

Finding a Mentor



Lunchtime Workshop for SUN

12 October 2004

Presented by

Della Aynsley
Learning and Development Coordinator
Staff Support and Development Unit

What is Mentoring?

If you received help from someone to learn, to sort out a problem or to devise a plan you have probably already had a mentor. It may have happened spontaneously and the word 'mentor' may never have been used. The term 'mentoring' is being used more widely now in our society and people are often encouraged to seek out a mentor. So what is mentoring and how do you go about finding a mentor?

Mentoring is often seen as a relationship between a senior and a more junior person – like a master and an apprentice. This can be a useful approach to mentoring but can also pose some problems for adult learners. Mentors can get just as much out of the relationship as a mentee while being seen as a teacher, coach etc can be unhelpful and limiting.

Viewing mentoring as a learning partnership can be more helpful. Status and power are ignored, mentors do more listening and questioning and advice is only offered once the mentee has had the opportunity to explore the options for themselves. This approach has a lot to recommend it.

Definitions

Mentor: "A wise and trusted guide"
The Macquarie Concise Dictionary (2nd Edition)

"Mentors are helpers. Their style ranges from that of a persistent encourager who helps us build self-confidence, to that of a stern taskmaster who teaches us to appreciate excellence in performance. Whatever their style, they care about us and what we are trying to do."

Shea, Gordon (1992) Mentoring – a practical guide Crisp Publications

"Mentoring is a relationship which gives people the opportunity to share their professional skills and experiences, and to grow and develop in the process. Typically, mentoring takes place between a more experienced and a less experienced employee."

Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment (1997)
Mentoring Made Easy, a practical guide for managers

Types of Mentoring

Mentoring can have many different forms. The mentoring relationship can be formal, informal, short-term or long-term. Some different types of mentoring are:

- **Facilitated mentoring:** when mentoring is formally established to meet specific organisational objectives - eg. induction training.
- **Key person replacement:** when mentoring is used to prepare someone to take over from another person – eg. succession planning
- **Informal, short-term:** spontaneous and off-the-cuff mentoring - eg. giving advice.
- **Informal, long-term:** when mentoring is a continuous relationship and the mentor is available as needed – eg. between friends of professional colleagues.

Contexts for Mentoring

When mentoring is defined broadly there are many possibilities for its use. Mentoring can be used in the following contexts:

- **Job orientation** – someone who helps you settle in to your new job
- **Career coach** – someone with whom you review your career goals and plans
- **Skills coaches** – someone who will help you develop specific skills
- **Professional or personal development** – someone who will help you grow
- **Confidant** – someone who is there for you
- **Technical advisor** – someone with whom you can discuss technical questions
- **Correspondent** – someone to whom you explain your ideas

In its simplest form mentors enable their mentee to figure out where they are going, where they want to be, how they will get there and how they are progressing.

Benefits of mentoring

Mentoring benefits both people in the mentoring relationship. By approaching mentoring as a learning relationship you can avoid becoming dependent on your mentor and use the experience to develop your critical thinking skills. You become empowered and take responsibility for your own actions. Your mentor does not have to be older, wiser or specialised in a particular field. You can both find the experience rewarding and satisfying. So why would you seek a mentor?

to learn new skills
to raise your profile
help with job applications
advice on career paths/options
access to a variety of resources
awareness of promotional opportunities
to expand networks and broaden horizons
to learn how to develop maximum potential
to set career goal and strategies for achieving them
to develop better life perspective – balance work and home
assistance in forward thinking and to get the big picture view

Mentor's role and responsibilities

The mentor's role is to listen, provide constructive feedback and help their mentee consider options. They may refer them to resources and facilitate decision making and share their own experiences. They might help to identify areas for development, coach their mentee and allow opportunities to practice new skills. They may be a sounding board, ask questions to cause further exploration of ideas or to challenge their mentee's thinking. They provide guidance, not direction and do not solve problems but act as a collaborator in the problem solving process.

Primary responsibilities of a mentor include:

- Maintaining confidentiality
- Being accessible
- Listening actively to the mentee
- Promoting responsible decision making
- Motivating and supporting the mentee to achieve their goals
- Ensuring a professional relationship
- Acting as a role model
- Recognising when it is time to relinquish the mentoring role

There are a few key differences between a mentor and a supervisor. Where a supervisor has management responsibilities, a mentor is an advisor. Mentors are NOT empowered to take action on behalf of their mentee.

Supervisors	Mentors
Determine job responsibilities and work objectives	<i>Counsellor</i> – help them take stock of where they are and where they want to be.
Supervise job performance	<i>Consultant</i> – facilitate decisions making and assist with option exploration
Performance appraisals and recommend training and development	<i>Coach</i> – assist and motivate mentee to implement plans and achieve goals

Mentee's role and responsibilities

Mentees approach their mentors to discuss issues and ideas. They may want feedback or advice or a chance to get something off their chest. Through the questioning of the mentor, the mentee may achieve a greater clarity about a situation or see a different perspective.

Whatever is discussed, however, it is the mentee who makes the decisions and takes any actions required. The mentee is responsible for their own decisions and actions.

Primary responsibilities of a mentee include:

- Being assertive about what you want
- Being an active participant by questioning and listening actively
- Undertaking self-development tasks within a timeframe
- Showing initiative
- Being willing and able to look inward to identify strengths and weaknesses
- Gathering information
- Assessing your needs and setting your own objectives

Skills of Effective Mentors

An effective mentor has been described as one who:

- M** – Manages the relationship
- E** – Encourages
- N** – Nurtures
- T** – Teaches
- O** – Offers Mutual Respect
- R** – Responds to the Mentee's needs

(Clutterbuck, David (1985) Everyone Needs a Mentor Institute of Personnel Management Bugbrooke, UK)

Skills of Effective Mentees

The skills listed below have been identified as those that help a mentee get the most from the mentoring relationship

- Assertiveness** - Behaviours that do not violate the other person's rights or sacrifice one's own
- Communication** - Listening, asking questions and expressing yourself.
- Self-discipline** - Willing and able to undertake self-development tasks within a time frame
- Adult Learning** - Ability to assess your own needs, set your own objectives, access a variety of resources and apply your initiative to achieve learning outcomes
- Self-assessment** - Willing and able to look inward and identify strengths and weaknesses
- Information gathering** - Research by observation, asking people, printed and electronic material etc
- Goal setting** - Clarifying your needs, interests, preferences, constraints etc then setting objectives in accordance with these.
- Prioritising** - Ability to evaluate alternatives and list them in order of urgency and importance
- Vision** - Ability to imagining possibilities for a desirable future
- Planning** - Working out what needs to be done in order to achieve an objective
- Evaluating** - Weighing up consequences of actions based on value or worth
- Managing conflict** - Discussing issues assertively, seeking to understand the needs and concerns of others, having the flexibility to explore options and finding effective solutions
- Organising** - Coordinating your efforts and energy, managing your resources
- Make decisions** - Having considered options, determine desired and/or appropriate action
- Deal with feelings** - Recognise emotions and express them in an appropriate way
- Negotiate** - State what you want, decide what you are willing to give in return, discuss options and arrive at a satisfactory win/win outcome
- Follow through** - Putting ideas into action

What do you want from mentoring?

Before seeking a mentor it is useful to determine why you want one, what you expect from the relationship, how you think it might operate and what the outcomes might be for you as a result of mentoring. These are things you will need to negotiate with any potential mentor.

- **WHY:** Why do I want a mentoring partner? List the benefits you hope to gain and your main interests in having a mentor.
- **WHAT:** List your expectations. What do you want/not want to happen in the mentoring relationship?
- **HOW:** How will the relationship operate? How will you communicate? How often? How long will the relationship last? How will I know if it's working?
- **WHAT ELSE:** What concerns do you have about mentoring? Are there additional possibilities that may occur as a result of the mentoring?

Where to find a mentor

You can go about finding a mentor in the same way you go about finding out about any sort of product or service you need – using your networks. Each of us has networks, some more developed and utilized than others. Consider sourcing your mentor through your networks such as:

Personal Network:

Sometimes seeking a mentor from someone in this group can add a further dimension to your relationship. Take care to avoid over-dependence, reliance on one point of view or hidden agendas when your mentor is part of your personal network.

Professional Network:

Your mentor may come from the same area or department or perhaps a different part of the organization. Opportunities to meet potential mentors also frequently arise in professional groups such as ALIA. Also consider looking for you mentor among those in volunteer organizations or other amateur groups.

Social network:

A host of opportunities exist for finding a mentor among your social networks. Consider people in clubs, community groups, hobbies and leisure pursuits.

Approaching potential mentors

It can be very challenging thing to approach a potential mentor – fear of rejection, fear of being thought 'pushy' shyness and modesty can make it difficult to say the least.

Ideally both parties could 'test the water' trying out the relationship before making a major commitment. Some might find the term 'mentoring' off-putting and so reject your request out of hand.

Here are some examples of how you might want to initiate a conversation with potential mentors:

- “I have noticed that you seem to be a person who (has a lot of experience in.... etc) and I was wondering if you would (be willing to give me some advice...etc.)”
- “I have been reading a lot about mentoring and am looking for someone who might be interested in exploring the benefits of mentoring worth me”
- “I am interested in learning more about this organisation. Would you be willing to work with me informally if we could work out some mutual benefits?”

Don't be discouraged if your first choice is reluctant. There could be many reasons why they do not wish to enter into a mentoring relationship with you and the vast majority probably have nothing to do with you personally. Simply move on to the next person on your potential mentors list.

Mentoring Checklist

You are ready to enter the mentoring relationship when you are able to tick off the items on this checklist

- I know what I want from a mentoring partner
- I have identified potential mentoring partners
- I know why I want this person as a mentor
- I have written expectations that I can negotiate with my mentoring partner
- I have some ideas, subject to agreement with my mentoring partner, about how the relationship might operate
- I have a list of concerns about mentoring for discussion with my mentoring partner

Mentoring meetings

It will be helpful if both the mentor and the mentee come to their first meeting well prepared. This is the time to work out the details of how the relationship will work and negotiate some sort of agreement. Think about answers to the following questions:

- What are our goals for mentoring?
- What roles do we take, what are our expectations of each other, what are our responsibilities?
- How long do we envisage the mentoring relationship lasting?
- How often should we meet?
- How much time are we willing to invest in mentoring?
- What if it doesn't work?
- Do we need a written agreement?

What if it doesn't work?

There are no guarantees. It is helpful to agree at the beginning that if either partner for any reason wants to end the relationship they are free to do so without fault finding, blaming or recriminations.

It can also be useful to identify some of the pitfalls of mentoring and how you might avoid, minimize their impact or effectively handle these pitfalls

References

Rolfe-Flett, Anne (1998) Develop your mentoring skills Synergetic Management Pty Ltd

Rolfe-Flett, Anne (1995) The Mentoring Workbook Synergetic Management Pty Ltd

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