



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants

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The Importance of Mentoring

The Institute of Chartered Accountants runs a rigorous course called the Graduate Diploma of Chartered Accounting. One of the important requirements of this course is to have a mentor, (preferably not a manager), who, over a period of time, in parallel with the course, assists the student by providing valuable support and advice. The mentoring component of the program has been revamped in recent years to have more structure and accountability to ensure the mentoring is meaningful and actually happens.

Mentoring goes back thousands of years to the passing on of knowledge from generation to generation. In some instances it involved initiation and various other rites amongst native communities. It was also used in the formation of guilds by craftsmen to pass on the secrets of their trade, and the ancient philosophers mentored mentees to question and discuss 'the meaning of life'.

The benefits of mentoring in the current day context are well researched and the benefits flow from the individual being mentored (the mentee), to the mentor and the organisation. Research demonstrates¹ that the following benefits can be expected from a mentoring relationship:

Benefits for mentees:

- Enhanced promotion rates
- Greater competence in their profession or trade
- Increased career satisfaction
- Decreased job stress and role conflict

Benefits for mentors:

- Higher levels of satisfaction
- Career and personal rejuvenation
- Develop a loyal support base
- Pleasure associated with shaping future generations

Benefits for the organisation:

- Decreased staff turnover
- Enhanced engagement with the organisation
- Staff who are mentored tend to be mentors
- Accelerated development of in-house talent

People wanting to develop in their chosen trade or profession can benefit enormously from the support of an excellent mentor. Mentors are used in a variety of ways including: sharing practical experiences, skills and knowledge, to help with solving issues, making decisions, managing or working within teams and in how to communicate effectively with others. Mentors can also help more junior or less experienced staff navigate work politics as well as assisting them to be aware of their values, ethics and attitudes and how this can be integrated into being successful at work. We all know these things are not always easy for people to work out alone so the guidance and support of someone who has many years experience (sometimes in the same field, and sometimes not), provides enormous benefits to the mentee.

Mentoring can be formal or informal, and can run over several years or just three to six months. While some believe that a mentor cannot also be a line manager as they are mostly short term focused, I am open minded about this and invite you to make up your own mind as you read this report.

Being a great mentor

In this report I am going to discuss seven important attributes of an excellent mentor. There are more, (and most of these are mentioned in an excellent book¹ by Johnson and Ridley called 'The Elements of Mentoring') however, I will focus on seven that I believe are crucial.

1. Have a clear intention

The mentoring relationship should be driven by the mentees to suit their individual development needs. To guide this, you need to set intentions on both sides. Ask the mentee to outline clearly what expectations they have of the mentoring relationship and what they would like to get from this relationship. Discuss areas that are unclear. You should also discuss your expectations as well as commitment and confidentiality between the two of you. It is also important that you work out early on if this is really a relationship you can both commit to. Many people are flattered to be asked to be mentors but that is not a reason to say yes – you have limited time and energy so you need to ensure that you are devoting it somewhere that you are truly willing to make a difference.

You could enter into an agreement with the mentee to have a trial for say 3 months and then continue by mutual agreement. It is important that you are both committed and schedule the time needed (say, 60-90 minutes every 4-6 weeks). Also allow for times for phone calls to discuss issues that arise between meetings.

2. Know the person

Get to know your mentee and share some things about yourself, too. I don't mean you have to socialise with them, however, get to know them as a person. Learn about their family life, their values, their passions and their style of communication. What you learn will be clues for how you can best support them.

In my work as a coach/mentor one thing I do is to seek out the 'real work' of the mentoring relationship. For example, someone might be struggling with confidence, although it may not be something that they themselves highlight or say. In this example, the response as a mentor is to listen to what is being said - and what is not being said - and then put forward your observation of what might need to be worked on and how you can support them in that. It's important to communicate your considered observations, (not your assumptions and opinions based on your standards), and get agreement with your mentee on the areas to work on. Most people appreciate someone highlighting a strength they haven't seen in themselves, or suggesting an area of development they may not have been aware of. But remember, mentoring is not about creating a 'mini me' – it's about supporting people to be the best they can be using their own strengths and abilities. The assumption of a mentor is 'How can I support you' – not 'what advice can I give to fix you'.

3. Listen and then listen some more

Nathan Buckley, (a recently retired AFL football champion), wrote that his journey as a leader changed significantly (for the better) when a young player had the courage to say to Buckley that he was not listening but rather thinking of the next thing to say. Most people in an honest moment will admit to this. It's important to teach yourself to be in the present moment and be aware of what is going on so your mentee can feel they are the centre of your attention for the time you spend together. To have someone giving their undivided attention to your issues, successes and problems is very special. You can be that generous person. If you find your mind drifting, or you start looking for solutions for them, let go of your thoughts and come back to the present.

4. C.A.R.E.

This is an acronym I use which reads "Challenge Another to Reach Excellence". In this regard never accept work that is not up to standard. I recall a manager in a professional service firm saying to a mentee – "Sue your work is not up to standard for this firm. While we want you to be here there is no future if you deliver work like this. I know you can do better". Sue made the choice to "knuckle down" and is now a valuable member of their firm. It did take a firm stand to get some change. The alternative is to let the person go or to suffer low quality work. Both alternatives are costly so explore ways of fixing the issue. The earlier the mentee learns that only high standards are acceptable (not to be confused with perfection) the easier it will be for them to integrate this into their work habits.

5. Positive regard

Sometimes giving your mentee tips and information is just not enough. Sometimes what they need is some old fashioned unconditional positive regard. And yes sometimes if this does not come naturally to you then fake it until you make it. Eventually it will be second nature. It can sometimes be daunting to move forward without being acknowledged for what is going well along the way. Take notice of what is going well for your mentee and let them know. You might say something like:

“Liz, I really think you are suited to your role as an operations manager. The feedback from the clients and your team is overwhelmingly positive. They like the way you are always interested in helping them solve their issues. I am so pleased you have decided to take this role”.

6. Encourage Development

Stretch your mentee to develop beyond the scope of their day to day job. You may encourage them to work overseas for a time to broaden their horizons or suggest they be involved (not just at the fringes) with some groups outside the workplace. This may be with community groups, sporting clubs or their professional associations. Involvement in these groups will round out their development as future leaders.

7. Create a harm free zone

Never ever abuse the relationship with your mentee. Your mentee needs to be able to trust that anything he or she says is confidential and won't be used against them or to benefit the mentor. Set up the ground rules for trust and confidentiality in your first meeting.

Next step

There is a large body of evidence now for the benefits of mentoring for individuals, mentors themselves and for organisations. As mentoring clearly provides a win/win for all here are some strategic questions you could use to review mentoring in your organisation:

- What are you doing about mentoring in your organisation or team?
- Should you be more intentional about your mentoring approach?
- If you are mentoring some of your team (or others), how can you incorporate the attributes discussed for improving your effectiveness as a mentor?

Discuss the above attributes with your colleagues and mentees to gather more insights. Start or continue to make mentoring an important part of the culture of your organisation and see the benefits for yourself.

"Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction". John C. Crosby

1. The Elements of Mentoring – W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley

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