

Participation: Mentor Perspective

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A Strategic Role: Creating Possibilities for Real Change

A Mentor is a “Man on a Mission”, who plays an active role in relation to their Mentee. It’s an enabling “Mission”, one that creates an environment within which their Mentee can grow, and change, in *Transformational* ways.

To achieve growth, they know a Mentee will conduct small experiments; express needs, take risks, receive feedback, reflect, and learn. A Mentor also recognises the Mentee needs to feel “Safe” when doing so, otherwise experimentation will be impaired, even perhaps, resisted.

A Mentor therefore needs to create an environment that fosters “Psychological Safety”. They need to build relationships that convey positive intentions for their Mentee. It’s an interpersonal challenge, because in order to take risks, a Mentee must first feel their participation will not result in negative consequences; a Mentee wants to know their Mentor is there only for them.

A Mentor also needs to create relationships based upon “Trust”. The Mentee needs to trust that time invested with their Mentor will result in personal growth. Equally, the Mentor needs to trust that their Mentee has the right mindset, commitment and appetite for growth.

There are three important areas for a Mentor to focus on as they engage in their “Mission” ...

- Building Safe Relationships
- Providing Governance
- Connecting Wisdom

A Resourceful Responsibility: Enabling Collaboration and Learning

Best outcomes are achieved when a Mentor uses their perspective, to focus in three areas.

1: Building Safe Relationships, to Unlock Sharing

Relationships are “Social Constructs”, and a Mentor knows they have the power to shape effective ones through repeated positive interactions with their Mentee. They know also, that it needs to be a relationship that’s able to purposefully support a Mentee on their growth journey.

They need to construct a relationship with “Psychological Safety” in mind, build it in ways to engender “Trust”, and, allow for honest, open and regular “Sharing”. It is about creating a space for rich, influential, dialogue, which affords Mentor and Mentee friction-free access to exchange a relevant array of information, a smorgasbord of ideas, and, a diversity of viewpoints.

Responsibility to build those productive relationships rests with the Mentor, especially in the initial stages. Yet, it’s not all about pain, there is gain too; effective Mentors use the process to further develop their own “Communication skills” and enhance their “Emotional Quotient”, EQ.

At a “Personal” level, a Mentor will reflect on aspects related to identity and purpose. For instance, they’ll need to consider who they are, how they make plans for themselves, as well as make commitments to others. They’ll also contemplate what they enjoy, what they have to offer others, and importantly, their rationale for participation in a Mentoring program.

At an “Interpersonal” level, a Mentor will reflect on aspects related to communications, influence, and change. For instance, they’ll need to think about empathy, how they listen to others, as well as how they use body language to build rapport. They’ll consider engagement, and how they can probe, share feedback and manage conflicts that may surface.

They will also reflect upon their own predisposition to change, and the role they play in helping a Mentee countenance *Transformational* change. That is the real purpose that underpins the Mentoring relationships that they construct.

2: Providing Governance, to Stimulate Experimentation

Building a friction-free and trusting relationship that enables a friendly and safe exchange of ideas, is an important and necessary early step. In doing so, a Mentor needs to keep their real purpose in mind; helping to foster growth in their Mentee.

Effective Mentoring conversations therefore need to hold the Mentee to account. They’ll lean more toward productivity, than they do “cosiness”. So, where a Mentee is highly motivated, they’ll need to respectfully reign them in. Where they are not, they’ll need to energise them.

Getting that balance right can sometimes be challenging, especially in cultures where group “Harmony” is highly valued. There is danger that a Mentor may fear their strong focus on accountability may put the relationship at risk. Silence is *not* an effective Mentoring strategy.

Where a Mentor feels uncomfortable about their role, it can help to view their relationship like that between a Board and CEO. A CEO provides Strategic Leadership, to achieve organisational *Transformation*. With a Mentee, the focus is Self-Leadership, the *Transformation* is personal.

Getting a Mentor to frame interactions as a “Governance” relationship is beneficial. It allows them to explore aspects of authority, decision-making & accountability, in ways that keep the dialogue safe. It also teases open the Mentor-Mentee roles, bringing clarity and transparency into their relationship.

“Accountability” in this context, means ensuring the Mentee has a clearly chosen direction, and has identified projects with opportunities for stretch. It also means they make visible progress in ways that develop specific Competences.

This requires a Mentor who is comfortable to operate more as a “Director”, than a “Doer”. To be effective, they’ll maintain a relevant distance, and focus on the bigger picture. They’ll ensure that decisions are made which keep their Mentee stretched and growing. They are comfortable to work “On” the business of Mentee growth, rather than “In” that business.

3: Connecting Wisdom, to Positively Accelerate Growth

“Wisdom” encapsulates the ability to draw from the well of one’s own experiences and expertise, and in doing so, think and act with common sense and insight. A Mentor’s desire to contribute their wisdom, lies at the heart of any effective Mentoring relationship.

Their “Wisdom” is shared in one of two ways, through “Advice”, or in giving “Feedback”. Advice is offered in advance of an action, and may not be that specific. It is given by a person qualified, based upon prior experience. Feedback in contrast, is quite specific, and usually offered up after completion of an event. It is reflective, and may encapsulate personal opinions.

A need to give Advice differentiates a Mentor from a Coach. The ability to share “Pearls of Wisdom” in relevant, timely and clear ways, separates an ordinary Mentor from an effective one. A Mentor’s challenge lies in knowing what to share, when to share, and how to share.

A Mentor must also keep the purpose of the relationship uppermost in their mind. Knowing it’s about Mentee growth will allow them to manage Feedback, so that it’s always relevant. They’ll determine what’s important through productive dialogue. The Mentor will keep their ego in check as they question openly, listen actively, and share positively, ideas relating to the needs.

Given the relatively infrequent nature of Mentor-Mentee meetings, timing is important too. An effective Mentor speaks when appropriate, usually as a situation arises. “Real-time” Feedback, that is situation specific, and given face-to-face, usually has the greatest impact. A Mentor’s ability to share Feedback when needed, also makes them more authentic, more influential.

Knowing how to share Feedback, in ways that both help the Mentee grow, and yet still honour and strengthen the relationship, can be challenging. Empathy is a powerful technique that helps a Mentor imagine how their Mentee feels in any given situation, and, guide their response.

Where things don’t work out as expected, “Developmental” Feedback is required. Rather than assign blame, the Mentor describes events, clarifies impact, and emphasises desired behaviours. Where things work out well, “Reinforcing” Feedback is given. They specifically describe what worked well, how this made them feel, and express a desire to see things repeated.

A Mentor will find it much easier to share Advice and Feedback, when they strengthen their Emotional Intelligence skills. EQ allows them to see things through the lens of their Mentee, and, choose ways to express themselves that are relevant, and, positive. A focus on the growth “Task” is important, whilst the need to build a productive “Relationship” is necessary too.

There’s a Time to Act, and a Time to Reflect

In the next Article, we’ll move the focus forward onto *Reflection*. We’ll recognise that the Mentor and Mentee meet relatively infrequently, so the opportunities for dialogue are finite. We’ll therefore delve into the dialectic between meetings, to explore how learning can happen.

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