What Do We Want From A Mentoring Relationship?

Mentoring partners often seek some guidelines for their relationship. Agreeing ground rules from the outset is the best way to prevent problems later. The following principles have been developed with input from people in Australian mentoring programs.

The aim of mentoring is to facilitate self-development; it is a vehicle for self-directed learning. The mentor is a resource and a support as the individual moves toward their own aspirations.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Mentoring partners should agree that their conversations remain confidential. So the mentor becomes a confidante, someone who is trusted enough to share dreams, aspirations and issues with.

Review University policies relating to Privacy or talk to HR staff to clarify your responsibilities. In Australia, we are required by law to report incidents of harassment or other unlawful behaviour.

COMMITMENT AND ACCESSIBILITY
When, where and how each partner may be contacted needs to be negotiated. Time should be scheduled and agreements respected. Each partner’s commitment means the mentoring relationship is given a high priority.

The mentee should take responsibility for driving the relationship and organising meetings. Reschedule meetings only when it is absolutely unavoidable. The mentee should expect to implement planned actions in between mentoring conversations.

NEEDS AND GOALS
The mentee’s needs and goals drive the mentoring relationship and shape the nature and direction of the mentoring.

The mentor assists their partner to identify meaningful mentoring goals and formulate plans to achieve them. The mentor then provides encouragement and support as the mentee implements actions as shown in the diagram below.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“How are you doing?”</td>
<td>“Where are you now?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing</td>
<td>Clarifying current situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
<td>Taking stock of personal factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Imagining future possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing plans</td>
<td>Gathering information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering strategies</td>
<td>Exploring options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining support</td>
<td>Setting goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“How might you get there?”</td>
<td>“Where do you want to be?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informed Decisions</td>
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ACTIVE LISTENING
Good mentors do more listening than talking. They are often described as "sounding boards" for the mentee's ideas and plans. This means attentive listening, checking understanding through feedback, probing and questioning for clarification. Mentees employ active listening and good questioning techniques as they gather information. Often the mentoring conversation becomes a dialogue where ideas are shared and explored.

Sometimes, all people need is quiet listening. Simply speaking their thoughts out loud generates insight, solutions or actions that become obvious. So the mentor, just by being supportive is a catalyst for change.

NON JUDGMENTAL
Honesty and openness characterise effective mentoring relationships. Feedback is offered in a constructive way so that defensiveness is minimised and opportunities for learning are maximised.

It is up to both parties to be objective in their feedback to one another.

PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH
Focusing on process rather than content means that mentors use listening and questioning skills to elicit issues, goals, strategies and plans.

The mentoring conversation is a basic problem-solving or decision-making model, whereby a person creates change through reflection, analysis, planning and active experimentation.

The mentor does not say what should, or should not, be done in any situation. They skilfully withhold advice and limit suggestions, preferring to prompt the mentee to generate options and evaluate the consequences of any action considered.

LIMITATIONS
It is unrealistic to expect a mentor to know everything and their limitations should be recognised. Mentors can help their mentee access information and perhaps share parts of their network of contacts.

A mentor is also a guide. A mentor has a "duty of care". If the mentee intends action that could have seriously adverse consequences, the mentor helps the mentee become more aware of them. If they cannot prompt insight, the mentor shares their concerns with the mentee.

Importantly, mentors must refer matters that are beyond the scope of mentoring to appropriate resources such as Human Resources staff or professional counselling services.

ADVICE
Advice is offered by a mentor when requested but it is provided in a non-directive way. In other words, the mentor helps their mentee think about various options and consider the consequences of any course of action. Decisions and actions are the responsibility of the mentee.

A PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP
Mentoring is a unique relationship, you may talk about quite personal matters relating to work and career, as if you were speaking with a close and trusted friend.

For some people mentoring happens in a very business-like atmosphere. Others enjoy a social element and are fairly relaxed. Either way, mentoring is a professional relationship and it is important to treat it like any other workplace relationship, that is, with respect for one another.

Professional etiquette, such as punctuality, should be respected and normal standards of workplace behaviour observed.

ENDING GRACIOUSLY
Many mentoring roles evolve into ongoing friendships, some culminate with achievement of goals; some merely fade away.

What is important is that mentoring roles are relinquished graciously, at the appropriate time. Both partners need to be able to acknowledge the other's contribution, celebrate achievements and "let go".

For tools and resources please visit go.unimelb.edu.au/3d7