

What's the Difference Between Coaching and Mentoring?

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A coach and a mentor are different things, although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. This can create confusion for everyone involved. Let's clarify the differences between these roles.

A mentor is an insider in a system, an expert in a field, who supports a novice. A mentor for a new teacher might be an experienced teacher in the same school or district. For example, a mentor could help a new teacher understand how to use the online homework platform or could offer tips on how to build relationships with the school's front office and custodial staff. A mentor shows a novice the ropes, the tricks of the trade, and helps the newcomer get through a career transition. A mentor passes on knowledge, experience, and helps a mentee make connections to others.

The key difference between mentoring and coaching in schools lies in the purpose for the support and the formality around the process. **Coaching is far more formal than mentoring, and has a more expansive end goal.**

Coaching is professional development. Its purpose is to help an adult learner improve their practice—whether that is teaching or leadership. Therefore, coaching is far more structured than mentoring. Effective coaching is anchored in goals (the coachee's goals, the school's goals, and student goals). Formal agreements around meetings,

confidentiality, and processes are established at the start of the coaching relationship. (For more on goals and agreements, see my book, *The Art of Coaching*).

A coach is a teacher, a facilitator of someone else's learning. In order to effectively guide the learning of another adult, a coach needs an extensive toolset. The coach doesn't need to be an expert in precisely the same field as the person they're coaching (i.e.: a former 6th grade teacher can effectively coach a new 1st grade teacher or a high school English teacher can effectively coach a middle school math teacher who is struggling with classroom management). However, the coach does need to have expertise in the field of teaching (someone who has never taught cannot effectively coach a teacher).

The job of a coach is wider, deeper and more extensive than the role of a mentor, and coaches usually receive far more training in order to become a coach (or at least they should). A new teacher or leader can benefit tremendously from having both a coach and a mentor.

Definitions matter: Without clarity on what a role means, without an articulated and shared definition, there's likely to be misunderstandings, differing expectations, and general messiness. Not only does there need to be a clear (and written) definition of roles, but these need to be discussed between coaches/mentors and coachees/mentees to ensure clarity.

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