



DISCOVER
YOUR HIDDEN
POTENTIAL

A 4-part guide for choosing the right coach to help you grow

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This guide explores the distinctions between coaches, mentors, and consultants; the value of fresh perspective; how to know if you're ready for coaching; and what truly matters when selecting the right leadership coach for your growth.

1. Mentor, consultant, or coach?

A corporate client recently contacted us seeking a coach for a high-performing employee being considered for promotion. The candidate excelled technically but struggled with communication and collaboration skills essential for senior roles. After we identified a coach, the client added an unexpected requirement: They wanted someone with the same professional background as the employee—someone who had “walked in the client’s shoes.”

This request prompted several discussions. Was the client seeking a coach or a mentor? Was the client clear on what a coach does? Did they raise a valid point? And why might industry expertise matter to some organizations and clients?

As we explored these questions, we delved into the distinctions between coaches, mentors, and consultants—and when each type of support is most valuable.

Christine Guthrie, PCC, Executive Leadership Coach, Founder of Authentic Ascent and Faculty at George-

town Leadership Coaching Program, clarified, “There are moments when a leader needs specific skill-based support. That’s the work of a consultant, trainer or facilitator. Coaching is different - a more spacious, reflective partnership - and honoring that difference allows transformation to unfold.”

Understanding the roles:

Coach vs. mentor vs. consultant

Choosing the right type of guidance starts with clarity about your goals and desired outcomes.

Coaches focus on developing your capacity as a leader, regardless of your industry or role. Coaches don’t focus on the technical aspects of a job—our realm is communication styles, decision-making patterns, emotional intelligence, systems thinking, and the dynamics shaping human interaction. The coaching relationship addresses leadership challenges that transcend a specific role, which is why effective coaches can work with leaders across industries.

Mentors share wisdom from their own career journeys. They offer advice on navigating a role, advancing in a

company, or handling organizational politics. If you're seeking guidance from someone who has traveled a similar path and can illuminate the road ahead, you want a mentor.

Consultants provide expert solutions to specific business challenges. Need a go-to-market strategy? Technical expertise for a project? Strategy on industry-specific issues? A consultant brings specialized knowledge to solve defined problems.

2. Industry expertise or fresh perspective?

Leaders typically have no shortage of subject matter experts. They're surrounded by employees, board members, and peers who understand their industry. What's often missing is an unbiased outside perspective—a thought partner who can ask difficult questions freely, without agenda or judgment.

"I find my most powerful coaching happens when I'm working with someone outside my own career background," shares Christine Guthrie, PCC, Executive Leadership Coach, Founder of Authentic Ascent and Faculty at Georgetown Leadership Coaching Program. "I'm more naturally curious. I'm not projecting what I think they 'should' do but helping discover answers that belong to them, not me."

When a coach doesn't know the intricacies of your industry or the politics of your organization, something valuable happens: you're forced to articulate your assumptions, clarify your thinking, and explain your goals fully.

This process of slowing down, simplifying, and reflecting often surfaces insights that can be hidden when surrounded by those who share your context and assumptions. A coach's outsider status isn't a limitation—it's a strategic advantage that creates space for breakthrough thinking.

3. Am I ready for coaching?

You may be asking, "Do I need a coach?" The answer is often "Yes" and then people may wonder how and when to start. A useful next question to determine next steps is "Am I ready to be coached?"

As we explored in the first section, coaching isn't about advice or quick answers. It's about making space to reflect and grow in ways that can be hard to access alone. While coaching doesn't necessarily involve homework, it does help if you are in a place to examine and question and, most importantly, decide where to change and grow.

If you're considering coaching, see how many of these feel true:

- ☐ I have a goal, question, or transition I want to explore
- ☐ I'm open to feedback and self-reflection
- ☐ I'm willing to be challenged in service of my growth
- ☐ I don't expect answers; I want a thought partner to help me find my own
- ☐ I want to be accountable for the work, inside and outside the sessions

If you checked any of these, you're in a good place to begin coaching. If you checked most, you're primed for growth.

You may be ready for great coaching if:

- You're asking questions about who you are and what really matters now
- You're open to feedback, even when it's uncomfortable
- You're more focused on growing than on fixing
- You want a space that's fully yours, without judgment or agenda

4. Which coach is right for me?

Whether you're selecting a coach for yourself or evaluating options for your organization, focus on these critical factors:

Chemistry and trust. Coaching is an inherently personal relationship. The foundation is psychological safety—can you be open with this person? Will they challenge you constructively? Have exploratory conversations with two or three coaches to help choose the best for you.

If you're in HR or professional development choosing coaches for employees, ask them to have a couple conversations with potential coaches and choose the best for themselves.

Coaching philosophy and methodology. Different coaches bring different frameworks and approaches. Ask about their process: How do they structure

sessions? What methodologies inform their practice? Can you align on goals and what success looks like?

Powerful questions. During initial conversations, notice whether the coach asks insightful questions about you and your needs, goals, and challenges. Great coaches focus on helping you discover your own answers.

It's natural to gravitate toward coaches who share your background or industry. But remember: coaching addresses universal leadership challenges—how you communicate, how you motivate yourself and others, how you set and hold expectations—not the technical details of finance, tech, or law.

While it may feel harder to evaluate who asks great questions or listens with true insight, these are the competencies that distinguish exceptional coaches. If you're investing in developing your leadership capacity, it's worth evaluating what truly matters.



What makes a great coach?

Great coaches share certain skills and qualities, so investigate these in your discussions and references:

- They see their client's world **through their eyes**, not their own
- They ask **powerful questions** that help clients discover their own answers
- They **listen deeply** without imposing their own agenda
- They create a **safe environment** where clients can explore
- They **focus relentlessly** on the client to help clients see themselves more clearly
- They **challenge assumptions** and push clients to think differently

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This guide also appears as a 4-part series on LinkedIn. We invite you to [join the conversation there](#) or contact the authors for more information.

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