

RYP Quarterly

Stop Blurring the Lines.

Why Mentoring, Coaching and Managing
Are Not the Same — And Why It Matters
More Than You Think

By David Stewart



LAMP



LADDER



LIFEBOAT

In leadership circles, few words are used more loosely, and misunderstood more dangerously, than mentoring, coaching, and managing. They are often spoken as if interchangeable, worn like badges of honour by leaders who claim to “do all three.” But in reality, they are distinct disciplines with different intentions, dynamics, and impacts.

When leaders confuse them, people suffer. Performance stalls. Trust erodes. Development becomes accidental rather than deliberate.

For organisations serious about developing people, and for emerging leaders trying to make sense of their own growth, clarity here is not optional. It is foundational. This article draws a firm line between mentoring, coaching, and managing, not to create silos, but to elevate standards.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE: DIFFERENT ROLES, DIFFERENT INTENTIONS

At a surface level, all three involve helping someone else. But that is where the similarity ends.

Management is about responsibility for outcomes and people.

Coaching is about improving performance through structured development.

Mentoring is about sharing wisdom to enable personal change and broader perspective.

Blurring these roles creates confusion because each requires a different mindset, a different relationship dynamic, and a different kind of conversation.

MANAGEMENT: ACCOUNTABILITY BEFORE EVERYTHING

Management is the most formal of the three roles. It is anchored in responsibility. A manager is accountable for:

- Delivering results
- Allocating resources
- Setting direction
- Monitoring performance
- Making decisions that impact others

The relationship dynamic is inherently asymmetrical. A manager has positional authority. They assess, direct, and intervene when needed. At its best, management creates clarity. People know what is expected, what success looks like, and how their work contributes. At its worst, it becomes control, reducing people to outputs rather than contributors.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: Not all managers can coach. Many are simply in charge.

*And being “in charge” is not a leadership strategy;
it's an organisational necessity.*

Confusing management with development is where problems begin. A manager might say: “Here’s what needs to be done. Here’s how you’ll be measured.” That is not coaching. It is not mentoring. It is management—and it matters.

COACHING: PERFORMANCE THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

Coaching is often misunderstood as “being nice” or “having a chat.” It is neither. Coaching is about performance. It exists to help someone get better at what they do. A coach does not provide all the answers. Instead, they:

- Ask structured, intentional questions
- Challenge assumptions
- Build self-awareness
- Create accountability for action
- Focus on measurable improvement
- Develop competence and confidence

The relationship dynamic is more balanced than management, but still purposeful. Coaching requires trust, but also discipline. It is not a free-flowing conversation, it is directed towards an outcome. A coaching moment might sound like:

“What options have you considered?”

“What’s getting in your way?”

“What does success look like in this situation?”

Notice what is absent: **Advice**. That restraint is what makes coaching powerful. It forces ownership back onto the individual. But here’s where many leaders get it wrong: They mix coaching with mentoring in the same breath. They ask a question... then immediately answer it. They invite reflection... then override it with their own experience. In doing so, they collapse the learning process.

You cannot coach and mentor in the same moment.

One empowers discovery. The other provides direction through wisdom. When combined, both lose their effectiveness.

MENTORING: WISDOM THAT DRIVES CHANGE

If coaching is about performance, mentoring is about transformation. Mentoring is grounded in wisdom. It is less about “how do I do this task better?” and more about “how do I navigate life, leadership, and complexity?” A mentor brings:

- Experience
- Pattern recognition

- Perspective
- Judgment

The relationship dynamic is different again. It is not hierarchical like management, nor structured like coaching. It is relational, voluntary, and deeply personal. This leads to a critical point often ignored: **A mentee must choose their mentor.** It cannot be imposed. Chemistry, trust and respect all matter. Without these, mentoring becomes a hollow exercise, or just another calendar invite.

In reality, most people don't have one mentor. They have many:

- A mentor for career decisions
- A mentor for leadership dilemmas
- A mentor for personal resilience
- A mentor outside their industry to challenge thinking

Mentoring crosses boundaries, age, geography, profession. It is not confined to organisational charts.

THE MENTOR'S ROLE: LAMP, LADDER, LIFEBOAT

One of the most practical ways to understand mentoring is through three roles a mentor plays, often shifting between them depending on the moment.



The Lamp

Shines a light on something the mentee cannot yet see.

- A blind spot
- A pattern of behaviour
- An opportunity not yet recognised

Illumination, not instruction.



The Ladder

Provides access. Creates a step up by:

- Making an introduction
- Sharing a resource
- Opening a door

It accelerates progress. The mentee still has to climb.



The Lifeboat

Offers support when someone needs it most.

- Someone is overwhelmed
- Confidence has taken a hit
- A setback feels personal

To steady, to listen, to hold space. Not to fix. Not to direct.

Great mentors know which role is required, and when.

WHY CONFUSION KILLS DEVELOPMENT

When leaders blur mentoring, coaching, and managing, three things happen:

1. **People Become Dependent Instead of Capable:** If a leader coaches but constantly gives advice (mentoring), individuals stop thinking for themselves.
2. **Trust Gets Eroded:** If a manager claims to “mentor” but is actually assessing performance, people hold back. They don’t open up.
3. **Development Becomes Inconsistent:** Without clarity conversations drift, outcomes vary, and growth becomes accidental.

FAMILIARITY IS KEY TO BEING AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR

To be an effective mentor, it is key to gain an understanding and familiarity of what motivates a person. Hearing their backstory is crucial, and understanding the whole person, not just what you see in the workplace, will help reveal what is driving an individual. Some tips to create a healthy and safe relationship with someone you are mentoring include:

Building a safe mentoring relationship:

- **Listen to their story.** Listen to understand, not listen to reply.
- **Don’t judge or make assumptions.** Be curious.
- **Treat aspirations on face value.** Their words reveal what they think. Their actions reveal what they believe.
- **Set ground rules.** Simple, and no more than four.
- **Share your own vulnerabilities** or times when you have had self-doubt. Treat vulnerability as something normal, not a weakness or illness.

LEADERSHIP & MENTORING GO HAND IN HAND

There are many synergies between leadership and mentoring. Both require practice and application to become proficient. More often than not it is the questions asked, or the gift of feedback provided, that has the most impact on someone. Often a leader is asked to mentor someone to help evolve them as a leader. This involves a pretty simple dynamic:

- To listen and observe how they are progressing in their quest.
- To help instill a sense of confidence and belief.
- To provide some simple advice to help take the next steps.

MENTORING FUTURE LEADERS REQUIRES APPLICATION

There is no course in the world that churns out leaders. It requires four elements.

Commitment | Confidence | Competence | A Quest to Leave a Legacy

All require trial and error. Lose any one of these, and a leader's effectiveness diminishes. A mentor's role is to help a person navigate this dynamic for themselves. This is best done by listening, observing, and having meaningful conversations.

Commitment comes from within – what motivates and drives them.

Confidence is about getting over self-doubt and feelings of vulnerability.

Competence is not a skill set, but what leadership attributes are acquired through experience.

A Quest is about the legacy they are hoping to leave others.

THE CLARITY OF SEPARATION

The most effective leaders are not those who “blend” these roles seamlessly. They are those who separate them deliberately. They are explicit about the mode they are in:

“Let’s stay in coaching mode here. I want you to think this through.”

“I’m going to step into mentoring for a moment and share what I’ve seen.”

“Now I need to speak as your manager about expectations.”

This clarity does two things. Firstly, it sets the rules of engagement. And secondly, it builds trust through consistency. People know what they are getting, and why.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR EMERGING LEADERS

The message for emerging leaders is: do not wait for someone to come and organise a mentor or coach for you. First, think about your own personal life and career needs. Do you seek wisdom or skills? Do you need to lift your performance, or change your perspective? What are your own personal leadership aspirations?

For emerging leaders:

- **Choose your mentors.** Seek out mentors you choose, not those assigned to you.
- **Know what you need.** Understand when you need coaching (performance) versus mentoring (perspective).
- **Be realistic.** Don’t expect your manager to fulfil every role.
- **Learn the difference.** Recognising it will accelerate your growth.

A FINAL WORD

There is a temptation in modern leadership to wear every hat, to be the all-knowing mentor, the empowering coach, and the decisive manager in every interaction. It doesn't work. Each role requires a different discipline:

Management demands accountability	Coaching demands restraint	Mentoring demands wisdom
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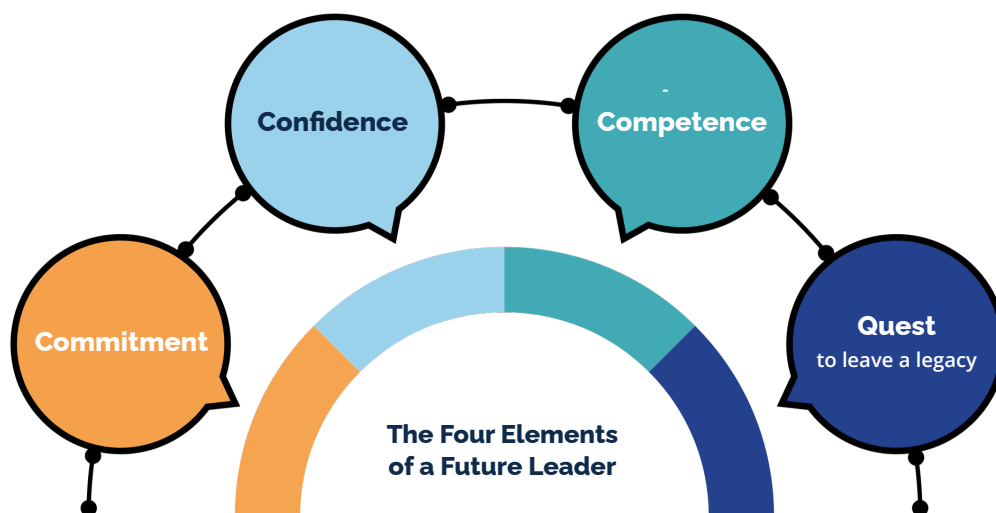
And not everyone is equipped for all three. Some managers will never be great coaches. Some coaches lack the lived experience to mentor. Some mentors should never manage. That is not failure. It is reality. The goal is not to be everything. The goal is to be clear about what is required and rise to that standard.

Leadership Lesson:

Leadership is not just about helping people. It's about helping them in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason. And that begins by stopping the blur.

Because when you get this right, development becomes intentional, relationships deepen, and performance follows. When you get it wrong, you don't just confuse roles; you compromise potential.

Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words



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