Skills Guide

Mentoring

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a voluntary process in which one person gives their time to help a mentee. It is most often one-to-one, but people may be mentored in pairs or groups.

A mentor is usually, but not always, senior to a mentee, but should be outside any current hierarchical relationship (e.g. a manager and team member, or a leader and a member of a research group).

For the mentee, a mentor may be a sounding board, someone to help you work through your ideas, and someone to throw light on your path.

Mentoring is
- confidential
- non-judgemental
- supportive and constructive
- built on truth, openness, trust, and mutual respect
- a shared responsibility
- not necessarily or primarily an advisory role

Mentoring is not a replacement for supervision or one-to-ones, appraisal or PDR, performance management or support in cases of harassment or grievance. The mentor does not act on behalf of the mentee. It is the mentee’s responsibility to take action and, where relevant, the mentor’s to assist the mentee in reaching decisions about action and/or reflect upon the consequences of such action.

Why is this important to you?

If you become a mentor, you can play a vital role on someone else’s development by supporting them in identifying problems and solutions and deciding on next steps.

If you get a mentor you could be helped to develop self awareness, identify development needs, plan work, identify solutions, learn from mistakes and setbacks, build confidence and motivation, and decide on your next steps.

If you can arrange mentoring for a member of your team, you can help your staff gain confidence and take responsibility for their own development.

What does effective mentoring look like?

We learn much better when we work things out for ourselves, so the role of the mentor is to listen as much as talk. This is one of the ways in which good mentoring has much in common with coaching.

Like coaching, mentoring is “…a human development process that involves structured, focussed interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the [individual’s] benefit.”

Like coaching, mentoring assumes that those coached are responsible for their results and capable of finding their own solutions to problems. Experience in University-wide mentoring schemes suggests that mentoring works best when, rather than offering advice, the mentor actively listened to the mentee; encouraged her to

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take responsibility for her own development; kept the mentor’s own agenda out of the way. In other words, the mentor has taken a coaching approach.

Coaching, however, suggests a shorter term relationship that focuses on specific aspects, problems or issues, while ‘mentoring’ implies a medium term relationship focusing on the mentee’s development in the round.

Coaches are usually qualified to coach, and usually have no direct experience of the area of work of their coaches, while a mentor will often bring additional and specific knowledge, experience or understanding of the mentee’s area of work, with the expectation that this will be shared.

A spectrum of mentoring approaches

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Active listening
- Stop talking
- Make eye contact
- Adopt an open posture
- Be attentive
- Suspend judgement
- Respond (nodding, saying “yes”, without interrupting)

What you can expect of each other
- Understand that the role of the mentor is to challenge and encourage but not to provide answers
- Prepare for meetings beforehand and be clear about the objectives for each meeting
- Be willing to learn and be open to suggestions
- Note and implement action points
- Evaluate the partnership at various points (at least at the mid-point and end of a period of mentoring)
- Recognise when the mentoring partnership has achieved its objective/s and reached its conclusion

The mentoring ‘contract’
Mentor and mentee should discuss and agree at the outset how the mentoring will work, including:
- How frequently will you meet?
- What do you expect of each other?
- How will you handle confidentiality?
- Will you always have face-to-face meetings, or will there be email/phone contact as well or instead?
- Where will you meet? (This needs to be sufficiently private and a place in which both parties are sufficiently at ease.)
- How and when will you review the mentoring arrangement?
- How will you conclude the mentoring arrangement?

Further reading