

Interpersonal Helpers

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Individuals and organizations sometimes enlist the aid of an “outsider” to provide specific kinds of help.

A bewildering variety of services is available. No wonder people rely on self-help books and the advice of friends, family members, and guidance from more experienced leaders! We all need access to help!

The many terms associated with professional assistance can be confusing: trainers, mentors, coaches, consultants, counselors, therapists, and collaborators. Whew! Let’s take a brief look at each.

Training is focused on providing an individual with new knowledge or skill. The agenda is usually fixed with some very explicitly defined desired outcomes. Organizations seek outside trainers either because the skill or knowledge is so specialized or because of an unusually complex process used to transfer the knowledge and skill. Training usually occurs in groups but can also be delivered one-to-one.

Mentoring usually occurs as a career-oriented relationship between an older and more experienced person (the mentor) and a younger or less experienced individual (the protégé or mentee). Interactions usually focus on generating options for the future behaviors of the mentee based on the experiences and advice of the mentor. The success of mentoring relationships in the workplace has caused the concept to spread to non-profit organizations, schools, and other developmental organizations.

Consulting is like mentoring, except that the relationship is usually more short-lived, focused on resolving a specific problem, or maximizing some unique opportunity. The consultant is asked to assess the situation, then provide recommendations based on specialized knowledge and experience. The contracting organization or individual then chooses to accept, reject, or modify the suggestions.

Counseling usually focuses on overcoming or relieving some current interpersonal anxiety, deficit, or limitation. Some organizations have created programs for employee and family assistance for interpersonal difficulties or a lack of clarity or direction. I can testify to their value, as I have set up employee assistance programs in three different Procter & Gamble facilities, and I have used and encouraged others to use the counseling available through these professional arrangements.

Therapy typically deals with dysfunction, healing, or repairing pain, feelings, or issues tied to the past. Therapists tend to disclose little, so there is a power differential with the client. Therapy for troubled individuals may be conducted in groups or privately and may be minimally invasive (somewhat like counseling) or extensive (even requiring medication or in extreme cases, hospitalization).

Coaching is a high form of customized learning, focused on the client’s desired future state. The coach creates an environment where clients are free to clarify their aspirations, generate and explore options, and capitalize on their strengths. The coach challenges individuals to move from where they are now to where they want to be, asking thought-provoking questions and evoking answers from the client’s own awareness and perceptions. Coaches deal with the client’s agenda, see the client as capable, and assist the client with discipline, providing accountability for following through on the actions the client identifies. There is no power differential; the coach is simply a supportive ally with different experiences.

An insightful observation by Stephen Covey in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is that all things are created twice, first mentally, then physically. Coaching and consulting deal with the mental creation; **collaboration** goes beyond that to the physical creation. In collaboration, the coach or consultant partners with the client in executing the action steps the client has chosen.

Considering the variety of outsider helps, which would assist your organization? Still not clear? Contact me at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or 770-286-2250 and I’ll work with you at no charge to sort through your needs. Then we can figure out who might be your best source for that kind of help.

As a leader, you can flounder away on your own, seeking to improve by trial and error, disrupting others in your organization. However, you’ll likely improve faster and go farther with the right specialty help!