
The art of mentoring

Mike Pegg

The author

Mike Pegg is MD of Pacesetters, Bishopswood, Herefordshire, UK

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Abstract

How can you be a good mentor? How can you pass on your wisdom? How can you help people to find their answers to challenges? Mentoring now plays a key role in organisations that wish to pass on their hard earned wisdom. But how to ensure that such an approach works? This article explores issues you may wish to consider when: selecting mentors; defining the role of mentors; and running a mentoring session. The article also illustrates the classic "Five C" model for helping people to focus on their challenges; choices; consequences; creative solutions; and conclusions. Good mentors create a "stimulating sanctuary". They help people to build on their strengths, find solutions and achieve ongoing success. This article gives a snapshot of key elements to bear in mind when introducing mentoring into your organisation.

MENTOR WANTED

- Must be both warm and wise
- Must be able to both gain credibility and make people feel comfortable
- Must be able to be challenging and also guide people to finding creative solutions
- Must be both sage-like and street-wise
- Must be able to create a demand for their services as a mentor

You are unlikely to see this advert when visiting the Job Centre or reading *The Sunday Times*. So how do you gain credibility as a mentor? How do you distinguish between the different roles played by a mentor? How do you run an actual mentoring session?

Mentoring now plays a key role in organisations that wish to pass on their hard earned wisdom. But how to ensure that such an approach works? This article explores issues you may wish to bear in mind when:

- selecting mentors;
- defining the role of mentors; and
- running a mentoring session.

Let's start by exploring the first quality demonstrated by superb mentors.

Mentors have credibility

Mentors start by gaining respect. How? Different people adopt different methods of establishing authority. Sir John Harvey-Jones, for example, won admiration for his leadership at ICI. Executives were then delighted to be filmed taking his advice in the BBC TV series *Troubleshooter*. Here are some ways that individuals earn credibility.

Through age

Grey hair equals wisdom. Mentors find it helps to be older than the mentee, perhaps because we all grew up wanting to respect our parents and teachers. George Mead's writing on "Significant Others" shows how we seek models to admire. Age also brings accountability. Certainly I got a shock when, aged 40, I ran a workshop for the Directors of a high tech company. Suddenly realising I was the oldest person in the room, I felt increased responsibility for the ideas I was sharing.

Through books

Authors gain respect by publishing books. "Consultants are ten-a-penny." said one Managing Director. "My board will only

listen to people who take the trouble to package their know-how.” Rosebeth Moss-Kanter and Tom Peters, for example, have reached business leaders by publishing best-sellers. Not everybody can sell a million copies, but putting a book on the table is more impressive than mass-mailing a brochure.

Through success

“Football is a results business,” said one club manager. “Discussing football problems, I take advice from managers who have won trophies. Everybody has opinions, especially about who to pick in the team. I only listen to people with a track record of winning championships.”

A similar rule applies in most fields. Famous hoteliers, film directors and scientists, for example, start with an advantage when opening their mouths. A word of warning. Brilliant practitioners seldom make great teachers. Many have employed their natural talent to reach the top. Sometimes they get impatient with students, stating: “Look, it’s so obvious, just do it.” Stars can find it difficult to share their knowledge. Past glories buy them time, however, as admirers are awe-struck in the presence of greatness.

Through street-wisdom

Sally was 28 years old when she became the youngest board member in a travel company. She took the alternative route – rather than the academic route – to success. Leaving college with few paper qualifications, she spent three years as a holiday rep in the Mediterranean. Gaining rave reports from customers and colleagues, she returned to take a sales job at head office in London. Top sales performer for three successive years, she then moved into Human Resources and transformed the sleepy outpost. Sally is now sought out by rising stars. She is seen as street-wise and knowing her way around the system.

Through chemistry

“Dave is the only outside adviser we employ,” said the MD of a leading-edge company. “Why? Two reasons. First: He immediately ‘got it’ when I walked him around the building. The chemistry was right and he quickly understood our culture. Second: He had the courage to stand-up to my senior

team, who eat consultants for breakfast. Continuity is vital in our culture. Dave spends half a day with every new manager. Acting as a confidential outsider, he explains the ‘rules’ for achieving success in our company. Why? Directors must not abdicate responsibility, but newcomers welcome the chance to talk with someone impartial. Dave has helped us to retain five talented managers who might have walked to our competitors in Silicon Valley.”

Through being a truth-teller

Managing Directors are frequently fed a censored picture of reality. Colleagues speak in “code”. Pausing for a moment, they alter their language to be diplomatic, or to obscure, what is really taking place in the business. Mentors gain respect by giving an honest picture. Truth-tellers must be tough yet tactful, because the first reaction to bad news may be denial. The art is to communicate in a way that enables people: to see what is happening and to see positive solutions. Reality checks provide the foundation for achieving success. Every MD needs a “truth-teller”. Who plays this role in your business?

Through expertise

Credibility comes through establishing authority in a specific subject, be it architecture, creativity, dancing, education or whatever. What is your niche? One marketing company, for example, hires an actress to coach its presenters in voice technique. She is savvy enough to stick to her specialty, however, and avoids wandering into giving opinions about the company’s financial strategy. Choose an exhilarating vocation and become an expert in that particular field.

Through presence

Mother Teresa transmitted this quality. Wrapping you in her spell, she made you feel special. Presence does not call for jumping around a stage giving inspiring speeches. Derek, a Human Resources Director, has an almost Zen-like authority. His diary is packed with meetings staff invite him to attend. Why? Caring and calm, Derek creates a sanctuary where people feel they can open their hearts and minds.

Mentors play many roles

Good organisations clarify the mentor's role. They define what the mentor should do and what the mentor shouldn't do. Clarity is vital, because otherwise mentees can get confused. Mentors come in all shapes and sizes. They also play different roles. You often hear a footballer, actor or business leader, for example, describe somebody they met in the past by saying: "They acted as a mentor for me." So what's the difference between, mentoring, leading, modelling, coaching, teaching, advising and counselling? Let's explore some of these different approaches.

Classic mentors

Mentors are "wise and trusted advisors". They have credibility and are willing to pass on their wisdom. Giving an overview of the jungle, they outline the roads people can follow towards achieving their picture of perfection. Sage-like and street-wise, they share their knowledge in a way that helps people to take greater control of their lives.

Leaders

Leaders are people who inspire us to do our best. They come in all shapes or sizes. Wartime heroes, for example, do not always succeed during peace. Great leaders reach the heart as well as the head. They encourage us to focus on certain values, pursue a clear vision and deliver visible results. Robert Greenleaf's writing on Servant Leadership offers an insight into the qualities that can bridge the gap between leadership and mentoring.

Models

Models are people that we admire. They provide examples that we may wish to copy and emulate. Teachers, for instance, can have a profound impact on us if they are inspiring and bring their subject to life. Sometimes we find ourselves talking, dressing or acting like them in our own lives. Positive models at work, for example, teach us about "the things you must do to be successful around here."

Coaches

Coaches work with people on a daily basis. They educate them to upgrade their skills as, for example, a footballer, engineer or therapist. Good coaches often take three steps:

- (1) They encourage people to build on their strengths.
- (2) They equip people to tackle areas for improvement.
- (3) They enable people to achieve ongoing success.

Good coaches recognise that people have different learning styles. Before communicating knowledge, they ask themselves: "How can I put this message in a way the person can accept?"

Teachers

Great teachers share their knowledge and make learning enjoyable and effective. They focus on the Three I's: Inspiration, Implementation and Integration. First: They inspire people to want to learn. Second: They provide implementation tools that work. Third: They help people to integrate the learning into their daily lives. We never forget a great teacher.

Advisers

Advisers are people we seek out to obtain specialist knowledge. Mentors can move into the role of providing advice, but everything must be above board. Why? They are changing the rules of engagement. Positioning what they are about to say, for example, they can state: "If it is okay with you, I am now going to step out of my role and just give you a straight piece of advice." Mentees can then apply the same judgement criteria as with any professional advisor. Mentors must not "slip into" giving advice without first making clear contracts with the person on the receiving end.

Counsellors

Counsellors meet people who want to solve a problem they are experiencing in their personal or professional lives. The classic method is to create a warm climate, practice listening skills and be non-directive. Providing the counsellor acts as a good "third ear", the person is often able to find their own answers to problems.

"Buddies"

The "Buddy system" is used by some organisations. Experienced staff members are assigned to new employees to "show them the ropes." Much depends on the quality of the Buddy. "Old hands" can teach the newcomer

to be positive or negative, to develop good habits or bad habits. Buddies are sometimes called Mentors, but they are mainly concerned with helping the newcomer to feel at home.

Mentors may switch between the various roles. Is this okay? Yes, but with one proviso. Clear contracting is crucial, so you may say: "If it is okay with you, I am now going to step into a different role." The mentee must be clear on what role you are playing at different times in your relationship.

Clear contracting is the basis for healthy transactions. Confused contracting leads to painful problems. Mentors in one hotel chain, for example, were "instructed" to deliver tough messages to poor performers. Three errors were set in train:

- (1) The mentors' position was abused.
- (2) The mentees lost confidence in the hotel chain.
- (3) The line managers, who lacked courage to communicate tough messages, were let off the hook.

Mentors must set clear parameters with their sponsors. They must agree what they are prepared to do in the role and what they are not prepared to do in their role. Clear contracting provides the platform for achieving success. Make sure that mentors know what they can and cannot do in your organisation.

Bearing all these things in mind: How can you be a good mentor? How can you pass on your wisdom? How can you help people to find their answers to challenges? There are many models for running a mentoring session. The following pages show one which has proved successful in many organisations.

Mentoring in action

Great mentors help people to take more control of their lives and find their own way to fulfillment. What happens in a mentoring session? The remainder of this article provides a snapshot of one meeting which followed the classic "five C" model (see Figure 1). It shows how to run a structured session that helps somebody to focus on their:

- (1) challenges;
- (2) choices;
- (3) consequences;
- (4) creative solutions; and
- (5) conclusions.

Figure 1 The mentoring model



You can, of course, follow the route in your own way.

Stephen enjoyed a job few of us would envy. He was the Director of an Assessment Centre for the "criminally insane." Pressure from politicians called for him making daily decisions about life or death: "My job is to decide whether murderers, rapists and others can be released back into the community," he said. "If we get the judgement right, nobody knows about our efforts. If we get the judgement wrong, the newspapers call for my head."

Decision day loomed for Stephen. Two years previously he had been head-hunted to lead the Assessment Centre at a notorious Special Hospital for violent criminals. He now faced several problems. Firstly, the boss who recruited him had promised complete autonomy, but she had now left. Political forces had taken over. The Government was "advising" Stephen to make the right "political decisions" before the General Election, saying: "Dangerous people should not be released onto the streets." Secondly, His diary was filled with Whitehall meetings dominated by bureaucratic infighting. Stephen had little time left to devote to his patients and do the work he loved. How to find answers to these issues?

Challenges

"Can you fax me the topics you would like to discuss," I asked Stephen a week before our meeting. Within 24 hours he sent the following list:

- How to use my talents to make my best contribution to society?
- How to manage political pressure?
- How to regain satisfaction in my work?

Meeting at a hotel near Heathrow, we began the three hour session by finalising the agenda. Where did he want to start? Stephen opted to tackle his top challenge.

"How can I make my best contribution to society?" he asked. "If we solve that problem, everything else will fall into place. Money is nice, but I want to feel alive in my work, not half-dead."

Choices

Drawing on the flip-chart, Stephen outlined the five possible options he had been considering:

- (1) Remain in his job as head of the Assessment Centre.
- (2) Get a similar job in another Special Hospital for the criminally insane.
- (3) Become a consultant.
- (4) Take early retirement.
- (5) Do something completely different.

"Strange as it may sound, I like working with the patients," he said. "Maybe I'm mad, but I feel it is a job that benefits the community. Patients are often easier to manage than the bureaucrats and politicians."

Consequences

Stephen and I then explored the pluses and minuses of the possible options. For example:

Option A

Staying in his role as head of the Assessment Centre.

Pluses. Contributing to society; working alongside dedicated colleagues; excellent money; tempting pension.

Minuses. Government interference; endless meetings; loss of integrity.

Thirty minutes were spent highlighting the consequences of pursuing the five routes. Stephen then moved on to the next step.

Creative solutions

Good mentors are fine listeners, but sometimes they must step beyond the role of being a "third ear". Mentees are hungry to explore new ideas for achieving their picture of perfection, which is where mentors earn their corn.

"Peak performers build on their strengths: so what do you do best?" I asked Stephen. "When creating fine work, for example, they balance apparent contradictions. They see both the big picture and the small details. Do you ever juggle such paradoxes? Re-visiting

our positive history can provide the key to finding future fulfillment. What successful projects have you completed in the past?"

"I am an entrepreneurial psychiatrist," said Stephen. "Encouraging people is my vocation, but I also like to make a 'profit'. My talent lies in finding money to provide niche services. Ten years ago I started a Counselling Service for companies. Seven days a week we provided telephone and face-to-face counselling for employees facing problems.

Autonomy is in my blood, however, rather than taking orders from bureaucrats."

Stephen did not shout "Eureka!", but he quickly saw another creative road. He could set-up a company supplying the Government with outside assessment services for the criminally insane. The pluses: doing work he loved; picking a team of professionals; building a business that served society. The minuses: financial risk, but this could be minimised; dealing with key Government players, but this could also be managed. Accepting the whole package, he said: "Let's do it."

Conclusions

Feeling a sense of urgency, Stephen began writing his business plan. Starting from his destination and working backwards, he created the following picture of his goals.

In two years time I intend:

- To have contracts that bring in £500,000 per year.
- To supply Assessment Services to three major Special Hospitals.
- To have a team of five excellent professionals who can market, sell and deliver Assessment Services.
- To have a full financial back-up plan, including insurance covering professional litigation, that provides security against potential hazards.
- To have written three articles that have been accepted by respected medical journals. Publishing will help to establish our credibility.

Two years was a long time: so what must he begin doing tomorrow? Stephen compiled a list that included:

- making a clear contract with his employers;

- contacting potential customers in other special hospitals; and
- selling the benefits of an outside assessment service to the Government.

One year has passed since meeting Stephen, who fought to overcome some initial resistance. Government service proved tougher to leave than anticipated. Bribed with an increased salary, he negotiated a phased withdrawal and six months later started his own business. Annual contracts have been agreed for supplying assessment services to two special hospitals. Determining the future of dangerous people, he is making an invaluable contribution to our society. Feeling alive,

he is now making full use of his talents. Stephen is developing through tackling the next fulfilling challenge in his career.

Good mentors create a “stimulating sanctuary”. They help people to build on their strengths, find solutions and achieve ongoing success. The “five C” model provides a useful starting point for people embarking on mentoring training, but every person must then adapt it to fit their own personality. This article has given a snapshot of some elements to bear in mind when introducing mentoring into an organisation. Take the ideas you like best and use them to pass on your wisdom to future generations.