

Coaching, Mentoring, Volunteering and Work – What Works and What Doesn't

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Abstract

This perspective piece provides an outline of how mentoring, rather than coaching, is prevalent in the voluntary sector and used as a tool to develop skills in volunteers. Mentoring, a voluntary activity, is chosen over coaching, usually a paid activity, and examples of developmental and peer mentoring programmes are outlined. The learning drawn from these examples at individual, team, and organization level are outlined and the need for a higher level of involvement by HRD professionals in the design and implementation of mentoring programmes is recommended.

Keywords

Coaching • Mentoring • Volunteer • Voluntary Sector, HRD

Introduction

This perspective piece offers one view of whether coaching and mentoring are applied in the same way in business and voluntary sectors and provides a personal view of mentoring specifically as a voluntary activity and within the voluntary sector. Coaching and mentoring are used in professional and volunteer environments, but research is focused on business rather than the voluntary sector, meaning that where research is used to underpin practice it is being taken from very different perspectives. A range of challenges relating specifically to voluntary sector/volunteer mentoring are identified, leading to suggestions that voluntary sector mentoring requires different approaches to be effective.

Coaching and Mentoring in the Literature

Coaches are often paid, with Glassdoor (2024) citing a range of pay scales. Although mentors can be paid, it is often done for philanthropic reasons (Indeed Editorial Team, 2024) with mentors volunteering their time. Such mentoring is found in sectors such as general and higher education (Bayer et al., 2015; Jones & Smith, 2022), prisons (Toma, 2022), and for older people (Hafford-Letchfield & Lavender, 2018). Its

importance in the voluntary sector is highlighted by Mason et al. (2022) and Warley (2024), where mentoring can be formal or informal and the mentee as well as the mentor is a volunteer. The term voluntary sector is poorly understood (NCVO, 2021) but there is broad agreement that the term covers a wide range of organizations with different purposes that are neither public nor private sector (Northern Bridge, n.d.), work for the public benefit, have a significant element of voluntary participation, and do not distribute profits (NCVO, 2021). The term voluntary sector used in this paper adopts these NCVO criteria.

There is a plethora of definitions of coaching and mentoring with the terms frequently used interchangeably within organizations and by practitioners (Connor & Pokora, 2017; Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2021; Iszatt-White & Saunders, 2017). There are however differences in how they are defined in the literature. Coaching focuses on working towards a clear set of goals in an organizational setting (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2021), Garvey (2011) broadly concurs, identifying it as a commercial activity, related to management, as do Parsloe and Leedham (2016). In contrast, mentoring is common in social and educational sectors where it is a voluntary activity, often focusing on

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the psychological benefits of the process (Garvey, 2011) and including feedback, support, and guidance. Although it is used professionally e.g. to support career development, it also occurs informally (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2021) and informal learning is significant within volunteer development (Fullwood & Rowley, 2021; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). The use of both approaches as a leadership and management development tool within business contexts is widely covered (Carroll, 2015, Connor & Pokora, 2017; Garvey et al., 2018; Watt et al., 2023) and mentoring in particular is a principal element of leadership and management development in voluntary settings (Fullwood & Rowley, 2021; Gill, 2011). This supports the prevalence of mentoring over coaching in the voluntary sector.

A further difference is the models used. Frequently cited coaching models, such as GROW – Grow, Reality, Options, Will (Whitmore, 2009) and OSKAR – Outcome, Scale, Know-How, Affirm, and Action, Review (Jackson & McKergow, 2006) are both more focused on business outcomes, with Whitmore (2009) identifying GROW as a business coaching model. Solution focused and result-oriented models, like OSKAR, usually support profit-related outcomes (Parsloe & Leedham, 2016), a direct contrast to the voluntary sector's non-profit focus (NCVO, 2021). The lack of research into the applicability of such models in voluntary settings makes it difficult to ascertain their appropriateness in informal/non-professional/developmental mentoring relationships which are found in the UK (Clutterbuck, 2014). This developmental approach aligns with Megginson and Clutterbuck's (1995) definition of mentoring as off-line help from one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work, or thinking.

Mentoring is often a voluntary activity (Garvey, 2011), so developmental mentoring fits within the voluntary sector where the main motivation of volunteering is emotional rather than career progression (Anheier, 2014). Funding comprehensive learning and development is challenging (Cranfield Trust, 2023) and volunteer-delivered mentoring is important in leadership/management development (Fullwood & Rowley, 2021; Gill, 2011). Bortnowska and Seiler (2019) acknowledge the paucity of research into mentoring in the voluntary sector. The different and more diverse volunteer-organization relationship means mentoring can be used for a wider variety of purposes than in the employee-organization relationship, precluding a universal model. Their 11-step model outlines common techniques including clarity about the aim of the programme, a structured approach to mentor selection, training of both parties, identifying needs, planning, monitoring, and supervision. Structured mentoring for non-profit senior leaders can be successful but mentors from outside the voluntary sector can encounter issues initially in relation to expectations (Collins, 2019). Given the lack of

research into mentoring in the voluntary sector, it is unclear if this is due to wide sector differences or lack of process, as outlined by Bortnowska and Seiler (2019), or the application of business/profit-related approaches to mentoring, but these could be significant contributory factors. The UK voluntary sector is diverse - a significant percentage of organizations are small/micro charities, the remainder are responsible for 80% of sector income (Tabassum, 2023). Whilst mentoring can be beneficial, different relationships and sector diversity mean a single model/approach as outlined by Bortnowska and Seiler (2019) would be difficult to apply across the sector. Equally, applying a model used and researched in a for-profit environment without consideration of different relationships and sector variations will also not be effective. Megginson and Clutterbuck's (1995) definition applies well within the voluntary sector as the help is, in the author's experience, off-line, and the transitions sought can be in knowledge, work – albeit voluntary – and thinking. The challenge is in how the relationship is structured between the voluntary organization, mentor, and mentee and the models/approaches used for the mentoring relationship.

Practical Applications

The author's experience of coaching and mentoring has been varied and predominantly formal, as part of paid work or structured voluntary programmes. This includes awarding body teaching/training coaching and mentoring; coaching as a line manager and as an external consultant in business and voluntary sectors; mentoring new staff in further and higher education. Despite the importance of training, support, and supervision (Clutterbuck, 2014; Connor & Pokora, 2017), provision was inconsistent in both paid and voluntary environments.

The author's mentor roles have been voluntary, reflecting the view that mentoring is a voluntary activity (Garvey, 2011). This includes a mentoring programme for women considering business start-ups; one for women's career progression; mentoring new volunteers and new branch directors within Samaritans; designing and delivering mentor training for Samaritans and the Association of Volunteer Managers (AVM). This supports the view of mentoring for both parties as a voluntary activity and one used to socialize new entrants (Garvey, 2011), as well as its use to support leadership and management development particularly within the voluntary sector (Cranfield Trust, 2023; Fullwood & Rowley, 2021; Gill, 2011).

These programmes had different approaches but broadly have been developmental mentoring or peer mentoring. Developmental mentoring is defined as supporting people to develop their own skills (Clutterbuck, 2014). It is a learning partnership with various levels of experience, and

a supportive, confidential activity which aims to develop capability. In contrast, peer mentoring is characterized by an equality in the relationship which leads to the abandonment of status and authority. A key aim in peer mentoring is to address specific gaps (Clutterbuck, 2014; Sauder et al., 2022).

Bortnowska and Seiler (2019) cite Czechowska-Frączak's stages of a mentoring programme model as a useful starting point for programme-level considerations, with their 11-step model providing sector-specific detail. The steps in these two models broadly align with Jones and Smith's (2022) ten priority aspects, showing that there are common elements of successful programmes regardless of sector.

Developmental Mentoring

Table 1 below shows a range of developmental mentoring programmes the author has experienced, examining the mentors' experience and any evidence of impact on individual, team and organizational learning.

The networking mentor programme process was informal with little matching, no training, no supervision, and little

follow-up. The professional body programme had a matching process, offered training, minimal support, and guidance but no formalized supervision. These can be seen to lack the processes necessary for effective mentoring (Bortnowska & Seiler, 2019; Clutterbuck, 2014; Connor & Pokora, 2017; Jones & Smith, 2022) and the lack of formal process will contribute to the inability to assess individual, team, and organizational learning.

Samaritans' volunteers who have passed their probation and undertaken the relevant training can become mentors. New volunteers are assigned mentors based on availability and a lead mentor collates feedback about new volunteer progress, supporting volunteer development (Fullwood & Rowley, 2021; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). Regular mentoring meetings are held to provide supervision and monitor quality. Although matching is less rigorous, which can impact the success of a relationship (Clutterbuck, 2014), appropriate training and opportunities for supervision are provided (Bortnowska & Seiler, 2019; Hawkins & Smith, 2013; Jones & Smith, 2022). As volunteers are mentoring in addition to their original commitment, however, attendance at the meetings for supervision is voluntary, meaning it is not consistently undertaken.

Table 1. Developmental Mentoring Examples

Mentoring Programme/Activity	Individual Learning	Team Learning	Organizational Learning
Networking organization – women supporting women to set up own business, usually sole trader. Engagement in the scheme was voluntary. Mentors were a more experienced person who had set up own business.	Evidenced by individual's decision or not to set up as a sole trader.	Not applicable.	May be evidenced in the future but unable to gauge this as relationships were time bounded and related to decision making not action.
Professional body – women wanting to progress their careers in management. Engagement in the scheme was voluntary. Mentors had already achieved a management role.	Measured by feedback from mentee direct to mentor and career progression during the process. The organizing professional body provided no feedback to mentors of learning at any level.	Unable to gauge this as mentor was removed from the organization and the mentee's choice to disclose their menteeship.	As for team, unable to measure this.
Samaritans new volunteer mentoring – new volunteers supported through a 6-month probation with regular mentor contact and feedback. Engaging in the process is mandatory. Mentors are experienced and trained volunteers who provide feedback to the mentee.	The practice provides high skilled volunteers able to offer a consistent high-quality service to callers. They are supported by further training and progression through probation is dependent on achieving an acceptable level of skill.	Mentors have to keep their own skills up to date. Experiences and learning can be shared with the mentor group and wider _volunteers. It ensures a supply of new mentors to promulgate good practice and provides continuous improvement of service. Feedback through in-branch mentor group.	It informs centrally produced training and practice. Currently these opportunities are limited and could be extended.
Association of Volunteer Managers volunteer manager mentoring programme – member volunteer managers apply to be either a mentor, outlining the skills/knowledge they can offer or a mentee, outlining what they want to develop/achieve. Engaging in the process is voluntary. Mentors are volunteer managers with more experience/knowledge in the areas required by mentees.	AVM gathers regular feedback from mentors and mentees which evidences individual learning up to and beyond personal goals set.	Mentors and mentees identify that their increased knowledge is used to support their practice where they have a team – but not all do.	Evidence of this is not gathered as the scheme is external from the participants' organization but if individuals and teams improve practice and knowledge then it is a reasonable assumption that there will be an organizational benefit.

AVM have historically provided mentoring programmes for volunteer managers. In 2024 they refreshed the programme to ensure a robust process. With the author, an appropriate level of matching, provision of a handbook, training, on-going learning, supervision, and a feedback process was agreed (Bortnowska & Seiler, 2019; Clutterbuck, 2014; Connor & Pokora, 2017; Hawkins & Smith, 2013; Jones & Smith, 2022). Mentors have varying levels of experience and are actively encouraged to attend the online initial training, on-going development/supervision session and online support/supervision group. Mentees are offered an introductory session and a mid-point review/mini-networking event. Feedback is positive and changes have been made to the programme, evidencing a learning organization approach (Parsloe & Leedham, 2016) and supporting leadership development (Fullwood & Rowley, 2021; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). Again the voluntary attendance at these sessions risks inconsistent approaches and outcomes.

Peer Mentoring

Table 2 below shows one example of peer mentoring where the author has been involved, the mentor's experience and any evidence of impact on individual, team and organizational learning.

Mentoring new branch directors is undertaken by an outgoing branch director in the same region. The prospective mentor is informally approached by a senior volunteer and given a verbal outline of the role; engagement is optional and there is no formal follow up. A good match, supporting a successful relationship, is reliant on the senior volunteer's knowledge of both parties (Clutterbuck, 2014). The author's experience of this is mixed. As a new branch director mentee, the match worked well, the support was effective and provided the confidence to become a mentor later, evidencing Clutterbuck's (2014) assertion that mentees can make good mentors. The role as mentor was less effective; the mentee was reluctant and contact was limited. In neither case was any training, follow up, or supervision offered and there was no request for feedback. This demonstrates the importance of good practice

in setting up mentoring relationships (Bortnowska & Seiler, 2019; Clutterbuck, 2014; Connor & Pokora, 2017; Hawkins & Smith, 2013; Jones & Smith, 2022).

Conclusion and Call to Action

This shows that despite good intentions, providing successful mentoring programmes in the voluntary sector is challenging. There is significant disparity between the practical application of mentoring and best practice as outlined by Bortnowska and Seiler (2019) and Jones and Smith (2022). Matching, ongoing support, and initial training were often haphazard and supervision rare; this has implications for the quality of the programme and mentor wellbeing (Hawkins & Smith, 2013). It is unclear if this is due to lack of time or understanding of the importance of appropriately matched, trained, and supported mentors to the success of the programme and more involvement from HRD professionals would help address this. However where programmes are run and delivered by volunteers, for volunteers, limited time and resources and lack of specialist HRD knowledge and support will contribute to the lack of process and consistency. It was unclear what contribution HRD professionals had in the development of the aforementioned networking and professional body schemes and although Samaritans' programmes are designed by HRD professionals, volunteers who may lack relevant experience oversee the delivery of these programmes, potentially diluting or changing processes and/or outcomes. This potentially contributes to the significant variation in programme management, from almost none to regular feedback and ongoing improvements. Reasons for this are also unclear and oversight from HRD professionals could provide a more consistent approach. That said, understanding of the voluntary sector, the organization's volunteers, their motivations, expectations, and how they engage with their organization is important for HRD practitioners to ensure that a one-size-fits-all approach is not applied. This can be achieved by acknowledging the specialist nature of volunteer management, its differences and similarities from employee HR processes, and closer working with paid and volunteer manager managers.

Table 2. Peer Mentoring Example

Mentoring Programme/Activity	Individual Learning	Team Learning	Organizational Learning
Samaritans branch director mentoring - new branch directors are offered a mentor. Engagement in the relationship is optional. Mentor is a director who has recently stepped down from the role in their own branch.	This can be supportive and help with specific challenges, improving outcomes for mentee and their branch.	The directorate team will benefit from a more competent and supported branch director and potentially learn new skills from observation.	There is plenty of opportunity but the lack of formalized process means there is no way of getting consistent meaningful organizational learning from it.

The most significant risk is a lack of quality control, leaving individuals and programmes vulnerable to poor experiences and reputational damage.

Where training and supervision is provided, engagement is not always consistent as evidenced by the AVM programme. Research into the reasons for this and what mentoring best practice could/should look like specifically within the voluntary sector, would be helpful. A clear understanding of this should provide more effective outcomes for the voluntary sector.

This perspective piece provides evidence to support the provision of matching, training, and supervision in contributing to successful mentoring programmes, ideally led and supported by HRD professionals who understand the sectoral differences and challenges. However, when providing mentoring within the voluntary sector and with/for volunteers this is not always possible.

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Nicky teaches topics including learning and development, leadership and management and sustainability. Nicky's PhD researched the development of leadership and management skills for volunteers who lead and manage other volunteers and her wider research interests cover change, motivation and leadership in the voluntary sector. She is an active listening volunteer with her local branch of Samaritans, and in over 30 years of volunteering has held a range of local and organisation-wide volunteer leadership roles.