

Mentor? Coach?

What's the Difference?

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I've noticed through my years of training and developing coaches, that most of the wise people who express interest in becoming a professional coach are already great at something else. And most have already been called upon to be someone's mentor. They come to me for coach training because they don't want to use their SME to just consult, advise, recommend and nag. They want to learn to coach because they care about developing people. And they ask about the difference between mentoring and coaching. Here's what I tell them.

The story of Mentor comes from Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus, King of Ithaca, is preparing to march off to fight in the Trojan War--and ultimately to a wandering ten-year, well, odyssey. Before he leaves, he asks a wise older man to oversee his household and his young son, Telemachus, with a commission to, "*Teach him everything you know.*" The wise older man's name? Mentor.

In the roughly 3000 years since, *Mentor* has joined our vocabulary, coming to mean something like, *A trusted advisor, friend, teacher and wise person who invests time, energy and affection in the growth of another.* And the years are full of legendary mentoring relationships--from Socrates and Plato and the beloved disciples of the religious traditions, to today's well-known [mentoring partners](#)—Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, Luther Powell and his son, Colin.

If you've ever had a good mentor, or even a mentor-moment that was rich with personal learning, you know how priceless the relationship or the moment can be.

Now it's the 21st Century and coaching is a thing. And some of our very best coaches are like you—ready to use your wisdom and experience to inspire the development of others. Great mentors and great coaches tend to think of their work as co-creating and delivering highly-customized and collaborative, just-in-time learning. And as one who has been called on through life to be both a mentor and a coach, here's what I know about where the two styles connect in the life of a leader like you:

1. The best mentors and coaches trust in the creativity, resourcefulness and self-responsibility of others, behaving as equal partners and putting a premium on exploration and experimentation (sound familiar?).
2. The best mentors and coaches use their subject matter expertise gently, and only enough to inform their questions and to spark evaluation and learning.
3. And the best mentors and coaches know how to balance advocacy with inquiry.

So, What's the difference? When a great mentor learns to coach, and when a great coach generously invests time, energy and affection in the growth of another, the line gets delightfully fuzzy.