, so that we can pass that value on to our clients in the shape of better, more effective, coaching.

Some coaches might argue that solitary reflective practice gives them what they need. Perhaps they already listen to recordings of their coaching and reflect on their strengths and their development opportunities. But professor of coaching psychology, Tatiana Bachkirova, suggests that coaches can be self-deceiving.⁶ When we reflect alone, we are blind to what we don’t know. We are working within our own frame of reference, without the benefit of a second, third, or fourth pair of eyes and ears. That leads us right back to the importance of supervision and mentor coaching as part of a coach’s portfolio of ongoing reflective practice.

Mentor coaching is lifelong learning

Ongoing is the operative word here. Mentor coaching is not just for credentialing purposes; it is for lifelong learning. I work with a mentor coach three or four times a year, so that I raise my awareness of the language I use. Sometimes, a very simple change can make a big difference to the outcome of the coaching. For example, some training schools teach coaches to say, ‘Tell me more about that...’ What I notice about this phrase is that it sounds like it is for the benefit of the coach, when everything should be evoking new awareness for the client. It can invite story-telling – known thinking – when in fact we want to encourage our client towards new ways of thinking. A subtle change in phrasing – to, for example, ‘What’s beneath that?’ – will more likely take them to a new awareness.

Mentor coaching is very practical. It is all about how we show up in the room with our client. All the theory in the world (from books, lectures and conferences) will not make a great coach. Practice with feedback will, on the other hand, enable us to get better and better over time. According to learning theorists Ryan and Deci, competence is one of the three basic needs of all human beings (the others being autonomy and relatedness).⁷ We want to know that our skills are valued and that we can grow further.

Coach Sarah Turner said of her mentor coaching experience: ‘I am learning so much and growing hugely as a result of going through my mentor coaching. I have just done a brilliant coaching session with a client [where] I tried to put into practice everything we have been talking about in my mentor coaching sessions and I really feel it is making a difference. I can feel myself becoming a better coach and I see it and hear it from my clients too – one client emailed me immediately afterwards to tell me what a useful session it was’.⁸

However, mentor coaching is by no means an easy form of learning. It takes courage to put ourselves under the spotlight and be vulnerable in front of others. But we learn the most when we step into ‘the arena’.⁹ Failure is good for learning (though this isn’t usually about outright failure – more tweaking to get from good to great).²

Ideally, we should space our mentor coaching.² This allows us to put into practice what we are learning from each session back in the ‘real world’, then come back to review a new recording that takes into account all that we have put

into practice, building our competence and working on fine-tuning once more. It’s the complete antithesis of ‘sheep-dip’ training, where everyone goes through the same content, whether they need it or not. Alongside supervision, mentor coaching is the most individualised, high-impact form of development.

Being the best coach we can be

We’ve seen how mentor coaching is not just a tick-box exercise for ICF credentialing purposes; but what about coaches who are not aligned with the ICF, where there is no expectation of mentor coaching?

Why deny yourself the benefit of high-impact continuous professional development, just because it isn’t mandatory? We’ve seen here how valuable it can be to sharpen your edge, no matter which professional code of ethics and set of competences you are aligned with.

I know that not everyone needs a mandate to embed reflective practice into their work. But we do need to know about options for professional development, and not everyone has heard of mentor coaching – or perhaps you call it something different. My aim here is to raise awareness of one more reflective practice that is available to you, no matter which coaching body you align with and no matter what your level of experience.

You might argue that this is a mechanistic way of checking that we are using all the coaching competences (whichever ones you use as your benchmark). It may feel that way, when we take ourselves back to conscious (in) competence,¹⁰ trying out new words and phrases, or expanding our coaching from tapping into verbal intelligence alone, to embracing multiple other intelligences through interventions such as systemic constellations work.¹¹ But let me bring you back to my original definition of mentor coaching: ‘...observed coaching with feedback against a set of competencies, *that sharpens the coach’s all-round presence*’.⁵ Every coach has a unique style and presence. We are not

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trying to change who we are as human beings, to conform to some cookie cutter concept of a ‘coach’, but rather explore how we can be most valuable to our clients’ thinking, supporting and challenging them¹² in the context of a safe relationship with them.¹³ Isn’t that what every coach is striving for – to be the best we can be for our clients?

‘Mentor coaching keeps us sharp. Supervision keeps us safe and sane’.⁸ Both should form part of every coach’s ongoing reflective practice. ■

Finding a mentor coach

You can search for ICF-aligned mentor coaches in the mentor coaching registry on the ICF website at <https://coachfederation.org/find-a-mentor-coach>. Alternatively, you could ask your existing supervisor to observe a recording of your coaching and to give you feedback in accordance with BACP’s *Ethical Framework*.¹⁴

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Norman has 19 years of coaching experience and is a professional certified coach, a certified coach supervisor and a mentor coach for the International Coaching Federation, for internal and external coaches. Clare is a prolific blogger, and has written various articles on coaching, action learning, coaching supervision and mentor coaching, and she is the author of *Mentor Coaching: A Practical Guide*, published by Open University Press (2019). clare@clarenormancoachingassociates.com

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