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The Joys of Mentoring

The second in a series of columns on mentoring talks about the precise qualities that draw people to a mentor and keep them coming back.

In the last (April-May) issue of Sensex, I presented a picture of how India's booming economy placed demands on the ready availability of people with the right skill sets, the appropriate talent fit and the need for relevant training. We saw too that executive challenges today included containing attrition, recruiting for growth and retaining talent. This huge challenge in the context of a warped work-life balance called for an urgent need for mentoring.



What is Mentoring

Most people are familiar with the concept of a mentor as the older, wiser businessman passing down knowledge and contacts to the up and coming high flier. These days, mentoring has come to be known

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as the facilitation of an individual's learning process, enabling the individual to take ownership for their own development. As I had said last time, each one of us must take control of our own destiny.

Mentoring is a relationship in which latent competencies are unfolded, potential skills are honed and both parties – the mentor and the mentee – experience mutual learning.

Mentoring is a journey, which takes time and in which the joy is in the travel, not merely in arrival at the destination. It encapsulates

a relationship rather than an activity, without necessarily having an expiry date. One can thus have life-long mentors, people who have always taken a genuine interest in our continued development and learning, out of an innate love or friendship. Mentoring is a powerful intervention in the development of others and is therefore a very serious business.

Mentoring vs Coaching

Mentoring, particularly in its traditional sense, enables an individual to follow in the path of an older and wiser colleague who can pass on knowledge, experience and open doors to otherwise out-of-reach opportunities. It uses listening skills to the full and a gift for asking the right questions to unravel and draw out the full picture. It generally does not call for domain knowledge, but the process helps the mentee arrive at the appropriate solution to their vexing problem. A good mentor must possess inter-personal skills of a very high order combined with a genuine love and concern for people. Coaching, on the other hand, generally calls for direct experience of the client's formal occupational role. It is specific, goal- and task-oriented, improvement and skills focused. Imagine

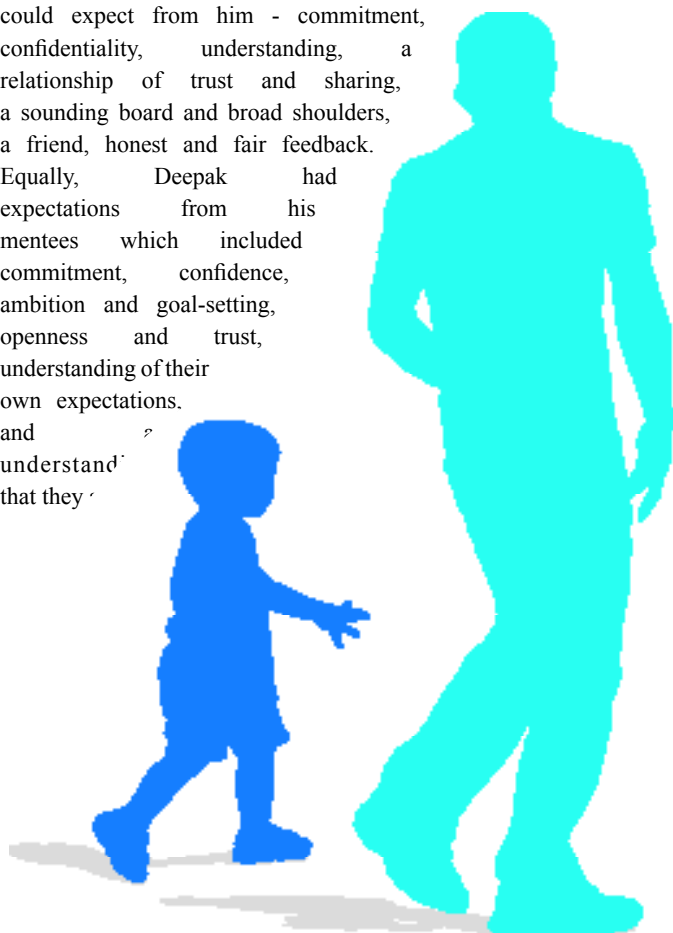
a cricket or a football coach and one visualises the main features of a coach. Although there are some key differences between coaching and mentoring, there are similarities too, and the edges are undoubtedly blurred. In both cases one-on-one interaction is the key. A good coach will also mentor and a good mentor will coach, as appropriate to the situation and the relationship. Both are processes that enable individuals to achieve their full potential. It is essential, however, to determine what your needs are and to ensure that you receive the kind and level of service you require, without worrying about the semantics of name. In my writings, I might use coaching and mentoring as interchangeable terms.

Formal Mentoring

Mentoring services can be formal or informal. Formal mentoring is what I referred to in my last article - a triangular relationship between the mentor, the mentee and the client (mentee's employer), who agree on a set of explicit goals that genuinely further the mentee's interests as well as the common good of the organization.

When John, the CEO of a financial services company asked Deepak, my friend from school and now an established mentor, to coach four of his reportees, Deepak was flattered. He did of course ask John pertinent questions - 'Why me?', 'Why don't you mentor them yourself?' and 'What are your expectations from this process?'. John explained his preference for an external mentor, being a non-threatening, unbiased, one-step-removed entity.

A formal mentoring engagement runs for 8-12 months, averaging one meeting per month. The initial interactions are spent in building a rapport. Deepak, for example, had explained what his mentees could expect from him - commitment, confidentiality, understanding, a relationship of trust and sharing, a sounding board and broad shoulders, a friend, honest and fair feedback. Equally, Deepak had expectations from his mentees which included commitment, confidence, ambition and goal-setting, openness and trust, understanding of their own expectations, and understanding that they



indeed - the masters of their own destiny and that the mentor does not have all the answers.

I have tried to define mentoring as a process in the earlier paragraphs. It is said that mentors are people who can help influence mentees reach major goals in life. The mentee must of course define his goal and expectations, and must believe in the process. Even more, he/she must develop confidence and trust in the mentor. The advantage of mentoring over other forms of development activity is that when it works well, it focuses on our real learning needs at a specific and personal level.

I have maintained that mentoring cannot be a structured process. The irony is that the more organised and structured you attempt to make mentoring, the less likely it is to work. Deepak told me of another formal mentoring programme he was engaged in for an industrial corporate, where the mentee very clearly told him that he liked his 'unstructured, informal' approach. "There is no other way we could have proceeded", he had told his mentor.

Of course it is best when you can pick your own mentor, instead of having your boss assign you one, for then it evolves naturally and can potentially move into a life-long mentoring relationship I talked of earlier.

Many companies employ coaching skills as a means of providing ad hoc one-on-one training, but only a small percentage adopt coaching as their core strategy for on-going self development. Coaching and mentoring, which began in earnest in the West in the 1980s, is however gaining in importance here, thanks to India's booming economy. The last decade has seen an explosion in the use of coaching and mentoring to support individuals from CEO to graduate recruit in developing skills and managing career and personal development.

For the senior executive, the mentor is an ideal sounding board and a powerful facilitator for personal growth along with behavioural and attitudinal change. He or she is an objective partner who will support and yet challenge views, behaviours and attitudes in a constructive manner. Above all, the executive gains an ally whose primary motivation is their success.

When Deepak asked his mentees how they benefited from having a mentor, they almost all uniformly cited having a sounding board as a major factor - someone who would listen to them objectively, facilitate them in working through their problems and inspire them to reflect on a viable course of action of their choosing.

Informal Mentoring

My childhood friend Nick is a natural informal mentor. People locate him by word of mouth and generally open up to him, confiding in him and sharing their problems. They use him as a sounding board, a shoulder to cry on, a friend and guide for their work-related problems, which also have a large bearing on work-life balance issues I touched on in my previous article.

When I asked Nick the reasons why his mentees confide in him in preference to confiding in someone else, he presented the following list after conferring with his mentees -

Kumud pointed out that Nick:

- "Is sensitive to non-verbals"
- "Listens actively"

- “Has good memory recall and correlation to past events”
- “Asks intelligent questions and thus creates a full picture”
- “Has a friendly disposition, is calm and communicative”
- “Is open minded and creative”
- “Is caring, unbiased, non intimidating”
- “Gives me plenty of time”
- “Has a keen interest in my development”
- “Creates a high level of trust and builds rapport”
- “Does not impose his will or opinion, just guides”

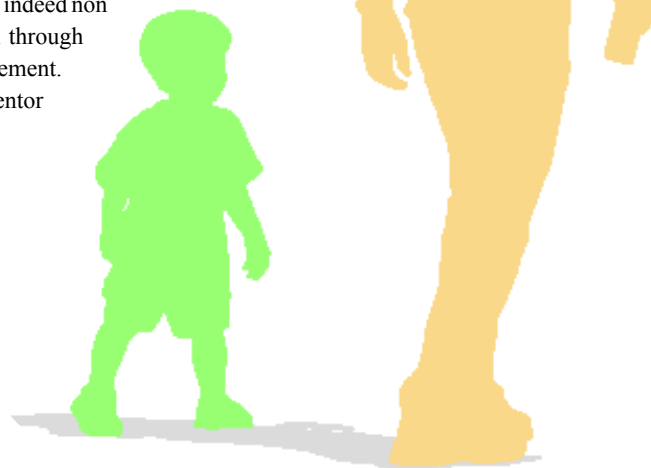
When Brinda was asked why she shared thoughts with Nick, she said:

- “He knows where I am coming from”
- “He helps me take an objective view of my life”
- “I introspect better after exchanging ideas with him”
- “Our interactions let me to look at myself in a different light”
- “He has a detached, unbiased approach to issues”
- “I am comfortable with his value systems”

Richa had this to say of Nick:

- “I sometimes speak to him to seek a solution to a problem, but not necessarily so”
- “I like sharing and expressing my concerns to receive understanding, a patient hearing, empathy”
- “He is a good listener”
- “His experience sheds light on a point which was not clear to me”
- “He never responds to my problem with a counter problem, just stays neutral”

Informal mentor relations such as those Nick enjoys can be life long for they are indeed non threatening, unbiased, not bound through a corporate’s ‘Triangular’ agreement. Also, the mentee has found the mentor him/herself.



The Road Ahead

Corporates who engage in formal mentoring programmes would love to evolve towards a degree of informal mentoring as well. For this they would need to overcome the hit and miss factor associated with successful pairing of mentors and mentees, a natural outcome of informal arrangements without guidance or clarity.

In the years ahead, I see healthy and inclusive informal mentoring relationships evolving quite naturally from genuinely caring formal mentoring programmes. The challenge would be to galvanise open-minded people who have had positive experiences in effective mentoring either as a mentor or a mentee, and who are keen to share their skills in a developmental mode for the larger good of the people and the benefit of the organisation.

For this, we have to ask ourselves “Who makes a good mentor?” Is mentoring a quality like leadership? In that case, should we ask ourselves “Are mentors born, or do they evolve?” Ironically, those who have inherent, intuitive qualities to be excellent mentors do not have the time for this important relationship. One hopes that those who they find it in themselves to take up mentoring.

And lastly, I am hopeful that a wholesome, energised people climate in organizations will play host to a natural blossoming of mentoring relationships just as in a ‘caring’ garden, where thousands of flowers bloom without a formal or informal tag.

This article is inspired by readings from HBR, The Mentoring Group and The Coaching & Mentoring Network .

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