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# What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a reflective and (usually) confidential relationship in which one person (the mentor) helps another (the mentee) to manage his or her own learning for personal and professional growth.

Mentoring is another example of talking used as a tool for learning (see 'Dialogue and Reflection' at [www.prodait.org/approaches/dialogue](http://www.prodait.org/approaches/dialogue)). In many organisations, a system of mentoring exists to provide work-related support for staff. The mentor, who may be a senior colleague or a peer from another part of the organisation, can help the mentee to develop personal resources and guide him or her through the complexities of organisational systems and networks of people. Importantly, the mentoring relationship is not managerial and so it is not directly related to promotion, staff review or the judgement of performance.

## Mentoring and other forms of helping

Mentoring is sometimes linked with other forms of helping, such as counselling or coaching. There are many overlaps between them. All are concerned with learning, but there are (sometimes subtle) differences.

### Coaching

Coaching usually refers to a relationship in which a coach helps an individual to improve specific aspects of performance by developing techniques and motivation. The coach may be a line manager and may set the agenda. It typically addresses a short-term need.

### Counselling

Counselling usually refers to a supportive relationship in which a counsellor helps another to help him- or herself to understand and cope with the demands of their life.

Mentoring may involve some counselling, but it is different in its aim of primarily encouraging work-related learning. Mentoring may also involve some coaching, but goes beyond it in its aim of improving performance generally, rather than improving specific aspects of performance.

## Mentoring practicalities

Whether the mentor has been allocated as part of a programme, or has been chosen by the mentee, a relationship has to be established. The partners need to feel they can work with each other and both should feel that they gain something from the experience. Many organisations will offer training to people who mentor and those who are to be mentored.

Mentoring sessions are formally arranged and are based on purposeful conversations. Clutterbuck (2004) refers to the process as PROP – Professional, Relaxed, Open, Purposeful – for both parties. The frequency, time and place of meetings will be specified. The arrangements must be clear and agreed by each partner in the relationship, including an agreement on any limits to confidentiality in the relationship. Ground rules can be established in the early stages to avoid misunderstandings.

## **Stages of Mentoring**

### **The early stages of a mentoring relationship**

In the early stages, the mentor and mentee need to get to know each other and discuss the direction they might take. They will each be 'testing the water' and making sure that they can work effectively together. They will each want to know something of the other's background and experience. The mentor will help the mentee to express him- or herself about matters relating to work and to explore personal goals and ambitions.

At the end of each meeting, it will be important to summarise what they have discussed, any agreements they have made and what they may talk about in the subsequent session(s). It can be helpful to have a written summary of the sessions. If either of the partners is keeping a learning journal, this would also be a place to record thoughts and feelings about what has happened.

### **Later stages of a mentoring relationship**

During mentoring, there should always be a joint assessment of the mentee's strengths and needs and expression of their short- and longer-term goals and ambitions. As the relationship develops, the mentor and mentee explore ways of understanding their organisation and of achieving goals within it.

The mentor can often act as a source of information about people and resources that can be helpful for the mentee's learning. The mentor is there to help the mentee to develop confidence and motivation to move forward by developing effective responses and solutions to the challenges of working life. The mentee assumes increasing responsibility for his or her own career development.

### **Finishing a mentoring relationship**

A mentoring relationship does not continue indefinitely but is usually set up for an agreed length of time. For example, it may last during the probationary period for new staff when the purpose of the relationship is to establish the mentee as an autonomous member of staff. A large part of the mentoring can be linked with a probationer's Personal Development Plan.

In the later stages, it is useful for the pair to review what has been achieved and whether there are any outstanding issues. They may decide to continue the relationship informally, the mentor remaining interested in the mentee's progress and the mentee knowing that another colleague is interested in their development. At this stage, the mentor and mentee become equal colleagues, meeting less frequently and without the formal structure of institutional mentoring.

## **Mentoring Knowledge and Skills**

Some of the knowledge and skills are the same for both mentor and mentee.

A mentor must want to be a mentor and must take the task seriously. Although mentors may be selected in an organisation, they must agree to undertake the role. They should also go willingly for training and briefing. Similarly, a mentee must be willing to be mentored.

Both must be clear about the purpose of the relationship and how it can be managed. Each must be aware of their roles and responsibilities and how these will develop over time. Each must be prepared to communicate openly and effectively.

### **The mentor**

Above all, good interpersonal skills are essential. The mentor is an active listener (see below), focusing on the concerns of the mentee and trying to understand them. They will question and explore ideas with the mentee, often challenging them to look at issues in a different way. Ultimately, they help the mentee develop a new understanding of their concerns.

It is important the mentor does not give advice from their own point of view or relate experience of what happened to them in a similar situation. Comments and suggestions need to relate specifically to the mentee's context and the mentee's ways of reacting and responding. They must ensure that the mentee retains ownership of the issues throughout.

### **The mentee**

The mentee will gain more from the relationship if he or she understands how it can work. Mentees should be open and truthful in exploring issues, and they need to understand that they are responsible for raising matters for discussion.

### **Active listening**

Active listening is a core skill for mentors, means paying great attention to a speaker and giving feedback in some form on what has been said. Feedback may be non-verbal, to indicate that you are still listening. It may be verbal, in

the form of questions to gain clarification or further information (questions simply to satisfy your own curiosity are not acceptable). Verbal feedback can also provide assurance that you have heard and understood what the speaker has said. To do this, you may summarise what you have heard and ask the speaker, 'Have I understood you correctly?'

Active listening means not jumping to conclusions about what you are hearing. It means listening for the important ideas behind what is being said and reacting to the ideas, rather than to the person. It means putting your own needs aside and listening to the needs of the speaker, prompting and encouraging further exploration and elucidation.

Training and practice can be helpful in developing these communication skills. For more information, see the material on the Canterbury Christ Church University College website at <http://pgclt.cant.ac.uk/skills.htm>.

## **What the University Offers and Expects**

In many higher education institutions, mentoring is only formally arranged for probationary staff. However, because it is helpful, people often want it to continue. The need for support does not stop when probation ends. Professional development continues as we become more experienced and increase our responsibilities.

Support and guidance can be helpful in managing the multitude of tasks presented by life in a university. There is nothing to stop people from making their own mentoring arrangements, either by mutually agreeing to continue the formal partnership or by starting to work with another colleague. Ideally, the formal structure of a mentoring relationship should be adhered to but there may be a number of relationships that can offer the support and exchange of knowledge and skills afforded by mentoring. It will be useful to reflect on what has been gained through mentoring and to try to capture similar benefits for further professional development. Shortage of time will often be cited as a reason not to meet with someone for professional support. It is worth considering whether the benefits, to both mentor and mentee, can outweigh the costs in time.

### **A note about confidentiality**

Although normally mentoring is a confidential activity, there may be specific circumstances in which a mentor is expected to report to the employer. For example, mentors may be required to confirm that meetings have taken place although they do not divulge the content of those meetings. Mentors and mentees should check these arrangements with the scheme organisers in their institution. For users at the University of Birmingham, the following website link provides more information: [www.sdu.bham.ac.uk/courses/profdetails.htm#Effective%20Mentoring%](http://www.sdu.bham.ac.uk/courses/profdetails.htm#Effective%20Mentoring%).

## Mentoring at a distance

Although most mentoring takes place face-to-face, meetings may be complemented by telephone, email or other technological contact. There are also situations where face-to-face mentoring is not possible or desirable and email or the internet is used. For a review of the research on effectiveness of 'telementoring', see the following article:

Single, P.B. and Single, R.M. (2005). E-mentoring for social equity: a review of research to inform program development. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 13(2), 301–20.

It would be interesting to have people's reactions to both face-to-face and e-mentoring. Let us have your comments and contributions (see the link on the ProDAIT website at <http://portal.cetadl.bham.ac.uk/PRODAIT/default.aspx>).

## Guidance on references

Barkham (2005) is written from the perspective of a new academic, provides some very helpful insights into the processes of mentoring for both mentees and mentors.

Clutterbuck (2004) may be helpful in understanding the structural and organisational aspects of mentoring.

## References

Barkham, J (2005). Reflections and interpretations on life in academia: a mentee speaks. *Mentoring & Tutoring*, 13(3), 331–44. Available at [www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/cmet;jsessionid=2cu90rs6309m8.alice](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/cmet;jsessionid=2cu90rs6309m8.alice)

Clutterbuck, D. (2004). *Everyone needs a mentor*. (4<sup>th</sup> edn) London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.