

## Executive Mentoring & Coaching – Facts and Myths



Do you need an Executive Coach or Mentor? Do your managers? Here is a useful framework for thinking about the role of 3<sup>rd</sup> party guidance.

**Credibility.** A nice word. Sufficiently powerful to unmask the pretentious and unethical who plague our professional lives. Credibility is hard to gain. Easy to lose. Difficult to restore.

With credibility you leverage a successful career, enhance your organisation and engender meaningful relationships. Without credibility you're left to ponder what went wrong.

Increasingly, the credibility of the burgeoning executive coaching sector is facing scrutiny.

We are witnessing an influx of over-hyped, ill-equipped people calling themselves coaches - yet often bereft of business acumen, empathy, analytical skills and interpersonal qualities.

Much of what's being offered is drawn from the heavily hyped US coaching market with a seemingly endless variation of coaching specialisations like life coaching, personal coaching, leadership, experiential, executive, success, corporate, relationship and career coaching. Then there's remedial coaching, retention, change, mentor, developmental and situational coaching.

Let's be clear, good executive coaching is a value-adding contributor to contemporary senior management, but identifying a credible coach is difficult. Not to mention a mentor!

### ***So what's the difference?***

For us at CMG a *coach* is more instructional, more “technically” focused and should primarily fine-tune existing skills – and indeed develop new ones – for the client. The client may either not know where they want to be or be very goal focused. The role of the coach is to develop the requisite skills to get the client achieving goals.

A *mentor*, on the other hand shares experiences, listens well and asks many questions designed to create options for a client. It is a collaborative “Peer” relationship that is as much based on skills knowledge as the imparting of wisdom accumulated over many years.

*Gold dust for a client is to find that 3<sup>rd</sup> party who can seamlessly transfer between both roles as and when required.*

It is a recent phenomenon, for example, with the CMG team, that more and more we are mentoring succeeding generations as opposed to coaching. These clients are exceptionally well developed skill-wise, but engage us more to consider all implementation options, techniques and strategies – particularly on the people issues. Business skill issues invariably follow.

## ***So how do we choose the right person?***

Let's talk initially about Mentors. It is our strong belief that with the plethora of so called coaches (just try a Google search to understand this), it is imperative to find a mentor first who can coach - NOT the other way around.

First up, ignore the puffery, and probe for their credentials, leadership experience and client portfolio. And just because a mentor was once a great CEO, an effective company director or a financial whiz, doesn't guarantee they'll be a master mentor – indeed coach. Word of mouth has limited value in the search for a suitable professional, because any person who talks about their clients in detail is no professional at all.

*Mentoring therefore is difficult to quantify.* I've found that the very personal nature of this vital role is what sets it apart from normal professional development or consulting. So *competence and qualities* are essentially the key factors for a good mentor – and must include subtlety, empathy, curiosity, trust, character and insight. The mentor must be strong on strategy, good at lateral/creative thinking and able to customise individual programs to suit each executive's particular needs. And there must be mutually agreed objectives.

Top mentors can often be found operating within multi-function teams where the most useful professional backgrounds include organisational development, high-level consulting, and executive management. Everyone's needs are different, and there's no "one-size-fits-all" approach.

I benefited significantly from informal coaching early in my own career in the Petroleum Industry, but regret the absence of mentoring - someone to share with during my GM years and who could have empathised and analysed. I am now fortunate to have a long standing mentor who has also felt the "blow torch" of leadership.

*For the future* just as the world itself is becoming more complex, so too is executive mentoring and coaching.

It's assuming an integral role in the lifelong learning paradigm. But remember that mentoring is not, as some would have us believe, a solution to all of our workplace flaws. Instead, a master mentor is akin to a harbour pilot - being neither ship's captain nor crew, but helping you avoid the shoals so you can steer your vessel on the right course.

Good mentoring demands complete confidentiality. The empathy and trust required to optimise the outcome must be founded on highly sensitive interpersonal skills and organisational acumen. A *professional friend – we call it. He does not catch the fish for you; he guides you on how to fish.*

As the coaching industry in Australia matures, it will be those executive coaches and mentors who can differentiate themselves via their credibility and core skills and qualities who will enhance their reputation amidst what will inevitably be a sectoral shake out brought about by an influx of ill-equipped practitioners.

Industry accreditation will only be a partial solution to the problem. Financial planners (many of whom should more accurately be termed "financial brokers") are in a sector that has recently gone down the accreditation pathway - albeit with mixed success.

*Beware of those theorists who market convoluted, irrational coaching systems to camouflage their own inexperience and professional inadequacy, at the same time creating coaching modules that are easier to mark up. **And there are plenty of them around!***

Finally, why be mentored at all? Perhaps because gazing at yourself in the management mirror can give a distorted reflection. And, in a world where complexity and communication increasingly dominate, the objectivity and subtle guiding hand of a mentor can help attenuate your management blemishes. The coach can then step in to fine tune!

***The erosion of the "job-for-life" mentality following the advent of globalisation and the knowledge economy has awakened the more alert among you to the reality of on-going career changes – managing transition.***

Achieving your goals through the savvy selection of a mentor is likely to prove as value-adding a career move in the years ahead as will the choice of appropriate postgraduate studies. And these days this applies to business owners and families in business just as much to the career-minded.

***Beware the hype.***

One of the events we remember only too well at Carnegie Management – and we were the first Australian company to specifically brand ourselves as Executive Mentors and Coaches (reference search engines and directory entries in 1999) – was being told we had to become members of the International Coaching Federation in 2002. When informed that their membership was predominantly comprised of HR recruiting companies and mature age sole traders, we gracefully declined.

***"We are witnessing an influx of over-hyped, ill-equipped people calling themselves coaches"***

Accordingly we at CMG decided that with this plethora of coaches and mentors, we needed to define ourselves with a "tag" that aptly describes who we are and what we do – THE GOALKEEPER™ - who works with Business people to re-focus and then keeps them on track to achieve their goals. Totally consistent as well with our logo – our brand.

Therefore we now ask you to ask yourself the question – whether you may be a CEO, a senior executive, CEO, SME business owner or family in business .....

***What Can an Executive Mentor Do for Me?***

Is Executive Coaching and Mentoring in Australian companies destined to play a role occupied by psychoanalysis in some movie: a virtual prerequisite for anyone who aspires to be anyone?

It might seem that way at some organizations, at least to the untrained eye. IBM has more than sixty certified mentors (they call them coaches) among its ranks. Scores of other major companies have made coaching, indeed mentoring, a core part of executive development. The belief is that, under the right circumstances, one-on-one interaction with an objective third party can provide a focus that other forms of organizational support simply cannot.

And whereas mentoring was once viewed by many as a tool to help correct underperformance, today it is becoming much more widely used in supporting top producers. In fact, in a 2005 survey by CMG, 86 percent of companies said they used coaching (read mentoring!) to sharpen the skills of individuals who have been identified as future organizational leaders.

Mentoring has evolved into the mainstream fast. This is because there is a great demand in the workplace for immediate results, and mentoring can help provide that. How? By providing feedback and guidance in real time. Mentoring develops leaders in the context of their current jobs, without removing them from their day-to-day responsibilities. And it does not necessarily have to be one-off.

At an even more basic level, many executives simply benefit from receiving any feedback at all. As individuals advance to the executive level, development feedback can become increasingly important, more infrequent, and more unreliable. As a result, many executives plateau in critical interpersonal and leadership skills.

So, should you have a mentor? And which managers in your sphere of responsibility might benefit from working with an outsider to help sharpen skills and overcome hurdles to better performance?

The right approach to answering these questions still varies a great deal depending on whom you ask, but input from several dozen mentors and coaches, and executives who have undertaken that relationship, does provide a useful framework on how to think about the role of mentoring.

## ***The Road to Mentoring Runs Two Ways***

Although both the organization and the executive must be committed to mentoring for it to be successful, the idea to engage a mentor can originate from either HR or leadership development professionals or from executives themselves. In the past, it has more often sprung from the organizational side. But given the growing track record of mentoring as a tool for fast movers, we see more executives choosing it as a proactive component of their professional life.

### ***Executive Mentoring is not an End in itself***

In spite of its apparently robust potential, the very act of taking on a mentor will not help advance your career. In other words, don't seek mentoring just because other fast movers in the firm seem to be benefiting from it.

Mentoring is effective for executives who can say, "I want to get over there, but I'm not sure how to do it." Mentoring works best when you know what you want to get done. Perhaps, in spite of your outstanding track record, you haven't yet gained the full interpersonal dexterity required of senior managers—for example, you're not yet a black belt in the art of influence, which is so important in the modern networked organization. Honing such a skill might be an appropriate goal for a mentoring assignment.

But simply having a clear purpose won't guarantee mentoring value. You have to be open to feedback and willing to create positive change. If not, mentoring may not be the answer.

There are certain times when executives are most likely to benefit from mentoring. Executives should seek mentoring when they feel that a change in behavior—either for themselves or their team members—can make a significant difference in the long-term success of the organization.

More specifically, the experts say, mentoring can be particularly effective in times of change for an executive. That includes promotions, stretch assignments, and other new challenges. While you may be confident in your abilities to take on new tasks, you may feel that an independent sounding board would be beneficial in helping you achieve a new level of performance, especially if close confidants are now reporting to you. More so, you may recognize that succeeding in a new role requires skills that you have not needed to rely on in the past; a mentor may help sharpen those skills, particularly when you need to do so on the fly.

But mentoring is not just for tackling new assignments. It can also play an invigorating role.

Mentors can help executives develop new ways to attack old problems. When efforts to change yourself, your team, or your company have failed—you are frustrated or burned out — a mentor can be the outside expert to help you get to the root cause and make fundamental changes.

One increasingly common use of mentoring for senior executives focuses on the challenges of managing younger workers, and on helping executives better understand and lead a new generation of employees whose work ethics and values are different.

### ***Mentoring Engagements should be part of a larger Initiative***

Mentoring works when it's systematic. Many organizations use it as an integrated part of a larger leadership development program. Increasingly, firms incorporate "360-degree" feedback, using the results to indicate areas in which an executive might benefit from working with a mentor. Has your feedback revealed an area in which you would like to improve? Is it a skill you need to refine in order to advance through the organization? Would you benefit from an outside perspective? The answers to these questions help gauge the potential value of mentoring.

## ***Mentoring can provide Benefits not available Elsewhere***

One of the big benefits of a mentor is that they aren't tied to the organization, your friends, or anyone else. They are tied to you only, so they support what you want and where you want to go.

Even our families, who want the best for us, can't be unbiased or totally objective. What you do or do not do impacts them, whether it's positive or negative. A mentor is not impacted by your decisions, your wins or losses, or anything else.

This doesn't mean that company goals aren't supported by mentor — indeed, the mentor was most likely hired by the company to support the executive's efforts to achieve those goals. Even so, the role of the mentor is not to represent specific company needs or interests. The perspectives they provide, the alternatives discussed, and everything else has no agenda except to support the mentoree.

For better or worse, many executives can't find this type of conversation partner - a "truth speaker"—elsewhere in their companies. That “professional friend”.

And to reinforce this view we are trying to convey this message to an overwhelmed marketplace with a strong point of focused difference to the newcomers. A recently run article in the national print and magazine media helps us to convey our message to those we believe we can lend assistance. It follows.

### ***The Executive Mentor – the Goalkeeper ™ – an Interview.***

“In the space of a fortnight, six different people told Paul Smith they were having a horrible time in their executive jobs. One told him that he wanted to resign forthwith. Another confessed to just having endured the worst month of his business life. A prominent Family Business owner said: “I just want to give up and sell up – it's all too hard.”

These were not Paul's employees, bosses or friends. They included corporate or government leaders, business owners and executives who engage him as a business mentor (and coach) and who felt free in a one-to-one setting, to confess how they were really feeling about their jobs. Big pay packets and titles are no buffer to human needs and emotions.

It's a cliché, but life at the top really can be lonely or isolating, says Paul, because few employees can imagine that their “superiors” might sometimes feel vulnerable and bewildered. He's been there too!

Few employees realise that they might lock their bosses into a projection in which they become a figment of someone else's imagination, he says. “Leaders can be ascribed all sorts of motives and circumstances that they just don't want to have.”

As an executive goalkeeper ™ and Chief Executive of the Carnegie Management Group, the Sydney-born Smith, 55, is hired by leaders to be the “deep, tough friend”, with whom they can develop enough trust and rapport to allow them to navigate the issues of leadership – both personally and professionally - hired by both the organisation and the individual alike.

“They benefit by getting stuff off their chest. I often find myself caring for people that others don't care for. If we can talk about an issue and then isolate the source, we can then work with it”, Paul says.

He also leads workshops on the question of how to bring more meaning, more heart, into a working life. He individually mentors employees who have suddenly been elevated into tough new roles – or help them to get there.

“Not everyone is immediately perfect for a new job, so I help them to get the job under their belt.”

He is well qualified for this role, as he has experienced these dynamics first hand over the earlier part of his career. Graduating from Sydney University as a Bachelor of Economics he rose through the ranks of the Oil Industry with a heavy bias towards Marketing, Corporate Planning and profit centre accountabilities involving “big numbers” he proudly says. These General Management roles were followed by senior executive roles in the Logistics Industry.

Paul therefore understands workplace pressure and the need to perform – particularly in a multi-functional role that requires the leadership of managers.

However then his transition occurred, shifting his passion to work with the “real people”, he says. Hence his drive to assist executives as their third party support base, their work colleague “removed”.

“Sometimes I used to recruit them, so my background, by definition, also involved career transition.” he says. “But then my focus shifted and I became more interested in what was happening to individuals, rather than what was happening to organisations in the first instance. Hence clients also include business owners in their own right. They are no different!”

As an **Executive Goalkeeper**™ Paul consults with men and women from all walks of life, in those existing leadership roles – including those aspiring to leadership – *“by bringing another way of looking at things that should matter.”*

The ability to seamlessly transfer from mentor to coach is the cornerstone for him, and for them.

Some of the relationships, conducted in regular two-hour meetings that encourage reflection and feedback, have lasted for years. “Human change doesn’t happen overnight.” This includes empathy, passion for the job, future vision, life balance and vulnerabilities.

The soft stuff is that which allows connection to the client and to the colleagues. It allows connection on the basis of feedback. A simple example: asking a client how they feel.

It allows people to reveal their vulnerability to him and, in some cases, to employees. “It’s a risky phrase nowadays,” he says, “but to get to empathy with employees and clients, a person has to do an awful lot of hard, intimate work on themselves, particularly the leader.

“It sounds benign, but it is necessary for leaders to do the soul searching that brings them back to the specifics and that leads to new insights.”

This then culminates in goal setting, milestones and ongoing review – particularly important in an ever-changing world. However as far as possible, stick to the game plan he says.

“They do have to be willing to fumble and to get to the fuzzy edges where they discover something and create new models and potentials. Also they need to be able to embrace new behaviours perhaps. Followers pick up on the authenticity of the leader.”

Coming from such long experience within corporate Australia, Paul now sees here a rather adolescent working culture that is under-confident and that still emphasises skill-based competency above all else.

“Most people tell me their organisation is only interested in their competencies, when what they really want to feel is some more purpose in their work.”

“Some of the briefs I’ve had from organisations have requested me to help people to bring more of their heart to work. They want to know how to breathe life into their work.”

This can happen if an organisation permits and nurtures whole human beings at work. “When that occurs, and an individual starts to seek more meaning, they become more creative, passionate, engaged and empathetic. They are happier and more fulfilled,” he says.

This is an adult working culture where there is a balance between work and culture and where “love” does play a part. The baby boomers (executives) are moving into adulthood (parenthood) at work and they are beginning to deal with issues of “generativity” and care.

“Generativity” means rather than producing everything oneself, the aim is to help others to be more productive. However there must be, also, a positive commercial outcome at the end of the day.

“It is a broader sense of membership and yet a lot of organisations here are still based on competency and tribalism. Also hand in hand with this, we as a business community do not seem to encourage a learning culture for the next generation of leaders.” he says.

“Therefore it’s all about strategy development and execution – for both the individual and the organisation.”

***“Executive Goalkeepers™ don’t kick the goals – they guide people on how to kick.”***

Paul says that when organisations allow individual workers to become fully engaged, words like productivity become almost laughable. “People will transcend their job descriptions and kick the ball right out of the park!”

The emphasis he maintains for all people – Executives, Business Owners and Family Business – is to become fully focused and know precisely where you are heading at any point in time. “The development of this clarity does not happen overnight” Paul states. It requires careful and considered personal introspection via a process to determine what it is you really want to do, develop the strategies and plans – then implement, he adds.

“At CMG this is just so important for us when teaming with our clients – we believe that our work with our clients is a journey. Accordingly our logo – our brand - reflects this journey. It succinctly depicts what we do.”

### **So Let’s Summarize**

A lot of organizations and executives jump into mentoring programs seeing them as a “quick fix”, and something quite inexpensive to implement. Many jump into it but don’t provide the necessary planning to their programming, nor the necessary support and resources to make it really work. So a lot of organizations may have mentoring programs in theory rather than in practice.

Mentoring programs vary, and depending on the organization the mentoring initiative, can be as short as a one-hour briefing before the “mentoring journey” occurs.

There are many different interpretations of mentoring. Some people see it more like a coach, or an adviser, or even a counsellor. In our opinion, it’s like those things, but it isn’t those things at all. You really need someone who can help someone think through their issues and their problems and their concerns, and come up with a good decision – rather than someone who is going to tell you what to do.

It is vital therefore that mentees have a good understanding of the agreed process and structure to ensure successful outcomes – to become fully engaged and aware of the skills, attributes and techniques for successful mentoring.

So what qualities does it take to be a good mentor and how does mentoring benefit the mentor and the mentee?

There are many qualities required for someone to be a good mentor, which can include significant professional expertise and competence in a particular field – or indeed in overall senior business leadership and management. There are also some key qualities that are necessary.

It’s important to be able to respect the “story” of the person you are mentoring and realise that this person is placing a good deal of trust and faith in you by sharing their career and professional development. Being a mentor is a privilege – and it carries with it a responsibility of confidentiality, trust and respect.

A mentor must listen with intent to understand rather than respond. By this we mean that as a mentor you often undertake the role of a “sounding board”. You can’t be a sounding board if you are doing all the talking! Taking time to listen and then determine how you can assist a mentee is a vital quality and skill.

So therefore the mentor should always be “there” for mentees – one-one, phone and email. Mentees are therefore guided towards things without necessarily being given the answers – people should work through the issues themselves and find out what suits them. Mentors actually guide, encourage and understand where you are at. It’s all about ownership and empowerment for the outcome as much as the added value in the partnership.

Significantly these days it also assists in terms of understanding people. You get a lot of talk about Generations X and Y versus the Baby Boomers. Sometimes it’s a very difficult proposition to understand someone who appears so different to you, so by being in a mentoring situation that requires you to withhold any judgement and really hear another point of view, it can increase your own skills of relating to people, so that’s another advantage as well.

However like any other program or initiative, mentoring programs need milestones, goals and some form of measurement – including that all important human feeling of well being. So when beginning the journey and developing the strategies always include those all important targeted outcomes – and review/monitor progress regularly.

We contend that mentoring for successful transition and to get people to where they really want to be has application in all walks of life – but in particular in organizations – and as much for business owners, the career minded and families in business – if not more so.

## **OUR LOCATIONS AND CONTACT DETAILS**

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***“Working together we have the minds and the means to get you where you want to be.”***

