

Coach vs. Mentor

Designing the Finest Meanings of Words

A Creative Director from the Royal Shakespeare Company once explained to me that if he went behind the curtain to speak with a troop of actors and announced that they would be performing Romeo and Juliet in the upcoming season, the actors would shrug their shoulders and agree grudgingly to the decision that had been made.

However, if he went behind the curtain and announced that the Company would indeed be doing a production of Romeo and Juliet – but it was important for the ensemble to know that the Director had chosen that this production a) would be set in Africa; b) there would be very little clothing and c) that all scenes would be done on bicycles – thespians would be rocketing out of their seats with excitement and ideas of how to create something the world had never seen – a production that was unique, beautiful and memorable.

This is the power of designed constraint when we bring rigour to identifying uncompromisable features of a beautiful solution, without knowing exactly what form that solution will take.

This same idea applies to our choice of words and how we use them. Some words may become more meaningful when we self-impose thoughtful constraints. Some important ideas may become more accessible to us and to the world, if they are constructed with these honed definitions. Two such examples, often used interchangeably in the realm of succession planning and leadership development, are the words “coach” and “mentor”.

‘Coaching’ as Practice

Our colleague, Robert Henderson, has an expression. He says it after we have done good work – or even great work, together. And he always says it with a smile. *“Great Bakers bake great bread.”*

He says it with a conviction and satisfaction that is very hard for me to respond to, other than nodding and repeating it to myself, a few times. To tell the truth, I went for a long time without a clue of what he meant. But his expressions stick with me until I figure them out.

One of the many things that Robert is passionate about is coaching. When Robert coaches me, there is something quite remarkable in the way that he conducts himself and in the internal atmosphere his conduct creates in me. I feel utterly and totally capable of unfolding incredible stories in the world. It is hard to describe the dynamic in any way other than he creates space for me to be clear and conscious of what I need to know, do and be in the moments that count.

And none of that space is taken up by his desire to be known as “The Great Coach” – or even ‘a coach’ at all. All of the energy that could be used to position himself as ‘Coach’ is put into the coaching. The practice trumps the promotion of practitioner and demonstrating mastery is more important to him than being Master.

He puts his all into baking the great bread. He works on who he is and how he does what he does. What he is, is of very little concern to him or anyone else. And people line up around the block to buy his bread.

By Ian Chisholm,
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Leadership is not about being a Coach. Leadership involves the practice of coaching

All of this leads me to the word 'coach', how we use it, and how we might use this word in the generations ahead. Just as I will outline how the word Mentor is most powerful when used as a noun (and not a verb), I believe we produce the most good in the world when we use the word coach as a verb (and not a noun).

This opinion puts me at odds with an industry that has elevated 'being a coach' above the coaching. It has become a title – and as such, a hook to hang one's identity on. "I am a Coach – it says so right here on my business card - and you, I assume, are not – and that will define our relationship." I hear and overhear a lot of conversations built on this premise. And I sense that as a society, we are missing the point.

We all need to be capable of creating space for others to explore and re-find the future. We all need to provide and receive quality feedback. And we all need to engage challenging conversations when they are required. For us to design great work together, you need to do these things for me, and I need to do them for you. Leadership is not about being a Coach. Leadership involves the practice of coaching.

Coaching is the intentional positioning of others to perform at incrementally higher standards, to learn more from their experience as it emerges, and to be increasingly engaged in their endeavours. It is an approach to leadership that invites more leaders from all levels in our organizations, communities and families.

I believe it is an essential practice for emerging leaders to undertake, and I believe it belongs to everyone.

'Mentor' as Gift Word

As the story goes, a nervous young writer found himself on a front porch, working up the courage to knock on the door of the residence of Robert Frost. He had come with a

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leather case full of poetry he had written, wanting to share it with a renowned veteran in hopes of receiving some commentary and gaining inspiration to keep writing.

When asked in for tea, the young man felt obliged to be transparent about his intent for imposing. He began, "Like you, Sir, I am a poet and..." "Stop," said Robert Frost, frowning his considerable eyebrows. "You can't say that." "I'm sorry, Sir?" said the young man, bewildered that his attempt at openness had been rejected so quickly. "You cannot call yourself a poet, young man. The word 'poet' is a gift word. It must be given to you by one who reads what you have written and judges that the person who wrote it, is indeed, a poet."

The concept of "a gift word" got me thinking: So many of the words we carelessly throw around might need to be reclaimed somehow, and used with a little more reservation.

- **Integrity?** It is certainly fashionable to proclaim that integrity is a value we share, but perhaps others have the best perspective to determine whether we have it or not. I don't boast about my integrity as much as I used to.
- **Leader?** I can certainly choose leadership and the responsibility and sacrifice that come with it, but perhaps it serves us all well if I am careful when applying that word to myself.
- **Team?** Maybe others looking in on the way we treat each other, the culture we have created and the way we conduct ourselves as individuals and groups are in the best position to decide whether we are, in fact, a team.

You see, the friend who shared this story is someone I choose to call a Mentor – maybe one of the most misappropriated gift words of all time. Thus, it is a word I would like to reclaim and reposition in the very special place it belongs in our language: on the top shelf, where gift words are kept.

Mentor is a noun, and, in my mind, exclusively so. I can't mentor you and you can't mentor me. We shouldn't start "mentoring programs", thinking that by simply calling it that we have tapped into the power of the concept. It is not something we do to each other – it is something we are to each other. And it is my choice, and my choice alone, as to whether I use that word to describe you.

Consider where the word itself comes from. When Odysseus prepared himself for his epic journey – an adventure from which he did not know if he would ever return – he had the formidable task of choosing who should raise his son, Telemachus, in his temporary or potentially permanent absence. Telemachus was placed in the care, counsel, and character of a man named Mentor.

Any parent immediately understands the rare credibility that must have been associated with the man named Mentor—to be the sort of person others would leave their children with in the event they may not return. And it is the weight and intimacy of this concept that have led me to use the gift word Mentor sparingly, appropriately, and as a proper, capitalized noun.

The fact that Mentor is a gift word does not mean that it should not be sought. In fact, the number of times in one's life that they are offered this gift word is a key indicator of leadership. Any of us can, if we choose, design our work in a way that allows the time and creates the space to teach, advise and coach others, masterfully.

If what we teach is valuable, and if our coaching is honed in its practice of positioning others for greatness, then it is highly likely that the gift words will come. And we will deserve them when they arrive - perhaps even as an unexpected knock on our door.



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