Business Mentoring: Saving a Match - Notes to Peer Partners & Corp. MnC Program Managers

Despite following best practices, and making careful matches, you'll occasionally encounter a MentorCoach (MC) and CA (mentee/Corporate Athlete) who will struggle in their MnC relationship. Take heart, and don't panic: this happens to the most competent program managers and in the most effective programs.

The good news? You might still be able to salvage the match yet. Keep these two things in mind:
1. Assess carefully. Don't assume that because the MC & the CA indicate the relationship isn't working that the statement is true. Often people confuse a roadblock or temporary setback as a sign that the match is not a good one when, in fact, with "peer partner" (or Prog Manager) guidance, they can work through the issue at hand and have a great relationship.
2. Focus on motivation. When the MC of a pair is presenting the problem to you, always listen to see if there's real motivation to resolve the issue. You know you're in this situation when your frequent recommendations for resolution are always met with a "Yes, but" or "That won't work" response. If the person is not motivated to resolve the issue, then you can't save the match. What is best in this situation is to tell the person that you're not sure how motivated he or she is to solve the problem. This will challenge the person to admit as much (which should result in the dissolution of the match), or it will allow the person to confront his or her own behaviour and possibly decide to engage properly in the match. Here are some strategies for handling specific scenarios: The "going through the motion" matches. In a professional mentoring program, a "no fault" clause exists that allows pairs to end the relationship early without any repercussions, especially if one of the partners doesn't feel it's going to work. However, this isn't always easy for a CA to do, since he or she might fear that the MC might take offense. As a result, the CA might still be meeting with his or her mentor but doesn't feel engaged in – or committed to -- the process. To save this type of relationship, when presented with the challenge, you may have to have a conversation with the CA (if you are the program manager) or the MC concerned (if you are the MnC peer partner) and indicate that you feel there's an underlying issue or that you believe the CA is not enjoying the relationship and is afraid to dissolve it. I find that honesty is always the best policy as a program manager (or Peer), so stating what you are observing in this way keeps people honest about engaging in the relationship. What's important is for the program manager to ask the CA why she or he feels the relationship isn't a good match. This can provide important information for the program manager: is it really a bad match or does some value exist -- and can that value be increased?

The "We haven't met very often, but we have a good relationship!" matches. Talk about contradictions! Remember, you can't have a mentoring relationship if you're not meeting regularly. The person uttering this statement is usually mistaking "liking" the other person as having a relationship. MentoringCoaching is about having a meaningful, developmental relationship. The focus needs to be on working together on a CA's goals and not just enjoying each other's company. In this situation, it's important to remind the pair about the importance of meeting regularly and having an actual agenda for the meetings with clear goals and timeframes. This will generally bring the pair back to the standards expected. The "We've run out of things to talk about, so we don't feel the need to continue" matches.

In a typical 6-12-month MnC program, some pairs will have this experience at around the 11th month (or sooner). That's part of the normal cycle of such engagements. However, if a pair makes this statement after the first three months or before 6 months, then this is a problem. What is happening that makes them feel this way? Usually this happens to a pair that has connected professionally but not emotionally or personally. This can indicate that the pair didn't feel a strong connection, or it can mean that one or both members were reluctant to engage in a deeper relationship.

One solution you can provide is for the CA to write down on a daily or weekly basis answers to the following:

- What happened today/this week that I would want my mentor to comment on?
- What difficult situation did I encounter or what situation did I feel unprepared for this week? Let me run this by my mentor for his/her insights.
- What specific tasks proved difficult for me today/this week that my mentor can assist me with?
- What did I do especially well today/this week that I want to share with my MC?

These questions attempt to make the relationship more personal by bringing in the mentoree's experience and moving away from just discussing a specific goal or activity.

However, even with this, a given pair may find themselves unable to really work together beyond what they've done.   One final thought: Save a match if you can, but don't force it if it's truly not working, and don't feel responsible if a pair opts to dissolve. Remember, the CA drives the relationship, but it takes motivation on the part of both partners to make it work. Your role is to encourage and support when necessary, but also to keep people honest about what's happening. This requires you to be equally honest in sharing your impressions when one of the pairs seeks your advice or wishes to end the relationship.

You might find you even have to take the initiative to suggest an end to the relationship where one or the other partner is not being honest with the process.   The success of any program is based upon how you, the peer partner or prog manager, as the case maybe, deals with "problem pairs."
Often, the other pairs in the program will be aware of the problems and will look to see how you handle them. Dissolving a match that is not meeting regularly or is faking the process sends a powerful message throughout your organization that your program is important.
Disclaimer: Notes are compilations from experience and articles.