

## **How2 be a mentor to a new employee.**

### ***Introduction***

We're all pretty clear nowadays that mentoring is a good thing. The overheads of recruiting good people in the war for talent can be crippling; all that white space above the learning curve is extra cost in the first year; and once they're up and running you know that your best-performing employee can be two, three, or five times more valuable to the organisation than the average. Mentoring is attractive to candidates, accelerates learning and enhances performance levels. That's a great return.

But successful mentoring doesn't just happen. It does need attention.

Two areas you can pay attention to in order to ensure you get the great return and not a costly mess are:

- 1 the design of the mentoring scheme
- 2 the performance of the mentors

I'm not going to discuss the former at any length because it is well covered by other Bytes in this series, and other work in other forums like the Coaching & Mentoring Network. I urge anyone designing and implementing a mentoring scheme to refer to those resources.

This article is about the performance of the mentors. What do you need to do to be a good mentor? To answer this question, I'm going to ask a couple more. This means you will understand the premise behind my answers and - hey! - find ones that suit you better if you don't agree. That's OK with me. First question ...

### **What's it for?**

Steven Covey, as I've mentioned in a previous Byte (and any loyal readers will have to forgive the repetition), says "start with the end in mind". "What is the scheme for?"

We'll treat this question at the organisational level. (There is another question to ask at the individual level which we'll come to in the next section.) What is the scheme intended to achieve? This is a design/implementation question, of course, but it so influences the mentor's approach that the mentor must have their own clear understanding. Here are some possible drivers for putting your scheme in place:

- to smooth the new starter's entry into the organisation - getting to know the ropes; maybe, understanding and entering into the prevailing culture (the legal profession has legendary socialisation processes);

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- to provide a safety net – social support in a potentially stressful situation;
- to accelerate skills development – providing technical or professional knowledge;
- to provide sponsorship – opening doors, influencing amongst management;
- to facilitate development – helping to set direction, providing feedback.

If anything, providing sponsorship is often less explicit, or less emphasised in UK organisations than it is in North America. And the input into development may be shared with the line manager. Nonetheless, most mentoring schemes are a mix of most or all these.

Being clear about these dimensions of the scheme immediately helps identify some key qualities, behaviours and skills of good mentors.

In order to help the mentee learn the ropes, you need to understand how things work yourself. Of course. This means a mentor needs to be reasonably politically astute, to understand something of how power is used in the organisation and where it resides. This is not about being a schemer or playing politics for politics' sake. Politics and power is what makes complex organisations run smoothly. By making these dynamics clearer to the new starter, you are giving them the opportunity to choose how to deal with them. Sometimes they will need to go with them, sometimes against them. One thing is certain: it's not a load of fun bumping into them by mistake.

You need to be *supportive*. This is a big area for mentors and it feeds a lot of the your other mentoring roles. Being supportive to another person means respecting them as an individual. In practice, *active listening* is a powerful way of expressing that respect. It follows that you will treat the mentee's concerns, perspectives and decisions both as *their responsibility* and *legitimate for them*. Your mentee is a different person and they need to make their own choices. If they make choices that are not the choices you would have made, that has to be OK with you. You might provide them with information, but you're not there to run their life, nor to judge how they are running it. You will respect the *confidentiality* of your relationship, and follow through on your own *commitment* to the relationship. This means putting appropriate time aside for meetings, holding them in an appropriate location and following through on actions. Be aware that there may be a power relationship implied by your respective positions in the organisation. You cannot assume that things are "all right" just because a mentee has decided to agree to you deferring their meeting, answering the phone, or whatever else it might be. Sure, you might have to do these things, but take responsibility for them.

If imparting technical or professional knowledge is part of the role, then the mentor should have that knowledge. That said, *being able to point the mentee in the right direction* might be a very reasonable way of working. This might mean knowing who the experts are, where the expertise is, or just having the depth of experience to be able to smell a rat outside of your own specialist expertise. There is actually a risk of having a very high level of knowledge or expertise, in that it becomes difficult to guide the mentee's learning process without taking power and responsibility away. You can easily create a dependency.

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If sponsorship is part of the role then *influencing skills* will be part of the mentor's toolkit, as will a *wide network*. You will need to keep your ears open for opportunities that suit your mentee and (unless this is the line manager's role) to make sure their aspirations are dialled in to the appropriate processes.

Facilitating development is the other big area for many mentors. If this includes supporting the mentee's personal development plan, then you need to be aware of any *competency frameworks* that exist in the company, *appraisal processes*, and *personal development planning* formats. In any case, you need to be able to help the mentee express their personal aspirations, help them translate these into objectives and plans, and finally review progress with them (which is essentially what all PDP processes do). This involves a good understanding of *goal-setting*, the ability to *challenge* the mentee without being judgmental, and the *curiosity* to get beyond the surface of problems or issues they are experiencing. *Asking stimulating questions* is a significant tool for the developmental mentor. Open, non-judgemental questions stimulate enquiry and self-examination and facilitate rapid learning. (Be warned that playing the old game of guess-what-teacher-is-thinking has the opposite effect.)

So by asking what the scheme is for, we have surfaced a number of requirements of the mentor. Here they are again:

- know the ropes;
- understand politics and power;
- be supportive;
- use active listening;
- give the mentee responsibility for their decision-making, and
- respect its legitimacy;
- respect the confidentiality of the relationship;
- follow-through on your commitments;
- be able to point the mentee in the right direction for information and expertise;
- influence and
- maintain a wide network;
- keep up to date with recommended personal development processes;
- understand goal-setting;
- challenge effectively;
- stay curious;
- ask stimulating questions.

That should be enough to persuade you that mentoring can be a serious undertaking, but can also be seriously beneficial to the mentor's development. Remember you are learning too! And this leads me onto my second guiding question ...

## Why are you a mentor?

Maybe you're a mentor because you are simply the person best qualified to be one. I implemented a scheme like that once. Great. Maybe you're a mentor because you're the only person who isn't too busy doing "real work". If that's the attitude of the people around you, you could be in trouble. Though it is a very legitimate role for the "elder statesperson", easing out of operational involvement, but still a very valuable source of wisdom.

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Most likely, you're a mentor because you (more or less) volunteered and you seem to fit the bill. So what do you hope to get out of being a mentor and what does that tell us about how you might want to go about it?

Here are some common benefits of being a mentor:

- recognition – you're good at your job and have a wealth of experience, being able to pass that on is a privilege;
- stimulation – it can be refreshing to see someone learn and develop, to meet challenges which you can help them overcome;
- friendship – the mentoring relationship can be deep and enduring;
- influence – being a mentor can give you a forum, and, through your mentee perhaps, another voice on important matters;
- affirmation - how many times have you seen books dedicated to an important influence in the author's life? And how very flattering it must be.

That sounds great, then.

If, though, you recognise any of these as *primary motivations* for being a mentor, you will need to watch out, because here we are talking about *your needs*. The mentoring relationship inside an organisation is about meeting and matching the needs of the mentee and of the organisation. If you are *primarily* entering into it to meet your own needs, there are going to be problems.

But I'm not meaning to be overly critical here. We're all human and we all have needs. The most effective way of acting consciously and responsibly is to acknowledge and work with those needs. So let's run through the main pitfalls of the "needy mentor" because this tells us something about what makes a good mentor (needy or otherwise).

Every mentor must be constantly alert to the trap of trying to impress the mentee. This might take the form of talking yourself up a bit; a couple of exaggerated "war stories". (We've all done it.) Your experience is a fabulous resource for the mentee. Just tell it how it is. Being a mentor is indeed a special position. *Be humble.*

Helping someone overcome challenges can be stimulating, but do take care not to relive your life through someone else. Being a mentor is not a second chance; an opportunity to put right vicariously what you got wrong in person. It is stimulating to see the world through another's eyes precisely because it's their world. *So don't dabble.*

Mentoring relationships really can be deep and enduring, and tend to be so where the individuals treat each other on an equal footing. You are not owed your mentee's friendship, but you may earn it through giving them the *utmost respect* as individuals.

If you need to extend your influence, don't let it colour your mentoring relationship. Your mentee deserves better than to be made a pawn in other people's lives. Part of your job is to help them stand on their own two feet. Stand on yours and *take responsibility for your own issues.*

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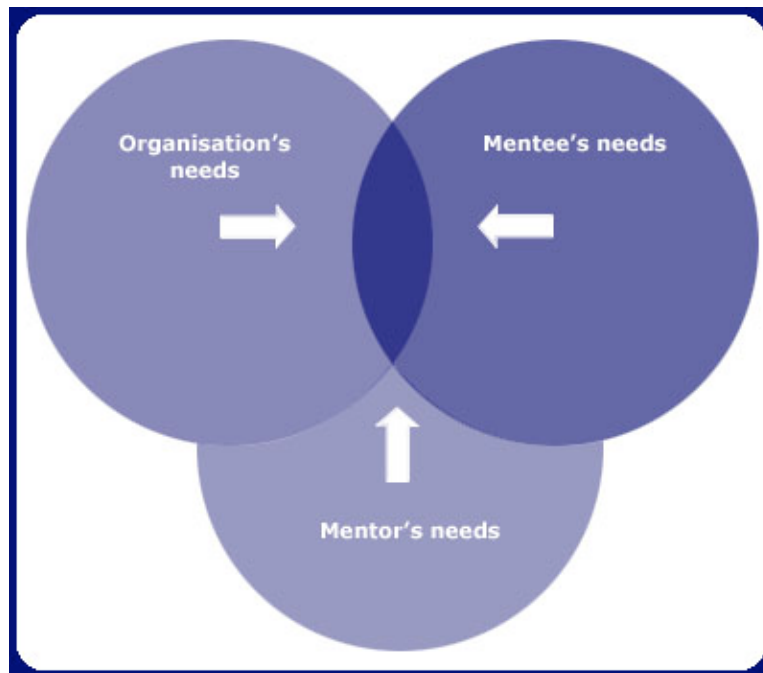
Finally, you can expect common courtesy, but you must earn respect. The most powerful tool in the mentor's toolkit is "positive regard" – the tendency to accept the other as they are. You can be a powerful role model to your mentee, and they will learn to reciprocate in their own way.

So asking why people might want to be a mentor we've added to our list of attributes, habits and skills of the effective mentor:

- be humble;
- don't dabble;
- respect the mentee as an individual;
- take responsibility for your own issues;
- keep a positive regard for the mentee.

## Is that it?

No. Two final thoughts. Firstly, I said earlier that the primary purpose of an internal mentoring scheme was to meet and match the needs of the mentee and of the organisation. We've talked about the needs of the organisation, and of the mentor, because they too have an influence on how the relationship works. The needs of the mentee are unique and I urge you to ask yourself your own questions about what those needs tell you and how you need to respond. In the diagram, below, the closer we are to the shaded area, the better the chances of success.



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Secondly, what I've given you here is an argument for certain ways of being a mentor and of doing mentoring. It is intended to cover the basics and you will find that the list you can distil from it overlaps significantly with other people's lists. It's important to understand that this is a starting point, not an end point.

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Mentoring is complex and uncertain. It changes with the mentor, the mentee and the circumstances. We can't predict those variables. We can't predict exactly what you'll need to do or how you'll need to go about it. So here is my final exhortation to mentors: *reflect on your own performance as a mentor*. Be a learner yourself. You may want some help with this. You could refer to some of the literature or go on a course. The best approach for an in-company scheme may be to develop a reflective practice (keeping a journal is a simple form of this) and to get together with other mentors to learn from each other in some kind of forum or support network. This is about giving yourself the resources you need to do a difficult and important job.

## **Conclusion**

Mentoring is important and beneficial. It may be used to a number of different purposes in organisations and mentors may attain a number of benefits as a result of their contribution. Exploring the needs of the organisation and the needs of the mentors surfaces a number of practical tips on how to be a mentor. My suggestion is that you continue this process. Continue looking at what is happening in the mentoring relationship and continue to identify how to be, and how to be a better mentor.