

Mentoring and the Development of Individual Performance by Diane Davy

The origins of mentoring

"Good mentoring can and should take a performer beyond the limitations of the mentor's own knowledge." So says Sir John Whitmore in his *Coaching for Performance* in the *People skills for Professionals* series of books. He goes on to say that the essence of coaching and mentoring, two sides of the same coin, "is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them."

The word "mentor" derives from the Greek root *men*, which means to think. The concept of the mentor comes down to us through the Greek legend of Odysseus, who before embarking on his travels entrusted the development of his son and heir, Telemachus, to the wise and trusted counsellor Mentor. Since then, mentors have been traditionally seen as the imparter of knowledge and wisdom, the supportive "grey beard" to a younger, less experienced individual.

In a modern context, mentoring provides a supportive relationship between a mentor and their mentee, which is designed to raise the individual's self-awareness and sense of responsibility. It should facilitate the development of the mentee, as Sir John says, possibly beyond the limitations of the mentor's own knowledge. The concept of the "grey beard" has faded with the recognition that anyone with the right skill set can mentor another, provided that the relationship is right for a specific situation.

Value of Mentoring

Mentoring achieves higher levels of performance for the mentee because it stimulates self-motivation, improves understanding and mental attitude and capitalises on the uniqueness of each individual. In the current political climate, which is focusing on the development of an entrepreneurial spirit across the whole of society to aid the nation's competitiveness in the global economy, these are key aspirations for the nation. And if they are key for the nation's economic wellbeing, they must by definition be key for the success of any of the professions.

Mentoring in the modern business context, therefore, provides a supportive one-to-one relationship as a key to the individual's personal and professional development. The mentor will facilitate the development of insights from within, rather than impose their own attitudes on the mentee. The mentor will use a holistic approach to develop the essential relationship of trust and confidence needed to discuss and analyse what are likely to be, after all, highly personal matters.

Mentoring skills

The skills and attributes required to be an effective mentor are developed from good people skills, as can be seen in the check-list below:

- A common-sense approach
- Listening to/concentration on the individual
- A non-judgemental attitude
- The use of open questions
- Encouragement of reflection
- Able to put experiences into perspective
- Trustworthy and honest
- Empathetic and understanding
- Lets the mentee say what they want/need

These skills are deemed to be of great value in the workplace, whatever the individual's job or levels of responsibility, and need to be developed further by the workforce as a whole.

I am sometimes asked if mentors are "naturals" or if they can be trained. The answer to both of those questions is "yes". Some individuals are naturally good at mentoring, particularly those with high levels of Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EIQ). Even these will always benefit from developing their skills further. For the less practised potential mentor, any form of constructive people skills development will add expertise. The focus should be on how to ask open questions, listening skills, assessment and giving constructive feedback.

Formal mentoring schemes

The present government has recognised that mentoring is a potentially a powerful tool to support individuals towards success, right across the spectrum. Schemes now abound for mentoring in schools, colleges and universities, in prisons and young offenders' institutions, in sports and youth clubs and community groups. Standards for such schemes have been developed, with government support, by the National Mentoring Network (NMN).

NMN also promote opportunities for businesses to encourage their employees to act as mentors to pupils in schools in their local community. The skills developed by the employees in the process are of considerable benefit to the business and the individual, whilst the mentees benefit from the focused contact with non-school professionals. Furthermore, this takes a business into a school in a positive light, which can be of immense value, for example in future employee recruitment campaigns.

In the world of work, again national and local mentoring schemes support entrepreneurs, women returners to work, senior managers and the newly self-employed. The highly valued and successful Prince's Trust supports young people to start-up in business successfully, and their volunteer mentors provide an essential input towards that success.

Quality issues

The key reason for developing standards for the performance of such schemes is the understanding that quality is important. It is widely recognised that poor mentoring has the potential to do more harm than good. A fundamental tenet of all mentoring schemes is the training, development and review of the mentors to ensure consistency of approach and quality of delivery.

Further exploration

Alongside the active, full-blown mentoring schemes, are other initiatives designed to explore in more detail some of the key issues. One such example is a small pilot project, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, with which I have been closely involved. This was established to investigate over a four-year period the drivers and barriers for practising engineers at the HNC/D level undertaking significant Continuing Professional Development (CPD), to develop and enhance their technical, business and soft skills.

A small number of engineers came through a rigorous selection process, to be given a substantial two-year bursary and their own personal mentor, who would support them to develop and implement an extremely flexible plan of action.

The key outcome for almost all of the 64% of mentees who completed the programme was achievement of their goals, although each had taken a highly individualised route towards them. Asked about the benefits of involvement on the programme, almost without exception they had valued the mentoring relationship above any other aspect, even over and above access to a large pot of money, feeling that it was crucial to their success. It was abundantly clear that each individual, to a greater or lesser extent, had grown significantly in confidence and ability, and was now more greatly valued by their employer. Most had upgraded their jobs either in-company or externally as a result of their development.

One of the individuals on the scheme, in talking about his relationship with his mentor, said it was "... a fantastic ... once in a lifetime opportunity. To have someone impartial to turn to, who is very much like a friend, who says why don't you try this if it is your goal, you can do it, we know you can achieve it. That was life-changing"

The mentors' experiences were equally positive. A typical comment from one mentor was that "seeing the (mentee) grow in stature has been an extremely rewarding experience". That sense of shared achievement is unbeatable.

Comprehensive benefits

Having said all of this, how can the general benefits of involvement in a mentoring relationship be defined? For mentees, they should gain in self-confidence and effectiveness, knowledge, and understanding of their worth to society (and to business if that is the context). Their own people skills should develop significantly through working with a skilful mentor whom they can use as a trustworthy sounding-board and possibly as a role model.

For mentors, the benefits at first glance seemed less obvious, but they are in fact equally valuable. Their people skills will continue to be honed by this intense one-to-one work, to the advantage of themselves and their businesses. I can say from personal experience that I always without fail walk away from a mentoring meeting feeling energised because I have learnt so much from my mentee. As was shown in the mentor's quote above, it is not a one-way relationship. Every mentoring relationship is different, even within a formal scheme, and therefore flexible. One size definitely does not fit all.

Inevitably a mentee will grow out of the need for a specific mentoring relationship, and it is essential that the mentor recognises and encourages this. It may be that a different mentoring relationship becomes necessary, or the motivating need has been resolved. It is the responsibility of the mentor to ease the conclusion of the mentoring, and that of the mentee to be honest about their need for moving on.

Individuals - how to chose your mentor!

So how do you go about choosing a mentor? This is the most personal aspect of the science or art of mentoring, because its success is dependent of the chemistry of one-to-one relationships. Quite frankly, either you get on with someone, or you don't. And if you don't, the mentoring relationship is doomed to fail.

I suggest that you start by understanding why you have decided that you need a mentor, and what you want to achieve by it. Then you look at the wide range of people that you know, however slightly, and whittle them down to a small handful who you think may be able to support you in your endeavours. Reject from that list anyone you instinctively know you will not get on really well with. You should be left with a very small number of potential mentors for whom you have considerable respect, so go and see your number one option on that list, and persuade them to become your mentor. The odds are that they may feel quite flattered to be asked.

When you have found the mentor for you, be very clear about the boundaries of the relationship for both of you and the levels of commitment required, and agree what the criteria will be for the conclusion of the mentoring. Once the parameters are set, get on with it!

The future for mentoring as a tool

The growing emphasis on the value of mentoring, and indeed coaching, right across our society could well be seen as something of a fad. However, the practice of mentoring has endured over the many centuries since Odysseus' day, and has clearly developed into a thoroughly modern business and community tool.

In spite of the growing trend to structure mentoring schemes, to embed quality into the proceedings and to formalise mentoring relationships, the basic Odyssean principle remains unchanged and pure. Mentoring is all about a fundamental one-to-one unselfish, supportive relationship which promotes personal growth, primarily for the mentee but also for the mentor. This will always add value, whatever the environment in which it is enacted.

About the author

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