



Mentoring and Coaching in Leadership Development

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Participant paper

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Summary

This paper argues that mentoring and coaching are not optional extras in leadership development but practical, high-impact conversational interventions that help leaders think more clearly, act more confidently, and navigate complexity with greater judgement. Drawing on research and on my own experience as a former CFO, mentor, executive coach and team coach, I make the case for mentoring, individual coaching and team coaching as distinct but complementary interventions that accelerate growth, strengthen resilience, improve stakeholder effectiveness, and support inclusion when they are contracted well and delivered ethically.

Introduction

I care deeply about mentoring and coaching because I have seen, first-hand, how quickly capable people can become stuck when pressure increases, systems become more political, or confidence is knocked by change. I have also seen how the right mentoring or coaching relationship can help someone recover perspective, reconnect with their strengths, and move forward with more clarity and courage.

My own practice is shaped by decades of leadership experience in complex environments, including board-level finance roles, international transitions, restructuring, and high-pressure decision-making. That background matters because senior leaders do not need generic encouragement; they need a thinking partner who understands complexity, challenge and consequence, and who can create a calm, rigorous space in which better decisions become possible.

For that reason, this paper is not simply a general endorsement of mentoring or coaching in leadership development. It is an advocacy paper for the disciplined use of mentoring, individual coaching and team coaching as powerful leadership interventions, and for the value of working with practitioners who bring professional training, accreditation and real-world experience.

Development

Mentoring and coaching are related but distinct. Mentoring brings experience, perspective, role modelling and contextual guidance. Reverse mentoring is a form of mentoring; it simply involves a more junior or under-represented colleague mentoring a senior leader, around topics such as technology, culture, or inclusion, creating mutual learning and fresh leadership insight.

Coaching brings a structured reflective process that helps the client generate insight, strengthen self-awareness and convert thinking into purposeful action. In EMCC-aligned practice, the two can sometimes be blended within a conversation when the client’s needs and the agreed contract support that choice.

A further distinction matters between individual coaching and team coaching. Individual coaching works with the judgement, behaviour, confidence and choices of one person. Team coaching works with the team as a system: its relationships, patterns, alignment, shared purpose and collective effectiveness. It is the responsibility of the practitioner and the client to select the right intervention at the outset, as part of the contracting phase.

The table below compares the different forms of intervention to support leadership.

Approach	Main emphasis	Typical value
Mentoring	Experience sharing, perspective, role modelling, career navigation.	Understanding pathways, culture, and professional identity.
Individual or group coaching	Reflection, self-awareness, decision-making, accountability, behaviour change.	Improving personal effectiveness, confidence, judgement, and action.
Team coaching	Collective performance, shared purpose, relationships, patterns, and team effectiveness.	Strengthening how a team works together, learns together, and delivers together.
Sponsorship	Advocacy, visibility, influence, opening doors.	Creating access to opportunities and progression.

Beyond my own and my clients’ experience, there is strong evidence to support a confident case for these interventions. A meta-analysis of workplace coaching found positive effects on learning and performance outcomes overall, indicating that coaching improves both individual development and organisationally relevant results (Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016). A later meta-analysis of randomised controlled studies found a moderate overall effect of coaching across leadership and personal outcomes, strengthening confidence that coaching can produce meaningful change rather than simply pleasant reflection (de Haan and Nilsson, 2023).

The evidence for mentoring is also substantial. A meta-analysis of mentoring research found generally supportive evidence of career benefits for mentees, including both objective and subjective outcomes such as compensation and career satisfaction (Allen et al., 2004).

Broader leadership-development research points in the same direction. Harvard Business Review Analytic Services reported that organisations with stronger leadership-development outcomes make greater and more effective use of mentoring and coaching alongside more traditional development methods like training, and are more likely to report gains in engagement, team performance and revenue. In other words, the most effective leadership-development programmes do not treat mentoring and coaching as optional but as strategic tools linked to business performance.

In *Impact of Manager Coaching on Learning Transfer*, Leimbach et al., as summarised by Wilson Learning, report that a review of nine studies found that adding manager coaching to training increased performance outcomes by an average of 23% compared with training alone, with improvements ranging from 7% to 55%. When managers received both content training and coaching-skills training, learning transfer effectiveness increased by more than 40%, and performance improvements averaged 41%, more than twice the effect of coaching-skills training alone.

This matters in practice because many of the issues brought by senior clients are not primarily technical. They are questions of identity, authority, transition, confidence, political judgement, stakeholder management, resilience and the ability to stay effective under pressure. Mentoring can shorten the learning curve by making experience transferable. Coaching can help leaders reflect on their own experience, test assumptions, regulate emotion, and act with greater intentionality. Team coaching can improve the quality of conversation in leadership groups, surface recurring patterns, and increase collective accountability and trust.

It also matters because organisations increasingly need more human forms of leadership. Employees, particularly Gen Z, do not respond well to command-and-control cultures that suppress reflection, ownership and growth. Leaders who can coach and mentor well tend to ask better questions, listen more carefully, develop stronger trust, and create more responsibility in others. That does not mean every manager should become their direct report's coach. It means mentoring and coaching capabilities are now central leadership skills, even where the formal intervention is delivered by an external practitioner.

Quality and ethics remain essential. Mentoring and coaching are only useful when clients feel psychologically safe enough to think honestly and when the boundaries of the relationship are clear. Good practice requires thoughtful contracting, confidentiality, role clarity, respect for difference, and the discipline to avoid taking responsibility away from the client. It also requires the humility to recognise which intervention — mentoring, individual coaching or team coaching — is the better fit.

Working with accredited coaches and properly trained mentors improves the likelihood of quality because it gives clients confidence that the practitioner has been assessed against recognised standards and is operating within a professional ethical framework. That matters particularly in high-stakes settings, where poor contracting or blurred boundaries can dilute impact.

Inclusion is another area where the case for mentoring and coaching deserves more weight. Used well, they widen access to support, perspective, visibility and developmental challenge. Research by Cornell University ILR School found that mentoring programmes can improve promotion and retention rates for minority men and women by 15% to 38%, and can increase minority representation in management by 9% to 24%, making mentoring one of the more effective organisational levers for progression and inclusion when it is intentionally designed.

Mentoring can help people who may be excluded from informal sponsorship networks understand the unwritten rules of progression and build confidence in navigating them. Coaching can strengthen voice, initiative, confidence and reflective capacity, helping people respond more effectively to challenge and change. Together, these practices can contribute to more inclusive cultures when they are intentionally designed and ethically delivered.

Case studies from my professional experience

Newly promoted Head of Department – mentoring

Following promotion to a Head of Department role, the client wanted to strengthen their leadership presence, understand the complex system they were stepping into, and improve relationships with key stakeholders. Over four monthly mentoring sessions, the mentor drew on extensive senior leadership experience to help the mentee decode organisational dynamics, map lines of influence, and rehearse critical conversations.

As a result, the mentee's confidence and leadership identity grew noticeably, and their posture and communication with peers and senior leaders became more assured and impactful, mirroring research that links mentoring with greater confidence and stronger leadership performance.

First-time CEO – blended mentoring and coaching

A newly appointed CEO faced a significant career step and was unsure how to adjust to the expectations and visibility of the role. Across six sessions over twelve weeks, the work focused on clarifying what success in the first year would look like, identifying how to leverage existing experience and transferable skills, pinpointing new capabilities required, and navigating complex board, chair and strategic client relationships with conflicting interests.

With the client's permission, the practitioner blended non-directive coaching with targeted mentoring and provided a confidential sounding board for high-stakes decisions.

The client successfully navigated their first 100 days, increased their authority with multiple stakeholders, and reported a clearer, more authentic leadership stance—outcomes that echo evidence showing coaching enhances leadership effectiveness and confidence.

CFO considering exit during restructuring – coaching

A long-serving CFO was unsure whether to stay with an organisation undergoing a CEO change and major restructuring. Through a focused coaching intervention, she explored the likely changes ahead, her own motivation and appetite for the next chapter, and what she needed from the relationship with the incoming CEO. This reflection enabled her to engage constructively in the transition, establish a new relationship of trust with the CEO, and choose to remain.

The intervention not only supported her sense of clarity and agency but also helped the organisation retain a critical senior leader, in line with findings that mentoring and coaching are closely linked to higher engagement and retention.

Under-represented Head of Function seeking progression – training plus coaching

A Head of Function from an under-represented background felt demotivated after several unsuccessful applications for more senior roles, partly due to limited access to senior networks and doubts about how his potential was perceived. A combined “Diversity in Leadership” development programme and one-to-one coaching helped him reframe his strengths, re-evaluate his approach to networking, and experiment with new ways of showcasing his contribution and ambition. Over time, he built stronger relationships with senior leaders, increased his visibility, and began to create concrete progression opportunities, illustrating how structured development plus coaching can enhance inclusion, confidence, and internal mobility.

Leaders as coaches or mentors

Because managers hold formal authority for performance, pay, and career decisions, they are rarely best placed to act as a neutral coach or mentor for their own team, since this power dynamic can limit openness and honest exploration. Nevertheless, I saw first-hand how leaders who can ask better questions, listen deeply, and share experience thoughtfully create more engagement, ownership, and discretionary effort in their teams.

It is also important to mention that leaders who coach or mentor peers not only support those peers’ growth but also deepen their own understanding of organisational challenges and builds stronger relationships that accelerate their development as leaders.

Conclusion

My message is simple: mentoring, individual coaching and team coaching are powerful, evidence-based ways of developing leaders, and their impact is greatest when they are matched carefully to the client’s needs, delivered ethically, and grounded in real experience. I believe in them not only because the literature supports them, but because I have repeatedly seen them change how people think, lead and move through difficult transitions.

For me, this is the real promise of the work. Mentoring and coaching do not merely help people perform better; at their best, they help people become more thoughtful, confident and effective versions of themselves, with positive consequences for the teams, organisations and communities they influence.

Ultimately, it is one of the most meaningful ways I know to give back to the communities I belong to and support the growth of the people in them.

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