

## **HARNESSING THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP**

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According to Steven Spielberg, “The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves”. While this is the ideal outcome, in many instances this relationship is misunderstood, leading to an inappropriate or detrimental conclusion. Mentoring should be a positive process that focusses on strengths and passion.

What then constitutes an appropriate, beneficial mentorship relationship? “From a mentor’s perspective, s/he should be aiming for wisdom continuity. Creating in someone else a greater understanding of their job and its responsibilities, and providing other people with the benefits of their experience should have a positive impact,” says Gizelle McIntyre, Director of The Institute of People Development (IPD). “Too often people try to be irreplaceable, leaving the company and themselves poorer when they leave.” For the mentor, the relationship should highlight a sense of pride in the lessons learnt, sharing more than mere technical expertise, but workplace and life experience too. Reflecting and interrogating your own experiences to inform and advise someone else has its own reward.

From the mentee’s perspective, the benefit of mentorship should be gaining experience. Although technical expertise is transferred through coaching by team leaders, peers or formal training, this simply isn’t enough. “What makes the world tick is; why, when and to whom? Mentorship is about learning how to play the game of chess, not what the pawns do. Through this relationship, the mentee gains an understanding of the organisational culture, learns lessons from others that assist in everyday productivity and is given insight into the finer ‘unwritten rules’ within the company,” confirms McIntyre. For this relationship to begin, the mentee must ask for assistance; “there may be brilliant mentors available, but if advice is not asked for it cannot be given”.

Mentorship certainly extends past the workplace, and different types of mentors will be called on for advice depending on the mentee’s needs. “From boardroom games to relationship issues, various mentorship relationships can be entered into. The depth and duration of the mentorship depends on the advice needed.” Although friends can be mentors, McIntyre believes that certain situations call for mentors that are willing to be tough, to explain why it is *not* a good idea to take the life-changing promotion, and can have the difficult conversations (as opposed to always giving supportive feedback).

To ensure that a mentorship relationship achieves its goals, it is essential to recognise mentorship as a form of contract. According to McIntyre; “There must be an underlying

structure to avoid abuse of the relationship by either party. Mentoring is not a friendship, it is a finite relationship; it only exists for as long as the need exists". To avoid any confusion, strict timelines and guidelines should be established at the onset; don't blur the lines with additional issues – mentor with a view to providing the initial advice sought and, once this is done, end the relationship.

The mentorship role comes with an implicit, essential ethical obligation and confidentiality is paramount. "A mentor provides advice; it is up to the mentee whether the advice is implemented or not. A mentor shouldn't divulge the mentee's queries or the advice given to any third party," says McIntyre. "In the same vein, a mentor should guide the conversation and end the relationship if the mentee begins sharing information that is not relevant or that should not be discussed – don't let the relationship continue as this will lead to an overstepping of boundaries. Remember that a mentor is neither a therapist, nor the mentee's security blanket."

When entering into a mentorship relationship, there are certain pitfalls to avoid. These include avoiding: complicated cross-gender relationships; mentoring two people that are in competition with one another; extreme age differences, as these can lead to generational misinterpretation; publicising the relationship, this will lead to biased feedback; and agreeing to take on a mentee when the mentor doesn't have the time available to manage the relationship effectively.

"The characteristics of a good mentor include an openness to learn themselves; this isn't a one way relationship, the mentor should understand the advantages of continuous learning and allow themselves to learn from the mentee's experiences as well," concludes McIntyre. "A good mentor will also have: been trained to be a mentor; a high level of self-awareness and self-knowledge; knowledge to impart while being confident in his/her experiences; and a good sense of ethics. The best mentors know that sometimes they are *not* the right person for the job and are able to express this honestly and tactfully".

**- ENDS -**

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**Boilerplate:**

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