

Getting the most from mentoring - recent developments and learning

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This article is for anyone who has an interest in what it takes to make mentoring work.

Firstly I will clarify what I mean by mentoring, then go on to share some core competencies that are found in the most skilled mentors, and will then summarise some expectations mentees have of their mentors. My final section will focus on the use of externally accredited NVQ mentor awards and my early personal learning from their implementation.

Some definitions

Before I launch into a short description of my most powerful learning from recent experiences on and around mentoring, I'd like, with the help of Audrey Collin (1) to clarify what mentors and mentoring means to me:

“Mentors are influential people who significantly help you reach your major life goals”.

“Mentoring is a protected relationship in which learning and experimentation can occur, potential skills can be developed, and in which results can be measured in terms of competencies gained rather than curricular territory covered”.

...”it is a relationship rather than an activity”.

For me this encapsulates mentoring really well. A relationship not an activity - yes, and this clearly distinguishes mentoring from most other forms of learning and development. The relationship may last a lifetime. In my own case, I have had a mentor for the sixteen years I have been in the business of helping others to learn, although, significantly, we have never used the word to describe that relationship, and, as I will emphasise a little later, this is typical of natural, uncontrived, mentoring.

A lot of us have a significant figure in our lives, who has been a long-term and positive influence on our development, someone who has the unusual and so valuable qualities that mean that whatever else is happening, they maintain a genuine interest in at least one other person's continued development.

The advantage of mentoring over other forms of development activity is that when it works well, it focuses on our real learning needs on a specific and personal level.

A deep irony is that often, the more organised and structured we make mentoring, the less likely it is to really work. I feel that mentors are like noses and strawberries - it's best if you pick your own. Thus, even the best intentioned efforts to make mentoring work, can founder as it will have its most positive effect when it evolves naturally, often without consciously considering mentoring is happening at all.

Who are the mentors?

Mentoring, like management, is a function, not a title - we earn the label by our deeds, and not just what we call ourselves. During a mentoring workshop last year I used repertory ('rep') grid to identify what it was exactly that differentiates the best mentors from the rest. If you want the long list of 500+ behavioural statements this generated, get in touch and I will be happy to send them to you - emailing is best, but here let's focus on some core competencies of mentors. Here are just ten of the competencies that the above workshop identified:

Does not blame - stays neutral.

Will give honest answers.

Not intimidating - easy to approach at any time.

Knows what they are talking about - good at own job.

Actively questions me.

Enabling, caring, open and facilitative.

Gives constructive and positive feedback.

Provides subtle guidance, but ensures I make any decisions.

Interested in me personally, genuine concern.

Willing to debate, argue, discuss.

Well, this selection alone makes it clear that the excellent mentor is indeed an exceptional and valuable person. Valuable yes, and I regret to say, all too often not sufficiently valued.

Mentors worthy of the title somehow get the balance right between 'over' and 'under' helping, and do this deliberately, and with skills the rest of us mere mortals will never possess. Thus a mentor will know when they are providing more guidance than they 'should' and will do this only when it prevents the mentee from floundering, or becoming needlessly frustrated. That said, the most competent mentors know when to 'under' help, to avoid unhealthy dependence upon them, and when best to allow the mentees to find their own way.

It is possible to develop mentor competence, but only with those who possess a platform of existing or potential interpersonal skills that provides the basis for further development. An irony I see repeatedly is that those most keen to become mentors are people I wouldn't let within a mile of the role, and that equally, many intuitive, 'natural' mentors don't recognise their own abilities, and are too rarely put in a position to show their capabilities.

During a recent mentoring workshop, a past manager of mine said something very profound on mentoring - "to be asked to be a mentor", he said, "is immensely flattering". Yes it is, and any would-be, or current mentor must realise just what a responsible role it is, and that it is *not* an opportunity for cloning. There are too many "be like me and you'll be okay" people out there, and mentoring relationships can be abused by those who see it as an imprinting exercise. The very best mentors actually enjoy being challenged by their ever less-dependent mentee, and see it as a relationship during which, as it matures, they will concede as many times as they suggest.

Thus mentors have to possess a real interest in others, and specifically in their development and learning. This is crucial, as it is this that drives their ability to put the issues and concerns of their mentees ahead of the other things that the rest of us find more important. The mentors' role is essentially to accelerate the rate at which a person learns.

Mentoring is not to be taken on lightly, as it is potentially a powerful intervention in the development of others, and can, but does not always, involve having to deal with a lot of personal issues that may have had no other means of outlet or resolution. Mentors have to accept that they will have in all likelihood, to put a lot more in than they get back.

What do mentees expect?

There must be a better term than 'mentee', personally I'm not keen on 'protégé' - if any reader has a better word do let me know!

Using the repertory grid again, I asked graduate engineering mentees participating in a structured, mentor-supported development programme what in their opinion separated the less competent mentors from the best. This is worth thinking about - do we often enough consider, or better still engage directly and meaningfully mentees in the design development, implementation, and...evaluation (!), of mentoring programmes?

Anyway, they came up with really thoughtful and insightful reflections, of which these are a sample.

They want mentors who are:

- Organised, patient and understanding.

- Enthusiastically persuasive.

- Down to earth and realistic.

- Prepared to get jobs done for you urgently.

- Able to make you feel relaxed, by showing they understand your perspective.

They *don't* want mentors who are:

- Very poor at keeping in touch.

- Likely to give you seedy looks ...leaving you wondering.

- Lacking in knowledge, and integrity in their field of expertise.

- Mad.

- Intolerant and impatient.

An interesting summary of a much longer list, and I found it a very valuable resource to pass onto the mentor group as it prompted the exploration of issues that would not otherwise had had an airing. Mentees' hopes, fears and expectations really do add a powerful dimension to the mentoring process. Perhaps we practitioners could remember this more often.

Mentor Awards

A relatively new development with tremendous potential to add value to many mentoring efforts are the 'mini-award' NVQs that are beginning, very, very slowly to gain some momentum.

Personally I am a late convert to NVQs when and only when they are genuinely developmental, and are as paperless as possible, meaning they do not require an unsuspecting candidate to chain themselves to a photocopier in order to churn out reams of paper so-called 'evidence' to prove their competence.

The mentor awards, when managed and assessed competently, can provide a credible externally accredited framework for the development and accreditation of mentors. This is a very significant development, as it can be just enough incentive to draw the 'right' people in, and is a genuine reward to those who can demonstrate competence with two nominated mentees. Even if the NVQ process itself is not taken on, the specific performance criteria and knowledge sought can be a great help in terms of benchmarking mentor development.

There seems to be a proliferation of mentor awards - some sector specific, as with local government, others offered by University/TEC and other parties, and others, with a little more history through for instance NVQ Awarding Bodies, such as Oxford Cambridge and RSA (OCR), or City and Guilds. The latter two for instance have four and two unit awards respectively - units taken directly from the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) qualification.

Working with the NVQ awards as I have been doing for a year now has prompted a lot of learning. For instance, the units are direct 'lifts' from the substantive 'full' awards, and need to be contextualised for the Mentor environment. Another issue worth pondering is that Mentor Award assessors must know the awards really well to find a robust, yet flexible and less-paper route to assess people who may be very senior and unwilling to assign big chunks of time to assessment. Personally, with my Mentor Award candidates, I confirm their competence via very focused, audio taped probing interviews, with clear signposting to the existence of tangible 'evidence' to back up their claims as appropriate.

Don't worry, I won't go into more depth on the awards themselves - get in touch if you want more details and I will be happy to help further - the important point is to spread the word that there is a growing source of external accreditation and certification for mentoring done well.

Given the strength of managerial opposition to NVQs seen in so many organisations, I find it helps to go softly on the fact that for example the OCR or City and Guilds qualifications are indeed NVQs, emphasising the fact that they provide the opportunity to earn whichever bodies' Mentor Award - with no mention of the NVQ aspect at all. Assessment which focuses flexibly upon observing true competence in the workplace, within a development programme delivering the knowledge and understanding that helps good mentors get better still will add value and credibility to efforts to grow mentor competence.

Many organisations have 'formal' mentor schemes, and awards such as those mentioned above may be of interest to them, as any skills development workshops and experience gained in the role will in all likelihood have gained them considerable evidence of prior learning should a Mentor Award appeal.

In conclusion

In the right hands, mentoring remains a powerful and cost-effective method of encouraging development.

It is crucial that the right people are recruited and developed in order to maximise the returns mentoring can deliver. Mentor competencies can be benchmarked against NVQ standards, or organisation-specific positive behaviours can be easily established.

The recent development of Mentor Awards provide an excellent start to the process of adding value to mentoring via external accreditation.

I thoroughly recommend the following websites for anyone looking for accessible, concise and very valuable learning on developmental and managerial issues:

learningbuzz.com Peter Honeys' site, full of bite sized chunks of very useful wisdom contributed by, and intended entirely for, practitioners.

trainingzone.com Well worth signing up to the weekly 'learning wire' which signposts to a wide range of relevant learning, and do explore the free downloadable material within the 'toolkit' section.

There is plenty more to learn on and around mentoring from both of these.

References and recommended reading

1. "Mentoring" Audrey Collin, *Industrial and Commercial Training* March/April 1988.
2. "Mentoring - a process for growth or 'buzz word' for the 90s?" Terence Deane, *Training Officer* September 1997.
3. "Mentoring" David Clutterbuck, *Industrial and Commercial Training* November/December 1986.
4. "Establishing a formalised mentoring program" Linda Phillips-Jones, *Training and Development Journal* February 1983.

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