How Coaching Differs from Mentoring

by Pat Williams

As you progress through your nursing career, your needs may change and you may find yourself wondering about the difference between coaching and mentoring.

Both coaching and mentoring involve a supportive partner who can help an individual improve personal and professional satisfaction. In both relationships, the client or person being mentored is responsible for the decisions they make and the actions they take.

Coaching is an individualized, structured partnership in which the coach listens, observes, and customizes their approach to the client’s needs. A professional coach believes that the client is naturally creative and resourceful and seeks to elicit solutions and strategies from the client. The coach’s job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources and creativity that the client already has. A professional coach may help the client:

- Brainstorm strategies to deal with a difficult situation at work.
- Practice new skills or critical conversations in a safe, non-judgmental environment.
- Plan for the next phase of his or her career.
- Look at the way current choices impact work-life balance and identify the changes that will have the biggest impact on personal and professional satisfaction.
- Objectively assess leadership, communication or conflict skills and provide tools to increase emotional intelligence and become more effective both personally and professionally.

A coach and client may or may not come from the same field. Even if the coach and client share a similar background, the primary focus of coaching is to help the client find his or her own answers, rather than the coach offering advice. A coach and client typically work together for a specified period of time or through a specified issue or transition.

According to the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org), mentoring can be thought of as “guiding from one’s own experience or sharing of experience in a specific area of industry or career development.” A mentoring relationship typically, but not always, involves an older or more experienced mentor sharing wisdom and offering advice to a younger or less experienced individual in the same profession.

A mentor may:

- Serve as a role model for the person being mentored.
- Provide useful introductions and networking opportunities.
- Help an individual successfully navigate the culture, politics and unwritten rules of an organization.
- Advocate on behalf of the person being mentored.

Mentoring may occur in a structured setting, but can also be more informal in nature. A mentoring relationship may be for a defined time period or continue throughout an individual’s life, and the mentor may, over time, become a trusted friend.

Both mentors and coaches can be valuable as part of a nurse’s career support team. The Center for
American Nurses has launched a new coaching program designed to help nurses connect with professional coaches familiar with the diverse aspects of a nursing career. To learn more about the coaching program and meet the coaching team, visit www.centerforamericannursescoaching.org.

About the Author

Pam Williams, ACC, is a Chief Innergy Officer at Innergized!, Inc. She and her partner, Marci Moore, are working closely with the Center for American Nurses to coordinate the Center’s Coaching Program. Marci and Pam presented Take Off the Cape and Soar and provided career coaching at the 2007 LEAD Summit.