Talent Management: Exploring Coaching, Mentoring, Advocacy, and Sponsorship - What’s the difference anyway?

By: Stacè Middlebrooks

Many companies have Mentorship programs and Sponsorship programs, which are quite popular. Some consider the two interchangeable. However, there are vast differences between them and other options to consider, namely Coaching and Advocacy. Coaching, Mentorship, Advocacy, and Sponsorship offer a flexible platform to maximize Talent Management. This suite of options can also help increase the visibility of diverse talent.

Defining Coaching, Mentoring, Advocacy, and Sponsorship

Consider these options in a spectrum, varying in intended results, methods, risk level, how they are initiated, and time commitment. This is not intended to be an exhaustive explanation, but more of a summary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Coaching</th>
<th>Mentorship</th>
<th>Advocacy</th>
<th>Sponsorship</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Collaborative, thought provoking partnership between coach and employee; Coach does not need to be an expert in desired coaching area</td>
<td>Relationship with defined time period for the specific purpose of knowledge/skill transfer; Mentor is expert; Typically unidirectional; May coach</td>
<td>The act of publicly promoting someone’s expertise, brand, and/or performance; Advocate does not coach or mentor</td>
<td>Partnership where sponsor uses relationship capital and reputation to advance someone’s career; May coach or mentor, but not priorities; Must advocate; Can be known or unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intended Results</td>
<td>Improved performance; maximized potential</td>
<td>Increased knowledge or skill</td>
<td>Brand created or improved</td>
<td>Next job/Career advancement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Telling/Showing</td>
<td>Promoting/Supporting</td>
<td>Influencing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>Client asks for coaching</td>
<td>Mentee asks for mentorship</td>
<td>Advocate usually takes initiative, sometimes asked</td>
<td>Sponsor identifies protegé/sponsee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Commitment</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Defined</td>
<td>Varies/Intermittent</td>
<td>Varies/On-going</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Optimizing Talent Management

Employ Each Option

- When we only offer one or two of the options we miss opportunities to cultivate talent. Determine your organization’s readiness for each option and start small, if you have to. The key is getting started.
- Your programs can be formal or informal, depending on the needs of your organizations.

Manage Expectations

- Ensure each option is clearly defined for your organization, each person knows his/her role in the relationship, and specify expected outcomes of each. There are many companies who provide training in how to coach, how to mentor, how to advocate, and how to sponsor. They can also help you customize programs for your company.
- Build accountability up front. Not having this clarity could prove disastrous. There are many leaders who think they are sponsoring someone, but actually may be mentoring or simply making themselves accessible and available. Both the leader and employee miss out on opportunities to connect in a meaningful and high impact way.
- Be inclusive in your matching processes when considering coaching, mentoring, and advocacy pairs. Find ways to connect many facets of diversity (gender, ethnicity, age, communication style, function, level, etc.). Ensure sponsors are inclusive in their selection decisions as well.

Concurrent Use

- It is possible to use multiple options at the same time. A linear approach is not required. Employees can benefit from having a mentor to increase skills, a coach to help apply their learning, and an advocate to help build a brand around their newly acquired skills. A sponsor may identify them and make decisions or use influence to help propel that person’s career forward.
- Concurrent options work well for all employees, but also serves the purpose of raising the visibility of diverse talent. In many cases, the employee is being seen for the first time by leaders outside their chain of command, gaining exposure to different parts of the business, and is able to showcase their talents in multiple ways. This helps all employees, diverse talent in particular.

Create Path to Sponsorship

- Give employees an opportunity to become “sponsorable”. Employees may not understand sponsorship and may not know they have to be attractive to potential sponsors. It takes more than good performance! Get them thinking about how they do their work, their brand, and their relationships.
- Outlining a path for employees can help them set career goals and manage expectations. Show them how to strategically map their careers with coaching, mentoring, advocacy, and sponsorship. Consider finding coaches for your top talent since employees tend to respond better to coaching when it’s done proactively. Show them how to properly solicit advocates – people who will champion them and their work – and how successfully advocate for others.
Help them understand the risks a sponsor will take on and how to show up in a way that attracts potential sponsors to them.

Leveraging multiple options can yield great success in Talent Management and Employee Engagement, and Employee Retention. It can also afford you the opportunity to leverage Talent Management to further Diversity & Inclusion efforts around gender, ethnicity, and other historically underrepresented groups. All options can be as robust or simple, formal or informal as needed. Consider the possibilities!

Stacè Middlebrooks is the co-founder and managing director of strategy for The Middlebrooks Group, LLC. The Middlebrooks Group, LLC is a minority owned and operated diversity and inclusion consulting firm focused on advancing diversity and inclusion. We offer consultation on D&I strategy development and program planning to create cultures of innovation and high performance through trust and inclusion.