

Setting Up a Mentoring System in Your Club

It is the time of the year when all activity in your club is back up and running and you are trying to source new volunteers to help out with your team. We have written in previous articles about the importance of 'asking' if you want to get new people involved but remember that it can be very daunting for new volunteers particularly if they are in a coaching role with little or no experience. Therefore it is recommended to assign a mentor, or 'buddy' for these new coaches and they can provide support and advice and offer assistance when required to these willing and enthusiastic new volunteers. Mentoring is nothing new — particularly in sport. We have all turned to an experienced friend or colleague for advice, especially when we are learning something new or are facing a new challenge. What is new, however, is the concept of using a mentor in a more structured way to help guide you through a challenging learning process. This will be an invaluable process and will increase the retention rates of coaches in your club.

Mentoring today is best defined as a developmental, caring, sharing and helping relationship where one person invests time, know-how and effort in enhancing another person's growth, knowledge and skills, in ways that prepare that individual for greater productivity or achievement in the future. In short, mentors help coaches to recognise and maximize learning opportunities.

The benefits of mentoring are well known: It gives less experienced volunteers valuable feedback, insight and support, while passing down wisdom and knowledge. Mentoring is a highly effective way for new coaches to learn the "how" of coaching and apply relevant theory. Mentors will work with the coach to develop and strengthen their coaching skill, be a sounding board for problems, help to identify some weaknesses or just be a source of motivation and a reminder that you are doing a great job. Mentors, however, are not 'master coaches.' Being a mentor can also develop your current volunteers and improve their leadership skills. As a mentor assists their mentee, they have the chance to reflect on and articulate their own expertise and experience—something they probably don't take time to do otherwise. Also, many mentors say they get personal satisfaction and fulfillment from their mentoring relationships. If they're feeling burned out or cynical, mentoring can give them a boost. But enough about the mentor, how can this process assist your new coaches? Mentors can bring life to theory, demonstrate practical coaching and skills, help solve problems, help the new coach to identify some weaknesses or just be a source of motivation and a reminder that they are doing a great job! Many sporting organisations are now beginning to realise the value of mentoring in the development of coaches and officials, and have implemented a formal process for coaches or officials to work with a mentor. You will never find two mentoring relationships the same. They all take on a life of their own and develop to suit the needs and strengths of the individuals involved. Mentoring should be about helping another person, regardless of their stage of development, to change their coaching practice for the better. The way in which this occurs may be different from sport to sport and person to person.

Benefits to the club

- Can add value to training courses attended by these coaches to see the theory in practice
- Taps into the expertise of experienced coaches in your club
- Re-energises experienced coaches who take on mentoring roles
- Coaches who have been mentored often become mentors themselves
- Encourages coaches to progress to the next level of accreditation through the motivation and assistance they receive from a mentor
- Mentoring has been recognised as a particularly useful tool to recruit, educate and retain female coaches

Benefits to the Mentor

- Renewed enthusiasm and commitment to their own work
- Opportunities to share their knowledge and skills
- Recognition of personal expertise
- New learning for themselves
- Promotes lifelong learning through relationships

Benefits to the Coach

- Increased confidence and motivation
- Constructive feedback on performance
- Helps translate theory into practice
- Opportunities to 'network' and enhance coaching prospects
- Promotes lifelong learning through relationships

Mentors come in all shapes and sizes, but to be effective they need to have appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge may include their understanding of technical coaching skills, understanding people and what makes them tick, and understanding the coaching process. Skills might include honesty; empathy; planning; goal setting; time and people management; and the ability to communicate one to one. Attitudes might relate to the process of mentoring, their philosophy towards coaching and their attitudes about the club.

Some of the key qualities you might look for in potential mentors include:

- an ability to focus on the coaching process, rather than the players' performance
- a willingness to assist in another person's growth and development, and to create a positive environment for learning
- good communication and feedback skills
- current technical coaching skills and experience
- trustworthiness and ability to maintain confidences
- flexibility and open to new ideas
- having sufficient time to commit to the relationship and being easily accessible

Some coaches will be better suited to the mentoring process than others. Some qualities that lend themselves to a more effective mentoring relationship include:

- a desire to be mentored
- a willingness to drive the relationship and take responsibility for their own growth and development
- a willingness to be challenged
- flexibility and open to new ideas
- an ability to listen and accept guidance and feedback
- an ability to self-analyse and self-reflect
- enthusiasm
- appreciation for efforts of their mentor.

What is the Mentoring Process?

Whatever the purpose of your mentoring relationship, you will find that effective relationships involve the following processes:

1. *Identifying needs* — Clarity on what both the mentor and mentee hope to get from it and can better tailor the experience to meet both needs.
2. *Goal setting* — after you have identified your needs you should be able to set some specific goals for the relationship, for both the coach and the mentor.
3. *Establishing an agreement* — the agreement does not need to be a formal written one but you should at least discuss and agree on some ground rules for the relationship. For example, how often they will meet and where, whether it is okay to phone one another at home, what time period they want the relationship to run for and when they want to review the relationship.
4. *Observation* — observation of the coach in action should focus on the needs and goals that they have already identified.
5. *Analysis and feedback* — this should be a shared process, with the coach being given the opportunity to analyse their own performance, as well as the mentor providing their analysis. This will encourage the development of reflective coaches, who have the ability to analyse their own performance and improvements.
6. *Action planning* — once the mentor has observed and analysed the performance of the coach together they can explore ways of improving their performance.
7. *Review* — the mentoring relationship is likely to change and grow as you progress. Many relationships are not always smooth sailing, however, and you should plan to review the effectiveness of the relationship at regular intervals. If the relationship is no longer meeting the needs of the coach or the mentor, then it may be time to end the relationship or find a new mentor. It is also important to review the process throughout.

Always remember that mentoring is a shared job. The mentor is not solely responsible for creating a successful mentoring relationship. The person being mentored needs to be flexible, honest, open and receptive to feedback and insight. He or she needs to be willing and able to take action in pursuit of goals, to invest in learning and to take steps toward needed change. The mentee also needs to be willing to give the mentor feedback and talk about what is or isn't working well in the relationship.

As they work together, they'll make corrections, the relationship will deepen, and they'll discover that being a mentor is no longer an unnecessary, expendable task. Instead it will be a rewarding one for the mentor that has a profound impact on others and the mentee will remain enthused and motivated for their new role.