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Coach-like Mentors Achieve Greater Effectiveness

By [Julie English and Lynn Lanoue](#)

Black Belts seldom have authority to direct the teams, sponsors and leaders they work with. Therefore, as a full-time [change agent](#), today's Black Belt needs excellent [soft skills](#) to move things forward from their position within the team. At the top of that skills list are coaching and mentoring. By blending these two disciplines, Black Belts may help team members create positive action plans.

Differences Between Coach and Mentor

Many people suggest that coaching and mentoring are one and the same. But when looking at the definitions for the two positions, it is clear there are some differences in key areas:

Focus of Work

- Coaching deals with the present. It is fundamentally about facilitating change and movement from a current state to a more desirable future state.
- Mentoring deals mostly with succession training. A mentor is a wise and trusted counselor or teacher that serves as a guide, especially in occupational settings.

Relationship

- A coach helps people to discover their own answers. Coaches are trained to listen, observe and customize their approach to individual needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the person they are working with.
- A mentor has the answers and is usually internal to the organization. Mentors have in-depth knowledge of the organization and the mentee's situation, often helping to guide and craft solutions.

Process

- A coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources and creativity that someone already has.
- A mentor provides guidance and wisdom. Mentoring is not about blazing a trail, but providing a map.

Becoming a Coach-like Mentor

Bottom line: coaching is not telling, and mentoring is not coaching. But as a mentor, Black Belts have the experience and the map – and it can pay off to experiment with the value of being a coach-like mentor. Using a coaching perspective will increase the effectiveness of the team and the impact of the solutions.

People do not resist change; they resist being changed. This is simply how the brain functions: when forcing someone to change or learn, there is a defensive posture and learning is lost. When [Black Belts](#) approach conversations with mentees as an expert, the other person may feel inexperienced or inadequate, and their brain may respond by shutting down. The key is to focus and ask supportive learning questions to help people learn for themselves. The power that goes along with self achievement will trigger a wave of synaptic activity. More synaptic connections give the brain greater flexibility to access many pathways at once, leading to more creative and longer-lasting thought processes.

5 x's of Coaching Skills

How do Black Belts incorporate a coaching style? By simply following the $Y = f(x)$ formula, and looking at the five critical x 's for powerful coaching:

1. Listening

This is a foundational skill for leaders and coaches, and the basis of all relationships. Effective communication depends on the quality of listening. There are three levels of listening – the mentor's agenda, the mentee's agenda and a shared agenda. Black Belts must listen beyond their agenda to a shared agenda.

For better listening, Black Belts should:

- Focus, both mentally and physically
- Take a few deep breaths to clear their mind and relax their body
- Remove clutter from their desk
- Concentrate on content, not delivery. Focus on what the individual is saying, not their grammar or accent.

When listening, it is also important to stop the mind chatter. This means quieting the internal voice, which may be tempted to argue with, critique or resolve what the mentee is saying instead of simply listening. This will help the mentor remain objective and open-minded. If Black Belts simply cannot shut off their internal voice, try redirecting it to ask questions about what the mentee is saying, such as "What are the key points?" and "How does this fit?"

Giving undivided attention to the mentee and the conversation is another must. While listening, Black Belts should not multi-task – turning their computer screen and cell phone off should help with this temptation. Also, Black Belts can use verbal and non-verbal listening acknowledgements and summarize statements for clarity and accuracy to ensure the listener they are paying attention.

2. Questioning

Great leaders inspire others not just by what they say, but also by what they ask. Asking non-judgmental questions is exploring for gold. The following are several tips for asking better questions:

Explore what the situation is in relation to the topic by asking:

- What happened?
- What is important about that?
- What is your assessment?

Define what the mentee wants to gain from the conversation by asking:

- What is your key goal?
- What are you not facing?
- What is ahead?

Learn what the person is thinking and feeling about the topic by asking:

- How does it look to you?
- What is motivating you?
- What is missing here?

3. Giving Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback takes courage and trust in oneself and the other person. It gives encouragement, direction and is essential in ensuring that all goals are met. The following are tips for giving better feedback:

Ask permission – "May I share with you what I have noticed?"

- Be positive and non-judgmental
- Create a climate of consensus
- Guide as opposed to telling

Motivate – “What I notice about you at your best is...”

- Point out specific talents, knowledge and attitudes
- Explain how these attributes contribute to their success
- Explain how they inspire others

Encourage – “What I notice about you when you are not at your best is...”

- Point out specific talents, knowledge and attitudes
- Explain how these attributes get in the way of success
- Explain how they affect others

4. Setting Goals

Listening, questioning and feedback are the basis for Black Belts to co-design a map with their mentees, which lists achievable goals and an action and accountability plan that encompass the entire individual.

Set goals in each of the following categories:

- Learning goals: These are focused on acquiring or mastering skills, situations or professional development through education.
- Performing goals: These are in alignment with the organization’s mission or vision, and aim to improve competency and achievement.
- Fulfillment goals: These are personal in nature, and relate to social and family life, health, and career and financial aspirations.

5. Offering Options

Options are the compass to effective change. Black Belts should offer options without attachment and in full agreement with the mentee. An option is a suggestion – not a demand – and may be refused. Options create an environment of co-created solutions and goals, leading to individual [buy-in](#) and ownership to attain a desired outcome. Design suggestions in four potential levels:

- Act as Champion – See the best in the mentee and invite them to as well.
- Request something – Design a shared action plan with accountability (what, when and how)
- Challenge them – Reflect on what is holding them back.
- Give a simple suggestion – Try suggestions that start with: “What would it be like...?” I am noticing...” or What if...?”

Chain Reaction

Coaching is a circular process of defining, measuring and achieving positive movement, and co-creating attainable goals with the mentee that lead to successful outcomes.

Thomas Pyzdek writes in *The Six Sigma Handbook* (McGraw-Hill, 2003): “In Six Sigma work there is a coaching chain: leaders coach Champions and sponsors, Champions and sponsors coach Master Black Belts, Master Black Belts coach Black Belts, Black Belts coach Green Belts, and Green Belts coach team members. Each link in the chain helps the next link learn more about doing their job right.” He goes on to say: “Mentoring isn’t so much about the mentor blazing a trail for the change agent as it is about providing the change agent with a map for getting things done effectively.”

As coach-like mentors, Black Belts can create a chain reaction of shared behaviors and knowledge, empowering each link to define, measure and achieve success.

About the Authors: **Julie English** is the CEO of *Within Reach Consulting LLC* and a founding member of *The Leadership Collaborative*, a coaching, consulting and training organization. A Master Black Belt, her 14 years of experience include working with companies such as *Allied Signal*, *Honeywell International*, *Raytheon* and *Accenture*. She can be reached at julie@withinreachconsulting.com. **Lynn Lanoue** is also a founding member of *The Leadership Collaborative* and is CEO of *BWI Coaching & Consulting LLC*. She has spent more than 25 years in the medical and healthcare area working for *Baxter Healthcare Corp.* and *Nestlé Clinical Nutrition*. Lanoue is a Green Belt. She can be reached at lynn@bwicoaching.com.

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