Understand the differences

Be aware of the differences between counselling, coaching and mentoring

When looking at the subject of mentoring, it is good to understand the differences between coaching, mentoring, and to a lesser extent, counselling.

Counselling tends to be problem-related, although it involves aspects of both mentoring and coaching. Counselling occurs when there is an unhealthy situation that needs to be attended to.

Coaching is about imparting skills and abilities. It is usually contract-driven and the coaching ceases when the required skill is developed or acquired. So coaching will involve some kind of teaching, like teaching someone how to swing a golf club or learning to play the piano.

Mentoring also seeks to impart skills and knowledge. But it is far more relational, and is more centred on how to do things rather than what to do. Mentoring is essentially a relational experience through which one person empowers another to reach his potential, by sharing and imparting life skills and experiences.

Mentoring is now recognised as a form of human development where one person invests time, energy, and personal know-how in assisting the growth of another.

Some characteristics of good mentoring are:
Mentoring is a process based on the principle of volunteering rather than on obligation or expectation. Mentors are usually sought out for their wisdom and insight rather than pure technical skills.

Mentoring tends to be characterised by proposals rather than instructions and guidelines. A mentor's input is always framed within the context of the mentee's responsibility for choice and action.

Mentoring is not about developing dependence and reliance upon the mentor. It is about training, so that the one being mentored is free to fly, even if it means to fly away.

Mentoring is a privilege. To share in the lives of others and to give observations and suggestions to help them do better or differently is a gift, because people are by nature defensive and proud.

Never give in to anger or frustration. No matter how correct you may be, saying things in the wrong manner is likely to damage the relationship.

Mentoring is about treasuring people. Whatever one says or shares is for the other's best interest, and not so you can look good.

Do not rush the person being mentored into ideas that may be new for him. Give time for reflection before pressing for change. Gentleness is a far more persuasive balm than pressure or manipulation.

Article by Steve Murphy, an associate trainer with SIM Professional Development who specialises in leadership, strategic negotiations, coaching, mentoring, and more.

The story was first published in The Straits Times Recruit.