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UNDERSTANDING MENTORSHIP

Patrick O'Brien, Managing Director of The Amanuenses Network Pte, takes a personal look at mentorship, exploring what motivates people to become mentors and the benefits they reap from working with mentees.

In a world that craves effective leadership, the word 'mentor' seems to be ubiquitous. But what does it actually mean? What does it really mean to be a mentor? Some people wish to become one, whilst others long to gain access to one. As you read on, we'll investigate the word's meaning and the motivations at play in the mentorship process.

Mentoring is less about authority, management and control; it's more about collaboration, influence and growth. Effective mentoring takes two committed parties, each acting in concert. It does not focus on position, title, task or role, but on creating a collaborative learning process for two individuals who are both committed equally to personal growth.

What does a mentor do? Why do people want to become one? Why do they seek access to one? How can you best utilise one? These are great questions. To work out the answers, let's step back in time.

Do you remember your first job in technology? What can you recall about those first three months? Mine? I remember it well. As a trainee programmer, I was immersed for four whole weeks in London, whilst others attempted to teach me how to code in Assembler.

Though they succeeded, the jargon, processes and technologies threw huge challenges at me. Being alone in the

nation's capital added its own demands, so too did the need to establish new friendships. Coupled with an inner drive to explore this big city, everything I navigated was new, fresh, exciting, even at times, if I'm honest, a little scary.

Starting out in a binary world of Assembler, I grew to realise that I also operated in a ternary world; most roles revolved around development, maintenance or enhancement. Yet this recursive and self-referential world, was often devoid of external perspectives; it was easy to get caught up in it.

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Technology's hard and technical skills dominated career thinking. In contrast, soft skills were surfacing, and these were the more likely areas to hold people back, especially when reaching out for promotion. Most people wanted to work on new technologies, few wanted to work on themselves.

On reflection, I realised that my career had benefited by an injection of objective, external perspectives from time to time. I'd been fortunate to receive kind words of counsel from others at appropriate moments. That is what prompted my

greater appreciation of mentoring.

The role of a mentor

'Mentor' is an ancient term that dates back to the Trojan Wars, well over 3,000 years ago. In Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the heroes Odysseus, left his family to sail from the shores of Ithaca in Greece to the city of Troy in Turkey. He placed the future of his son Telemachus under the wing of his good friend, Mentor.

Mentor's role was to guard, guide and grow Telemachus, to keep him in his care, awaiting the safe return of his young

protégée's father. Twenty years later, Odysseus returned home.

The *Odyssey* crafted the classical view of the modern-day mentor: a wise old person, who willingly, nobly, and over a long period of time, imparts knowledge in the service of others. In this view, the mentor performs various roles for their mentee, the person in their charge.

First, they act as guardian and protector, providing safety and security to enable their mentee to countenance change. For instance, the mentor may look out for the mentee, raising awareness of possible

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issues to consider, such as regulatory policy changes or corporate strategies.

Back in 2015, Google completed and published some research into what makes a team effective. Though structure, clarity and meaningful work were in the top five, at the top of the stack was psychological safety.

A mentor gets this; it's pivotal to a great mentoring relationship. So, as a mentor, you'll develop personal competences that align to synergise within your business area too.

Next, mentors provide structure and accountability, providing shape to the track in which their mentee wishes to head. For instance, they may act as a sounding board, helping their mentee set broad direction, find appropriate headings, and choose relevant destinations.

Being a mentor means having influence.

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It feels good when others ask your opinion, and you suggest options. Whether it is in the choice of role, a new business direction, or job switch, receiving the mentee's trust is enriching. When a mentor operates as a best friend, it makes the workplace feel that much more meaningful, and so much more engaging too.

Finally, mentors bring experience and connections, and provide advice and guidance to help their mentee grow. They may share specific skills or open particular doors, thus cultivating the competences a mentee requires for the next stage of their life's journey.

To paraphrase Santayana, an inability to remember the past means that we may often repeat it. However, common sense may not be all that common, so this is also where a mentor can help. Their perspectives bring in the wisdom of their

past experiences, for the benefit of their mentee, their team, and their organisation.

A mentor differs from a manager

Managers focus on driving current business performance. It's the ends that matter, so they invariably lean toward task completion. Mentors focus on cultivating personal growth; the future means are more important. They therefore tend more toward people development.

Managers ensure that desired results are delivered. With their delegated authority, they usually have direct line responsibility for a team, so plan, organise, direct, coordinate and control. They provide direction, and tell others what to do.

In contrast, mentors cultivate deep relationships with their mentee and so share their experiences. They set time aside to build trust, deepen dialogue, and

and wisdom.

They develop strong communications skills to build healthy mentee dialogue. They learn to build rapport and empathy naturally, and develop stronger consulting skills, such as active listening, powerful questioning, and the ability to give their mentee real-time feedback.

They develop good emotional intelligence to manage themselves and others, and relate well to situations. They use social skills to garner trust and build relationships that honour and respect differences. They learn to clarify responsibilities, encourage mentee self-awareness, and keep mentees accountable for their own growth actions.

Finally, they hone relevant wisdom to contribute as positive accelerants to their mentee's growth journey. They reflect on their own experiences too, to share life stories, package nuggets of wisdom, and suggest relevant options. They may also provide information, bring connections to bear, perhaps even open doors.

Mentoring builds beneficial relationships

In summary, effective mentors are more effective leaders. The role provides them with the ability to strengthen interpersonal aspects as they work on their own soft skills. It affords them opportunities to give back, build relationships, contribute to the personal growth of others, receive recognition for their efforts, and build personal insights and confidence.

When done effectively, it provides a platform for continual deeply satisfying win-wins. And when you look back, the value of a well-intended, heartfelt, and personally spoken 'thank you' from someone whose career you have positively affected is truly priceless.

In the next article, we'll switch from the lens of mentor to explore the relationships through the eyes of the mentee. What might be driving their need to secure a mentor?

bring their wisdom to bear. They provide personal support, and guide others.

Finally, the efforts of managers are business related, and typically transactional; they ensure that jobs are executed well. Stability, process, and preservation of the status quo is their focus. Conversely, mentors are personal, and, transformational; they foster growth in others. They enable personal change, and create a safe, motivating environment for its realisation.

Benefits of mentorship

Great mentors provide guidance and cultivate growth. They curate strong, trusting relationships that allow their mentee to flourish. Mentorship provides them opportunities to develop their leadership skills in three critical areas: communications, emotional intelligence