

What is
mentoring?

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There are many definitions, from the very brief 'a learning relationship', to 'helping people to take charge of their own development, release their potential and achieve results that they value' and 'helping someone become better at helping themselves'. Mentors may have several roles, including sounding board, critical friend, facilitator, networker, coach and role model. Each mentoring relationship is different. Some are intense and last over time, whereas others are brief, and related to a specific situation.

Why use a mentor?

Mentoring is particularly useful at times of change, such as when settling into a new post or taking on a new role. It provides an informal and confidential environment where opportunities, dilemmas and problems can be addressed. A mentor might challenge your assumptions, or be a sounding board, with whom you can discuss new ideas. Typical topic areas discussed in mentoring relationships include organising one's work and building a team, influencing, working with a challenging colleague or handling a difficult situation, or making a career decision and future personal and professional development.

What does a mentor do?

Mentoring is useful for handling situations that different people would deal with in different ways, depending on their own preferences, abilities and resources.

The mentor supports the mentee in reviewing the problem or opportunity he or she is facing and in deciding on how to handle the situation. The mentor provides a 'map', a framework which the mentor and mentee use to guide their discussions. The mentor facilitates the mentee in exploring the situation, gathering information and gaining insight into a situation, reaching a decision and taking action. The mentor's skills are in listening carefully to everything the mentee says, empathically challenging blind spots, helping the mentee to develop a wider perspective about the matter in question, to set goals, develop strategies to achieve these and to decide on a plan of action.

Although the mentor might share his or her experiences and offer suggestions, it is the mentee who decides what is really going on and on the best course of action. The solutions we find for ourselves are much more likely to work than ideas suggested by others – the mentee knows best, not the mentor. So the mentor is a facilitator or enabler for the mentee, rather than a puzzle solver.

This contrasts with much of our clinical work, in which we give opinions and information to patients and colleagues who may benefit from our expertise. We do this by gathering and analysing information, sorting out what is relevant so that we reach the right diagnosis. In general we are seen as experts who are likely to know best. Although the working relationship with the patient is important, the focus of the conversation is about solving a puzzle, gathering the facts and evidence and then outlining options.

Mentoring is not about offering advice and sharing our experiences. It's about helping someone else become more

effective at developing their opportunities and resources, and managing their problems, helping them to become better at helping themselves.

Good mentors work in different ways. They might act as a sounding board to try out new ideas, or a challenging friend, helping someone see the difficulties a course of action might present. They might help with networking or coach someone preparing for an event.

Who are the mentors?

The mentors have all attended a 4-6 day training course, based on Gerard Egan's 'Skilled helper' model. We all use mentors in our own work and lives. Mentoring is much more likely to be successful if the person doing it is trained. He or she must have good listening skills, and be able to clarify, probe and challenge in a supportive way. The mentor must have a genuine interest in being a mentor, and work within an ethical framework, demonstrating respect, empathy and genuineness to the mentee and maintaining appropriate confidentiality. In managing change effectively, a mentor needs to help the mentee develop possibilities, to identify and test commitment to appropriate goals, to develop strategies and plans to achieve these goals. We hope that we offer at least some of these skills.

What is expected of a mentee?

For mentoring to be successful, the mentee must want a mentor and have realistic expectations of the interaction. People get most from mentoring if they are strategic about their own development and willing to experiment with different ways of thinking about problems and opportunities. For this to work, the mentee must be willing to share his or her thoughts and feelings with the mentor and to be open and honest about their own preferences and abilities. But this does not mean that mentoring only works for high flyers and for big strategic issues. It is just as useful for thinking about handling a difficult conversation, about managing a team or about being more assertive, as it is for mapping out a future career direction.

The mentee might just want to talk through a dilemma to understand it better and decide whether anything needs to be done or not. Alternatively, he or she may want to think about what solutions would make sense and what he or she wants from a situation. Then again, the mentee may want to think about different ways in which he or she might deal with a situation, to decide which would be most likely to be successful and to make a plan.

How do I decide whether mentoring is for me?

The only real way is to give it a go. Use a 'taster' session to discuss a dilemma or opportunity that you are currently considering, and see whether you find the experience valuable. Remember that the GMC now advise us to use mentoring conversations at times of change in our careers.

Have a go and find out what it's about!!

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