

## Bonus Chapter: *Suddenly in Charge*

# Outside Forces: When and How to Work with a Coach or Mentor

by Roberta Chinsky Matuson

*At PerkinElmer Human Health, we provide coaches to many of our incredibly valuable employees. This is an investment we are making in them. Each employee has a 5 percent development goal to work toward, whether with a coach or not, in order to take the next step. That 5 percent is usually very personal; for example, smoothing an edge, finding ways to be more confident, or improving executive articulation and presentation. I can—and do—help with these things, but I've found that it's more digestible coming from a third party.*

*While this is happening, I'm working with the coaches on the sidelines, receiving feedback that provides me with more tools to better manage my staff. I use this information in my daily interactions to help me develop my employees.*

*I can see a measurable improvement month by month when someone is working with a coach. But I recognize that this is a work in progress, and that we must continually work together to keep things moving in the right direction.*

Mary Duseau  
Vice President, Global Sales & Marketing, Bio-discovery  
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# Outside Forces: When and How to Work with a Coach or Mentor

Coaching and mentoring have come a long way since the days when companies used these outside resources to help fix toxic behavior at the top of the organization. Today, coaches and mentors are widely used across all levels of the organization to help people accelerate their development and improve their performance as leaders. They do this in much the same way that athletic coaches work with players: by helping you make the most of your natural abilities and find ways to work around your weaknesses.

Imagine for a moment learning to play a game like golf, which requires knowledge of the rules, concentration, and practice in order to achieve success. Now think about what it would be like to learn how to play this game without access to an instructor or a coach. Most of us would throw our clubs up in the air in a fit of frustration. In fact, that's exactly what many of us did back in the nineties, when we didn't have access to people who could help us improve our game at work—we left corporate America to start dot.com companies.

## The Big Debate—Mentor or Coach

Ask ten people to explain the difference between a coach and a mentor, and you will most likely get ten different answers. However, most would agree that there is a difference. Before you start looking around

for a coach or a mentor, you must determine what specifically you are looking to gain from this type of relationship. Once you've answered this question, you'll know which direction to move toward. Here are some general guidelines to help you decide:

A mentor:

- Is usually much higher up in an organization than you
- May be in a role that you aspire to be in someday
- May work in the same organization or in another organization
- Is most often selected by the person who is looking for mentoring
- Is selected based on the guidance he or she can give to you at a certain stage of your career or development
- Their influence is determined by the value you place in them
- Waits for you to ask for guidance
- Is usually not compensated
- May become a lifelong advocate or friend

A coach:

- Sets a strategy for your development as a leader
- Works with you to develop milestones and will hold you accountable as you work toward achieving these mutually agreed-upon objectives
- Helps you see blind spots that often prevent managers from achieving success
- Pushes you to achieve your personal best
- Helps you increase your professional relationships
- Works with you as an advisor
- Drives the relationship in a proactive way
- May be provided to you by the company (Note: if a coach is paid by the company, his or her first obligation is to the company if a conflict of interest arises)
- Is compensated for their services
- Works with you until it is determined that you have achieved your established objectives

Terri S. Alpert, founder and CEO of UnoAllaVolta.com and CookingEnthusiast.com, has found working with a coach to be very similar

to working with a personal trainer at the gym. “When I have goals for myself and I want to modify my behavior, having someone to be accountable to helps with the ongoing motivation. Changes happen as a result of changing habits. It is so much work for something to become a habit. Why not use every resource you have available to you? Resources are like tools in a toolbox. Part of managing is using your resources wisely,” states Alpert.

## **The Benefits of Working with an Outside Person**

DeKalb Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Leonardo McClarty was excited when his board chair first suggested that he work with a coach. This was his first leadership position in which he was running the show, and it was good to know that the organization wanted to invest in him.

“For me, it’s been all about accelerating the learning curve!” McClarty says. “A coach has a much clearer lens that they see things through because they are not in it day-to-day. They have other experience that they bring to bear because they are working with other clients who are experiencing similar challenges. Most importantly, they tell you what you *need* to hear and perhaps not what you *want* to hear.”

You may be thinking, “Well, isn’t that the job of my boss?” Yes and no. The boss has other responsibilities, such as accounting, HR, customer service, etc. He or she is looking at the big picture and may not always have the time to give you the kind of guidance you may require, particularly if you are just starting out in management. When you have a coach, however, the focus is on you. Your time together is free of other distractions.

When McClarty played college football, his team had a number of coaches, each dedicated to a specific skill needed to play the game. This allowed each coach to focus on what he or she did best. Together, they put together a winning team. We see this same game plan play out throughout corporate America: the CEO decides the game strategy and calls the plays, while managers are often coached by outside experts who are known for their ability to pull together winning teams.

Alpert uses a similar approach in her company, where anyone who wants coaching can have it. Sometimes she offers coaches to people who are not meeting expectations. “We want to give them every chance of succeeding in order to have a long-term place here,” Alpert says. She offers a

coach as a resource with one caveat, however: you have to achieve the goals that have been agreed upon. Alpert has found that most people who choose not to use a coach are not truly committed to achieving these goals. If this is the case, then it's best not to waste this resource.

## WHY NOW IS THE TIME TO WORK WITH AN OUTSIDE PERSON

Here are a few of the most vital times to consider working with a coach or mentor:

- You are preparing yourself for a promotion.
- You need to adjust quickly to a new circumstance.
- You have employees you find challenging to manage.
- You find yourself working for a difficult boss.
- You've been assigned to a new function, office, or even country that requires you to use skills you have barely developed.
- You have a performance weakness that, left unattended, could spread and negatively impact other areas of your performance.

## What to Look for in a Coach or a Mentor

Nowadays, it seems like just about everyone is a coach or a mentor. So why not simply use the same coach your friend has been using? That may be fine, but before doing so, make sure your needs are the same and that this coach or mentor is the right fit for you. Here are some other things to look for in a coach or a mentor:

### 1. Does his or her experience make the grade?

I don't know about you, but I certainly don't want someone coaching me on how to successfully do my first jump out of a plane if he or she hasn't already done it at least a dozen times! The same holds true when selecting a coach or a mentor in business. A life coach might be great for your cousin who has decided to reenter the workforce after a leave of absence, but may not be appropriate for you if you're looking to learn how to become a more effective leader. You need someone who has been in the trenches and has successfully led people.

### 2. Do your styles match?

You need to be comfortable showing this person who you truly are, and at times hearing some difficult feedback. Some coaches are

known to be direct, while others take a softer approach. Knowing which style you prefer will enable you to find someone with whom you can work successfully.

**3. Is he or she willing to give you a trial period?**

It's difficult to really know if your personalities will click until you begin working together. That's why it's important to make sure whoever works with you is agreeable to a trial period. Note: this does not mean you are entitled to a full refund should you decide partially through the engagement that you are not compatible. This simply means you have an out clause in case you need to go your separate ways.

**4. Has he or she successfully helped others in similar situations?**

What does his or her track record look like? Find out how long your potential coach has been working with people, and in what capacity. Be careful not to get too caught up in specifics, though. An excellent coach who previously helped a new manager in a manufacturing company strengthen his relationships with senior management can certainly do the same for you, even if you work in retail.

**5. Is he or she available?**

Finding a wonderful coach or mentor won't do you much good if he or she does not have the time to help you. Before you enter into a relationship, clearly define your needs and ask the person whether or not your expectations are realistic given his or her other commitments.

You may also want to consider the person's official credentials, but don't get too hung up on this. I'm often asked if a coach without certification is worth considering. In the interest of full disclosure, I do not have a coaching certification, yet I have effectively coached people for over twenty years. Find someone who can demonstrate that he or she has achieved similar successes, and don't worry about the three letters that may or may not be assigned to his or her name. When you've identified someone you like, check references. If they match what you have observed, proceed. It's that simple.

## **Does Gender Matter?**

There are certainly varying beliefs regarding whether it is best to have a coach or mentor of the same sex. In many situations you may not have a choice, since there aren't enough women in leadership positions

to go around. That being said, there may be times when a mentor or coach of the same sex is preferable.

“There are many things women have to consider that men don’t have to deal with,” notes Stutts. “Women still have the primary responsibility to handle family matters. You don’t often hear men talk about work/life balance. That’s where having a female mentor can really come in handy for women.” However, this doesn’t mean women shouldn’t take advantage of the resources that male mentors may offer.

## How to Find a Mentor or a Coach

Mentors can be found in many places. Begin by looking inside your company. Many organizations have established formal mentoring programs. All you need to do is ask, and you will be matched with someone in the organization who has volunteered to participate in the program.

If your company doesn’t have a formal program, then you will need to look outside to find a mentor. Sometimes these relationships fall into your lap; for example, you’re at a conference and you meet someone who takes an interest in what you are saying. As the conversation continues, you feel a connection. Before long, he or she tells you to call the next time you find yourself in a particular situation.

Other times, you might have to search high and low for an appropriate mentor. You need to put yourself in places where you will easily encounter these people. For many, this may be a conference or association meeting where you’ve identified one of the speakers as someone you would like to get to know.

Mary Stutts, author of *The Missing Mentor: Women Advising Women on Power, Progress, and Priorities* and senior VP of corporate relations at Élan Pharmaceuticals, says that you have to get creative. “Go to these conferences, even if you have to pay your own way, to get access to the people who are the leaders in their field. Go up to them after they have spoken and hand them something of interest. Ask them for permission to follow up for feedback,” advises Stutts. She also suggests joining a project at your company in order to gain access to leaders you might not encounter otherwise.

The Internet is a great resource for finding a coach or mentor. Comb through your alumni association’s online directory and search for alumni who are in positions that you aspire to. Send an e-mail asking them if they might make time to meet you for a coffee before or after work. Use your LinkedIn network to search out possible mentors as well.

Don't be surprised if it takes a while to find a mentor. People are busy, and most won't immediately volunteer to take on another project. However, they may do so after they have had some time to get to know you.

## **Maximizing Your Relationship with a Mentor or Coach**

### **THE MENTOR**

Samir Said, founder and CEO of Social Business Bank, has invested much of his time in developing relationships with mentors who have been of great support to him in building his business. Often, these relationships develop organically. You may be introduced to someone at a conference whom you seem to click with, or you may intentionally be on the lookout for this person. Said believes that the mentoring relationship must be a two-way street. "You have to provide some sort of value to the mentor. This may be a small sign of appreciation, or it may involve trying to help the mentor out as well," says Said. In his situation, he has intentionally looked for connections that would be of interest to his mentors before introducing himself to them.

Stutts believes it is of utmost importance to be prepared when you meet with a mentor, and to list the specific issues you need help with. "These are busy people," notes Stutts. "Stick to the agreed-upon time frame. Get in and out of their office. Make the best use of your access by being concise. Ask very specific questions that you want them to answer. If you follow this advice, they will happily meet with you again."

Life coach and strategic marketer Steffi Black advises people to consider the circumstances and evaluate the best way to honor your relationship with a mentor. "In some situations, you will be better served to set up regular times to get together. In other situations, having an open-ended relationship where you can call when you need to is best," Black advises. Make sure this person doesn't just become a sounding board for your problems, but someone who helps you reflect on the situations that arise and makes you think about how to deal with them.

Think of a mentor as someone who is volunteering to give of him or herself. Be respectful, take only what you need, and be prepared to give back when the opportunity presents itself.

## THE COACH

Most coaching situations are set up for a defined period of time. Therefore, it is especially important that you make the most of your time together. To do so, you must begin with clear objectives. These are usually established together with your coach, along with ground rules, time frames, and specific goals and measures of success.

You must follow through on what you say you will do. It makes no sense to work with a coach unless you are fully committed to making the necessary changes that will give you lifelong results. If not, you will be like those people at the gym who show up, chat a bit as they go through the motions of doing what looks like exercise, and return home only to find that little has changed.

Alpert offers the following advice on effectively working with a coach: “It is important never to think the coach is going to do the work for you. The coach exists to hold up the mirror so you can see your own actions and behaviors in order to achieve your goals. This must be something you personally want to do, not something your boss thinks you should do. You have to want to grow on a personal level.”

## Knowing When It’s Time to Cut the Cord

Having an outside person to rely on can be great until you become too dependent or you outgrow the relationship. At this point, it makes sense to either fly on your own or find someone else who can help take you to the next level. Here are seven signs that it may be time to let go:

1. You are not achieving the results you are hoping to achieve.
2. You feel you are no longer growing.
3. You are assigned to a new position where your coach or mentor has no expertise.
4. You are afraid to make a move without checking in with your coach or mentor.
5. You are scrambling to find things to talk about.
6. It seems to be taking longer and longer for your coach or mentor to return your calls.
7. You have mastered the skills you have been working on and are now able to teach others.

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KEY LEARNING POINTS:

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- Corporate coaches are no longer reserved for executives who are behaving badly. Today, they are widely used across organizations to help high-potentials strengthen their leadership skills.
- There is a difference between working with a coach and working with a mentor. Before you start looking around for a coach or a mentor, you must determine what specifically you are looking to gain from this relationship. Once you've defined this, you will know how to best proceed.
- A mentor is someone who will help you without receiving any material goods in return. It's your responsibility to call upon your mentor when you need guidance.
- A coach is paid to help you. Clear objectives, along with agreed-upon ground rules, time frames, and specific goals and measures of success are the foundation of the coaching relationship.
- When selecting a coach or mentor, make sure the fit is right, especially since you will be sharing information that is of a personal nature. Look for someone who has a proven track record of helping people achieve the same types of results you are looking to achieve.
- There are many ways to find a mentor, including tapping into your organization's formal mentoring program, making connections at conferences, social networking, and searching your college alumni network.
- It is important to nourish mentoring relationships. Keep the mentor informed regarding your successes and provide acknowledgment along the way. Be respectful, take only what you need, and be prepared to give back when an opportunity presents itself to do so.