

Top Tips

Mentoring

What is mentoring?

The best way to learn how to do a job is to do it, but when a person is new to a position this is not always a satisfactory answer. They may need a mentor, or an experienced person to guide them. Mentoring is not an activity but a long term relationship, which may be defined as:

'The process of developing and nurturing an additional confidential relationship to assist an individual to reach his or her goals.'

A mentor is not a trainer, counsellor, or manager, although there may be some elements of all these roles present. A mentor is a person who can listen to concerns, and provide support and challenge when needed, in a 'safe' and confidential environment. Although it is not always necessary, a mentor will usually be more senior in status and more experienced than the person they are mentoring.

What is mentoring not?

About being a manager

The relationship does not replace or undermine the line manager; it is an additional and very different role. For this reason, a manager should never act as mentor to one of his/her own team. Similarly, it would be inappropriate to ask your manager's manager to act as mentor to you.

Example: A team leader wants to avoid the situation above, so asks a manager from a different part of the business to act as a mentor.

About being a 'buddy'

Similarly the person often appointed as a 'buddy' to a new starter is unlikely to make an effective mentor. A 'buddy' is more about being a companion for a new starter's first few days or weeks, and being available for the trivial and mundane questions about the new job or workplace.

About encouraging a 'teacher's pet'

The relationship is not about using personal power or influence to forward a person's career, nor an opportunity to create a 'teacher's pet' situation; both the mentor and mentee must avoid this.

Benefits of mentoring

For the mentor

- **A new network** – of people at a different level with whom they would not otherwise make contact
- **A new perspective** – while discussing business, the mentor will find their opinion challenged which may lead to re-evaluating their beliefs
- **Improved influencing skills** – mentoring provides an opportunity to influence a new generation of managers
- **A development opportunity** – a chance to practise new skills

For the mentee

- **Better and quicker understanding** – of the strategic direction of the business and the reasons behind it
- **Increased self-confidence** – a chance to develop clarity of thinking
- **Better career management** – support, advice, and an opportunity for informal consultation
- **Improved management and coaching skills** – an opportunity to receive feedback from a different perspective
- **A source of challenge** – on their opportunities, problems, strengths, and weaknesses
- **Help and support** – guidance with their career

Before you start as a mentor

Before you take on the responsibility of acting as a mentor, think of the person who you are considering mentoring and ask yourself:

- Do you feel comfortable with them as a person?
- Do you have, or can you gain, their respect and trust?
- Can you get the person involved in work that will stretch him/her?
- Can you give them honest and constructive feedback?
- Can you challenge and question their ideas and opinions?
- Will your existing relationship, if any, interfere with your mentoring relationship?
- Do you know enough of what they need to know about the business?

Roles of the mentor

Your roles as a mentor involves using your influence appropriately to:

- Seek opportunities for high profile activities for the mentee
- Suspend judgement and listen without prejudice
- Represent the person's concerns to others
- Act as a sounding board for their ideas
- Clear away barriers and obstacles, open doors
- Help expand the person's network of contacts
- Focus mainly on future capability and potential rather than the present

Building a relationship as a mentor

If you are to build a successful relationship as a mentor, you will need to:

- Maintain confidentiality
- Gain respect and build confidence and trust
- Encourage the exchange of information
- Listen to the person's career ambitions and concerns
- Help them understand their formal and informal development needs
- Help set objectives and plan strategies for achieving their goals
- Listen to, question, and challenge thoughts, ideas, and opinions
- Give honest and constructive feedback
- Set time aside for meetings and other activities
- Act as a role model for professional behaviour

Before you start as a mentee

Remember, when you are being mentored the relationship is primarily for your benefit! With this in mind, think of the person who you are considering asking to act as mentor and ask yourself:

- Do you feel comfortable with them as a person?
- Do you respect and trust them as a colleague and as a person?
- Are they the best person to provide what you need?
- Can they get you involved in work that will stretch and develop you?
- Can you be completely open with them?
- Are you prepared to have your values and opinions questioned?
- Will this conflict with your existing relationship, if any?

Building a relationship as a mentee

If you are to build a successful relationship, you will need to:

- Be clear what you want from the relationship
- Define and agree the parameters of the relationship, eg:
 - What will and won't you talk about?
 - How often will you meet, and will it be in or out of work?
- Arrange the meetings and define, agree, and manage the agenda
- Maintain confidentiality
- Be open; your mentor cannot help you if you remain guarded
- Be prepared to be challenged and stretched, and to receive feedback

For related topics see Top Tips:

- **Development Methods**
- **Feedback**