Coaches and mentors need essentially the same set of skills, which is one of the reasons why it can be hard to differentiate absolutely precisely between the two. Several books include lists of desirable skills. They include Downey (2003), Rogers (2004), Whitworth et al. (1998), Clutterbuck (2004).

The fundamental ability is to be able to engage with the client and build a trusting relationship. Clients must trust the coach or mentor enough to be able to say honestly what they think and feel. Without that, nothing lasting can be achieved.

ROGERS (2004) DESCRIBES IT LIKE THIS:

“To be successful, all [approaches] depend on respect for the client – the foundation stone of which is what Carl Rogers… called ‘unconditional positive regard.’ All call on the practitioner to create and sustain a high degree of rapport and to act from the highest ethical standards. All need an extraordinary degree of self-awareness and self-management. (p26)”

THESE SKILLS ARE KEY:

- **Self-awareness** is important in order to enable the coach to disentangle what reactions and feelings belong to them, and which belong to their client, so that the coach’s needs and their preconceptions of the client are minimised (Downey 2003).

- **Listening.** As we saw earlier, Kline’s view is that it is the quality of the coach’s listening that determines the quality of the client’s thinking. The ability to stay silent to enable clients to say more, or reach a deeper level in their thinking, is essential. Along with listening go the ability to paraphrase and summarise what the client is saying. This ensures the coach or mentor understands what is being said, and also helps the client clarify or make sense of what they are saying.

- **Feedback** is also crucial. This might be feedback from other people, such as colleagues in the workplace. Or it might be feedback about how the client is coming across to the coach or mentor during the session. The latter can be especially illuminating if the coach or mentor experiences the client playing out the same behaviour patterns in the session that they are trying to address in the workplace.

- Finally, it is the coach’s or mentor’s responsibility to **structure** the session so that the client is able to achieve meaningful results from the conversation.

These are the basic skills a coach or mentor needs. De Haan (2008, p163) builds on this in describing what he calls the strategic skills of the coach, which you would expect an experienced, probably external, coach to have.
• Coaches are able to maintain relationships. They have the ability to build up and wind down relationships with a wide range of clients, to create working alliances that create the possibility of coaching. It helps to be clear, unambiguous and consistent, and to be able to tolerate a wide range of feelings, both within oneself and in others.

• An effective coach is able to use different areas of knowledge (e.g., self-knowledge, knowledge of how individuals develop, of the organisation, of psychodynamics, of different approaches to coaching, and of communication techniques).

• An effective coach can work consistently with different approaches and make a considered choice, depending on the issue, the client and their context. Some of these different approaches de Haan refers to are discussed in a later section.

• A coach is good at recognising patterns and mental models. The coach is on the lookout during the sessions for possible links between the client’s issues and relationships, and also between the ‘here and now’ in the coaching relationship and other work relationships.

• Perhaps most importantly, coaches are able to manage their own many painful experiences in coaching conversations. This includes coaches having to handle criticism or clients’ unrealistic expectations, and managing their own ‘stuff’ in the form of recollections and expectations.

Morris-Williams and Grant make the interesting point that many of the skills required to be a good mentor are not different from those of a good doctor. It is the context which is different. They cite empathy, active listening skills, open questioning, and being non-judgmental (Frei, 2010). Underlying the similarity between mentors’ and coaches’ skills, Hay’s (1999) view is that the key qualities of a mentor are self-awareness, a positive attitude and a desire for self-development.

FINALLY, CLUTTERBUCK (2004) HAS DESCRIBED THE “TOXIC MENTOR.” THIS IS SOMEONE WHO:

- always rushes around helping others rather than attending to own needs
- transfers their own problem into their mentee’s situation
- has an alternative agenda
- takes offence when the mentee does not follow their guidance
- is not switched on to their own learning

The toxic mentor is to be avoided.