Practice-Based Article

Strengthening the Future of Health Science Librarianship:
An Introduction to Coaching and Mentoring

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In the evolving landscape of Irish health science libraries, librarians increasingly expand their roles beyond traditional resource management. Coaching and mentoring, distinct but complementary disciplines, offer invaluable support for professional development, leadership growth, and for navigating the growing complexities of library services. Through structured guidance, experience-sharing, and role-modelling, they foster continuous learning, career advancement, and a strong professional network, ensuring librarians remain adaptable, resourceful, and effective.

A Continuum of Professional Development Approaches
Coaching and mentoring share foundational principles, existing along a structured conversational continuum that encompasses various professional interventions. At the therapeutic end, practices such as psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and counselling address emotional and mental health concerns. Moving towards more action-oriented approaches, life coaching, executive coaching, and mentoring focus on personal and professional growth, goal setting, and performance enhancement. At the other end of the continuum, training and consulting leverage specialised expertise to provide knowledge, strategic insights, and tailored solutions.

Coaching as a Professional Development Approach for Librarians
Coaching empowers individuals to identify goals, take ownership of their professional development, and plan for future career aspirations. Sir John Whitmore (2009) described coaching as "unlocking people's potential to maximise their own performance". For librarians navigating evolving roles and responsibilities, coaching fosters self-confidence and leadership capabilities, strengthens communication with colleagues and stakeholders, and enhances their ability to advocate for library resources and innovation.
So, how does coaching unlock potential? Central to the process are dialogic and relational skills, structured conversational frameworks, active listening, and open questions designed to develop self-awareness and drive change. Coaching begins with contracting between the coach and coachee, defining expectations for the scope of work and the coaching relationship. Sometimes, the coachee's organisation is involved in initial expectation-setting. Between sessions, coachees reflect on discussions and experiment with new ways of behaving or thinking about situations.

Coaching balances support with challenge. A skilled coach encourages reflection by questioning assumptions, identifying patterns of thinking, and presenting alternative perspectives. This approach cultivates professional agility, resilience, and continuous growth, making coaching an invaluable resource for librarians. A coach's presence and engagement are vital, ensuring the focus remains on the coachee's agenda while fostering self-discovery. Many coaches use structured frameworks, such as Whitmore's GROW model - Goal setting, acknowledgement of current Reality, exploration of Options and Will to change and the Way Forward. Coaching helps professionals refine their thinking, develop effective relationships, and

enhance their leadership impact.

Mentoring: Building a Supportive Professional Community

The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC Global) defines mentoring as "a learning relationship, involving the sharing of skills, knowledge, and expertise between a mentor and mentee through developmental conversations, experience sharing, and role modelling. This relationship may cover a wide variety of contexts and is an inclusive two-way partnership for mutual learning that values differences."

Like coaching, mentoring is dialogic and relies on relational skills, providing a safe space to discuss experiences, ideas and possibilities. Trust, respect and positive expectations underpin successful mentoring relationships. Unlike coaching, mentors impart knowledge and experience in addition to fostering reflection. Traditionally, mentors guided mentees by sharing their approaches to similar challenges, imparting knowledge and experience, advice and guidance. More recently, mentoring has evolved into a learning partnership, encouraging mentees to explore their ideas before mentors offer insights.

While coaching focuses on skill development and personal growth, mentoring provides a broader platform for career guidance, knowledge transfer, and professional networking. In health science librarianship, mentorship supports established and new entrants by facilitating the sharing insights and knowledge, fostering confidence, and cultivating a collaborative professional environment.

Mentoring enables early-career librarians to navigate professional complexities, from managing specialised collections to supporting healthcare professionals with critical information. Research by Shin Freedman (2021) highlights mentoring's role in fostering growth, social and professional networks, career advice, knowledge sharing and resources, coping strategies, and confidence building. As a two-way learning partnership, mentoring also benefits mentors by refining their leadership and communication skills. Formal mentoring programmes cultivate organisational learning cultures, strengthening professional networks. Mentoring helps to build a supportive culture of shared collective learning and strengthening personal and professional networks.

Choosing the Right Support Structure

There are times when mentoring may not be the best option, and other interventions on the professional continuum should be considered. Mentoring should not extend into personal or professional challenges beyond its scope, as this may lead to emotional strain on the mentor. Psychotherapy or counselling may be more appropriate for emotional concerns or trauma. For mentees with skills or performance gaps, their manager, not a mentor, should support. Major change initiatives often require specialised consultants. Formal HR processes should be followed for organisational concerns such as bullying, or where mediation is necessary.

Unlike coaching, typically delivered in a structured format, mentoring may occur through formal programmes or develop informally. Professionals often seek mentors based on personal rapport, relevant experience, networks, or shared career interests, such as transitioning from general into health librarianship. Mentorship strengthens the profession by facilitating the exchange of institutional knowledge, best practices, and career support. Both formal and informal mentoring connections foster inclusive and collaborative environments, benefiting the wider librarian profession.

Cultivating a Culture of Professional Development

Both coaching and mentoring thrive in workplace cultures that prioritise continuous learning and professional development. Coaches exemplify this through their own commitment to training, accreditation, on-going professional growth, peer group support, and supervision. Librarians at all career stages benefit from environments that encourage knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and professional development. In addition to core coaching and mentoring initiatives, organisations could offer mentor training, peer mentoring circles, group coaching, coaching skills for managers courses or structured networking events as valuable additional resources.

By embracing the power of coaching and mentoring, librarians can shape their professional growth, build resilience, and strengthen their leadership capabilities. As the Irish health science library sector evolves, investing in these practices will not only sustain the profession but also empower librarians to drive innovation, cultivate collaboration, and enhance service delivery in a dynamic landscape.

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