



How to have an effective mentoring relationship

A toolkit for mentors

1. What is Developmental Mentoring?

Mentoring is a developmental dialogue between two people. It is a process of ongoing support and development, which can tackle issues and problems identified by the mentee. Having a mentor or mentors can be one of the most powerful developmental relationships a person will ever experience. Anybody at any stage of their life or career can benefit from having a mentor, whether it is deep personalised learning with someone with substantially more experience or having a sounding board with a peer, or working with a younger or more junior person in a reverse mentoring situation to support in finding out a different perspective on life. Often individuals can benefit from having more than one mentor in their life if they are going through a period of intense change. Mentoring taps into a basic instinct most people share – the desire to pass on their learning or to support development and help another person fulfil their potential.

Most people from all walks of life and at all stages of their careers are able to identify deep, personalised learning they have obtained from a developmental relationship with someone with greater experience, who has taken a direct interest in them. Effective mentoring is a two-way learning relationship, which can develop the mentor as much as the mentee. It involves the creation of reflective space for the mentee, helping them to improve the quality of their thinking. The mentor will also provide professional friendship, role modelling, advice and guidance and be that sounding board and challenger that will really stretch the mentee in their learning zone.

Mentoring is a confidential, offline (not with your line manager) partnership between two people based on understanding and trust. Its chief aim is to build on self-reliance and self-confidence in the mentee. It is a positive, developmental relationship, which is driven primarily by the mentee.

Developmental mentoring is characterised by

- A need by the mentee to achieve some form of change for example, in their ability, their understanding or their circumstances.
- It involves a high level of trust and openness, which allows the mentor and mentee to address difficult, sometimes uncomfortable issues.

- Being out of the line of authority. Mentoring relationships do not develop easily between line manager and the direct report due to the power dimension present.
- Recognition of the value of learning together, even though mentor and mentee may have very different levels of experience.

2. The behaviours and core skills of a Mentor

An effective mentor:

- Demonstrates a keen interest in developing their mentee.
- Is attentive, positive and constructive in building their relationship with their mentee.
- Has the ability to create a trusting and open space for reflection, guiding the mentoring process and is aware of the roles a mentor can play.
- Has the ability to give guidance and advice, insights and experience, to introduce the mentee to concepts, improve the quality of their thinking and to help awareness around widening their network or navigating their organisation.
- Helps the mentee set and achieve goals or direction relating to the areas of development the mentee identifies as most important.
- Plans and prepares for the meetings with the mentee.
- Spends time reflecting on the process and outcomes of the mentoring conversations to develop their contribution further.

Mentor skills include:

- **Building trust** to not only establish rapport, but to create a positive, supportive environment that permits open and honest communication. Effective mentoring only happens in an open atmosphere of trust and confidentiality.
- **Asking open questions** using explorative questions rather than giving tips/advice or even imposing your own “solution”, facilitating the mentee’s thinking to find their own solution.
- **Active listening and showing interest** in what the mentee is saying and reflecting back important aspects of what they have said to help their comprehension and show that you have understood.
- **Giving constructive feedback** and (sometimes) providing guidance.
- **Readiness to share experiences** by helping the mentee gain broader perspectives of their responsibilities and organisation and by sharing mistakes and successes they have encountered.
- **Self-awareness, self-confidence and behavioural awareness.**
- **Reacting in a** timely manner to communication.
- **Supporting the development of direction** and learning goals and helping build the mentee’s capacity.
- Giving **encouragement and empowering the mentee** to develop their own strengths and not need their mentor.
- Having a sense of **humour.**

- **Being able to respond to a mentee's frustrations and challenges** with words of support, understanding, encouragement and praise (just knowing that someone is there to listen can be very helpful).
- **Energy and enthusiasm** for the mentoring conversation, enthusiasm is catching!
- **Openness to experimenting** and learning practices that are new.
- **Having the empathy** to really relate to the mentee and understand their perspective of the world.

3. Starting your Mentoring Relationship

Some mentees may feel nervous talking to someone they don't know about themselves or they may feel inferior to their mentor, as they have less experience. They may believe in the concept of mentoring, but do not know what to expect from the person they have been matched with. Here are some ideas to consider for your first meeting:

- **By getting to know each other**, and becoming relaxed, you can start building trust. To help your mentee to be relaxed and responsive, begin by establishing rapport together. The easiest way to do this and help them to be comfortable is to find areas of common ground in your lives. This may be around work issues, but do not be afraid to talk about your family, interests and hobbies as well. This will help your mentee to feel safe and start to develop trust with you.
- **Preparing for your first meeting:** Consider your experience in the areas your mentee wishes to develop skills and knowledge in. Also ask yourself what you want to get out of the mentoring relationship (it is a two-way learning experience) and let your mentee know why you are offering some of your time as it will help to build their trust further.
- **Start to develop direction.** What does the mentee want to focus on and why? Often this part of the dialogue generates the most focus and learning for the mentee as they clarify what is most important for them to work on within this mentoring relationship. If your mentee comes to the first meeting with very clear direction, then do challenge them on their thinking to ensure they are really working on the most important two or three learning objectives for them at this point in their life.
- **Don't rush your first meeting** and if you need longer to develop the direction then leave this to your next conversation.

A mentoring agreement

It is important to clarify and align your expectations at the start of the mentoring relationship.

It is also important to establish an agreement for how you want to work together in the relationship and any boundaries you wish to respect. Quite simply this is an understanding of what you can expect from each other:

We recommend that you agree:

- The frequency and length of mentoring meetings and try to book these into your diaries in advance.
- That your mentee is responsible for arranging meetings and agendas.
- That you both will keep to arranged mentoring sessions and only cancel if unavoidable.
- To review your relationship regularly and provide each other with honest and open feedback about your mentoring relationship.
- That what is discussed in the sessions remains confidential and neither of you will disclose any of the information discussed without the permission of the other person.

Consider if there any boundaries or topics that you would prefer to be off limits in the mentoring relationship and agree them up front. You can always review these at a later date if one of you changes your mind.

4. Maintaining the mentoring relationship

It is suggested that you have mentoring conversations every 4-6 weeks. Having a process to your meeting will also support your focus and learning.

Check-in at the start of each meeting

- Start by re-establishing your rapport and feeling comfortable together.
- Follow-up on commitments and actions from the last session.
- Mentee shares recent experiences (challenges, opportunities, and successes).

Checking in questions to use:

- How are you today?
- What are you feeling today?
- What's on your mind?
- Any reflections/follow up from last time?
- What has happened since our last conversation?
- What is the agenda today?

Main body of the conversation

Mentor and mentee explore the objective or direction for the meeting agenda. They will bring in the mentee's recent issues and challenges and discuss options and approaches. The mentor should feel free to share personal stories and anecdotes with the permission of the mentee.

The mentor will probably use a process model for this part of the conversation e.g. The Three Stage Process, GROW or just listen as a Thinking Partner. During this part of the conversation:

- Regularly review progress against the objectives.

- Assess the need to revise or update the objectives.
- Identify development opportunities and solutions.
- Encourage self-management – the mentor’s role in the relationship is not to create dependencies by dictating problem-solving techniques and decisions to their mentee. Mentors should encourage mentees to manage the achievement of their objectives themselves and providing their experience as a source for ideas, letting the mentee choose and decide.

Mentors should support, listen, challenge and only guide and provide advice at the request of their mentee once they have gained some insight themselves into the issues being discussed.

Checking out and next steps:

Clarify any commitments made and anything that needs follow-up, and confirm next session date, time and agenda, but only if your mentee is comfortable to do this. Ensure you review both the process and outcomes from the session:

Checking out ideas:

- Mutual feedback on how the session went.
- What do you and your mentee want more or less of for next time? (Feedback, listening, advice, challenge etc).
- Where are we in the life cycle?
 - Building rapport
 - Setting direction
 - Progression through their objectives
 - Winding up the relationship.
- What are the main learning and action points from the meeting?
- Provide feedback to each other on what has been appreciated during the meeting.
- Do we want to organise the next session?

5. Tips for effective relationships and overcoming challenges

For an effective mentoring relationship:

- Review your relationship regularly.
- Prepare for and reflect on meetings.
- Give constructive feedback to your mentee when it is appropriate.
- Encourage challenge within the relationship and challenge your mentee constructively.
- Have goal or direction clarity.

You are likely to have reached a boundary if you:

- Are being excessively drawn into an issue.
- Feel you lack the professional expertise to help.

- Are being pulled into the details of your mentee’s job role.
- Are spending too much time on an issue and can’t move forward.
- Feel you are struggling with the content of your conversation.

To encounter challenges in a mentoring relationship is normal; to overcome them it might be helpful to:

- Review your original expectations.
- Give open and honest feedback to each other.
- Challenge constructively.
- Re-contract if you feel the relationship is veering off from the original agreement.

Mid-point review

We encourage you to review the things that are going well and not so well in your mentoring relationship in the mid-point of the mentoring journey, and here are some questions to ask yourself and/or your mentee:

- What do you appreciate about your mentee? And do they know that?
- What goals/direction has the mentee set at the beginning and which have they partially or fully achieved? Have new goals/direction been added?
- What have you got out of the relationship as a mentor? What do you enjoy about the engagement? What would you like to change?
- You can ask the mentee the same questions.
- Are you both happy with the mentoring and have you met as often as you planned?
- Or have there been frequent meeting changes? (And if so, how could that be improved?)

6. Winding up the mentoring relationship

By reviewing the relationship regularly, both mentor and mentee will be aware of when the relationship is maturing (rather than it just losing a little momentum from time to time). In this way, the ‘maturity review’ is less scary for both parties.

Reasons why it might end include:

- The mentoring programme is ending after an allocated time period or number of mentoring sessions.
- The mentee has achieved the agreed goals and outcomes and is running out of things to discuss.
- The mentee has gained confidence/improve their skills in connection with the learning goal, and now it is time for the mentee to navigate alone.
- The mentee’s goals or direction has changed significantly or their specific needs developed and they need a different type of learning support to mentoring, or another mentor with different expertise.
- Your conversations start to lack energy, you are both finding it difficult to sustain momentum in your discussions and you both feel it is time to move on. This doesn’t

mean your mentee hasn't fulfilled their learning objectives, just that they have run out of things to talk about.

Whatever the reason, do talk about it first in a meeting/conversation, and ensure wherever possible that it is a joint decision. This discussion should be honest, respectful and provide constructive feedback to the other, giving both of you time to prepare for the actual final winding up meeting. Don't just send an e-mail to close a relationship down.

In the final meeting discuss the following:

- Recognise that the formal relationship must come to an end.
- Discuss at least one meeting ahead how the ending will be managed.
- Create an agenda for the final formal mentoring session:
 - Review/re-define outstanding objectives
 - Finish within a mentoring session
 - Allow time for moving on.
- Review the relationship outcomes and any outstanding objectives. You may be required by the programme to provide a written reflection on this.
- Share what you have learned with each other - reviewing both the mentee's and the mentor's learning is key.
- Celebrate your successes! And exchange thoughts about your frustrations as well from both sides.
- Thank each other for the time and commitment that has been put into the relationship.
- What comes next? Don't forget to discuss the future: Will you continue to meet or speak occasionally – either formally or informally? This is called 'keeping the door open' and is important when you have had a good relationship. Or it may mean winding the relationship up more gradually over a period of months with longer periods between conversations.
- Your mentee may want to ask you to help them scope out their future direction or action plan together.
- What or who will replace you for your mentee? Allow time to plan what comes next, maybe your mentee needs signposting to other types of support or to find a new mentor or coach.

Questions which might be asked include:

- What have we achieved together?
- What would we like to thank each other for?
- Do we want to continue in a more ad hoc, informal relationship and, if so, what will the intent of this be?
- When we look back on this relationship, what have we learned that we can apply to our future mentoring relationships?
- What or who will take the place of the mentor?

If you have any questions about how to have an effective mentoring relationship, please contact aomp@coachmentoring.co.uk.