

Mentoring for Managers

Mentoring is more than just the latest management fad. By becoming skilful mentors, managers can nurture confidence and competence in their staff, and strengthen their own job satisfaction along the way.

As a manager, you may well have benefited from being mentored – having a positive and helpful relationship with a more experienced or senior colleague. Being mentored can boost confidence and enhance expertise, resulting in increased career success. But being a mentor has its advantages too. Managers who mentor experience increased satisfaction and fulfilment, enhanced creativity and professional synergy, career and personal rejuvenation plus recognition by their organisation for developing future talent.

Mentoring is a dynamic, reciprocal, personal relationship in which a more experienced person (mentor) acts as a guide, role model, teacher and sponsor of a less experienced person (mentee). The elements of mentoring are clustered around three themes; what mentors do (matters of skill), their typical traits (matters of style and personality), and arranging the mentor relationship.

What mentors do

Once you've decided to be a mentor, you will probably be wondering what it is you need to do. There are a number of tools available to the mentor, some of which are more important and widely used than others. The vital thing for a mentor to know is how and when to use these tools to get the best results.

Select mentees carefully

Mentors should behave like prudent investors – they must be selective in their choice of mentee. Successful mentors only start mentorships with colleagues who match them well. The investment should pay dividends for both mentor and mentee. Good mentors appreciate the costs of mentoring – it takes time, emotional energy and resources – and they realise that they can't mentor everyone. Mentors generally select mentees who share their interests and have similar career aspirations. Mentorships are, first and foremost, relationships. Those that begin informally are often more effective than those that are formally arranged.

Expect excellence

Mentors should expect more of their mentees than their mentees typically expect of themselves. This raises their expectations and lifts their performance.

Mentors can communicate their expectations for excellence in two ways – by modelling competence and following standards of excellence themselves, and by putting into words their high expectations of their mentees. But mentors should be aware of the difference between high standards and expecting perfection. Demands for flawless performance are destructive and can sabotage the relationship.

Affirm, encourage and support

Mentors can affirm mentees in two ways. They can affirm them as people – the most important type of affirmation as it acknowledges a person’s inherent worth. They can also affirm mentees as professionals – an acknowledgement of their achievements.

Affirming mentors communicate and demonstrate faith in the mentee’s ability and trust in their judgement. A good mentor knows their mentee’s career potential, and is tuned into their mentee’s ambitions. A mentor needs to nurture these ambitions and affirm that they are attainable. Mentors should also take every opportunity to encourage and support their mentee, by speaking a kind word, lifting a mentee’s spirit or being a sounding board when necessary.

Publicise mentee’s successes

Good mentors make their mentee’s successes known and expose them to senior leaders in the organisation. A useful starting point is to collaborate on projects with mentees – give them sub-projects and tasks suited to their talent and experience. This way mentees can gain publicity without incurring risk. As the mentee’s successes grow, the mentor makes them public and looks for other opportunities for their mentee to shine.

Traits of Good Mentors

Although a wide range of personality features can be found among good mentors, there are some qualities that typically contribute to successful mentoring. Mentees, like any other human being, are naturally drawn to mentors who are warm, trustworthy and have good interpersonal skills. Personality traits may be more difficult to adapt and develop than skills, but every mentor can improve and polish their interpersonal approach.

Listen actively

Listening is more than hearing. It is the active attention to two levels of communication; the overt message, the literal or concrete meaning of spoken words, and the covert message, the more subtle or implied meaning. Active listening is a complex and demanding activity of several microskills.

The key listening microskills

- **Good nonverbal responses** – eg, nodding, smiling, maintaining eye contact. Make sure they fit with your verbal responses
- **Verbal prompts** – eg, yes, umhm, tell me more about that
- **Don’t interrupt** – interruptions make people feel that what they have to say is not important
- **Ask for clarity about vague comments.** This shows mentees that they are being taken seriously
- **Reflect what mentees communicate.** Paraphrase or summarise what they are saying – it shows them that they are being understood

Use humour

A mentor with a knack for humour is more likely to be seen as human, approachable and fun to be around. Humour is useful in a mentor relationship as it helps mentees, not to take themselves too seriously. If a mentor can use humour and make light of themselves, it reminds mentees that their next project or an impending report is not a matter of life or death. But be careful not to use humour to belittle a mentee or trivialise important matters. And some people are more receptive to humour than others. As a mentor, you should be aware of how well your mentee responds to humour, and act accordingly.

Notice interpersonal signals

Given a choice, most mentees would prefer a mentor with emotional intelligence to one who has powerful intellect. Some distinct skills characterise emotionally intelligent mentors;

- **Self awareness** – they understand their own moods and emotions and how these affect others
- **Self control** – good mentors do not allow disappointment to drive them to depression, or frustration to lead them to anger or rage
- **An ability to tune in to the emotional make-up of others** – they read verbal and non-verbal signs
- **A proficiency in building social networks** – they can find common ground and build rapport with mentees, colleagues and superiors alike.

Arranging the Mentor Relationship

The all-important process of forging a mentorship should begin with the selection of a mentee.

Successful mentors choose mentees they can be reasonably certain of effectively mentoring. Mentors and mentees who are well matched on important personal and professional dimensions – such as personality, social skills, communication style, values and goals – form stronger, longer-lasting and more beneficial relationships. So it's worth spending some time getting to know prospective mentees before committing to the mentorship.

Mentorships need to be well structured. Mentees must be given clear expectations, boundaries must be established and both parties must appreciate the potential risks and benefits of entering into the relationship. From the outset, good mentors plan for development, change and even the end of a mentorship. They must take responsibility for the constant evaluation of the relationship, and plan for the increasing independence of their mentee. Mentors must prepare their mentee for the end of the formal mentorship, by talking about it and celebrating the mentee's enhanced confidence and competence.