

Pradeep Mallick



The Mentee in Mentoring

The make-up of mentees: can they become mentors?

When driving home last month after his absorbing meeting with Nick, Deepak pondered over their thought-provoking discussions about the dynamics of mentors – their DNA, are they born or do they evolve, what's in it for them, how mentoring skills can be developed in them and whether formal or informal mentoring worked better. He had enjoyed his discussions. He had begun to like Nick, for they shared the same passion – mentoring – even though Nick used the informal approach to mentoring as against the formal mentoring programmes that Deepak himself had grown into. He was pleased with the opportunity to clarify his points on the different approaches to mentoring and was satisfied that the talks helped reinforce his ideas and endorse the convictions he held.

Today, he was awaiting Nick's arrival to discuss where they left off last month – to consider the dynamics of mentees in this magical mysticism that is so central to a good mentor-mentee relationship.

What mentees want in mentors

Deepak and Nick had, at their first meeting at my place and again last month, discussed the elements of informal and formal mentoring and what made mentees – in either format – come back to their respective mentors month after month. What was it that mentees were seeking in their mentors. Nick started by sharing his inputs on what mentees wanted, expected and looked for in their mentors. He clarified that this was based on a feedback he had obtained from a sample of his mentees over the years, and was reinforced by his own observations from years of informal mentoring –

Good, patient listener who makes you feel comfortable

Effective communicator

Great social skills – smiling, welcoming approach

Prepared to criticize you constructively

Friendly, young at heart, takes you under his wing

Can look at the broad agenda, is open to other points of view

Punctual, down to earth, realistic, has faith in you, never patronising

Can relate to your experiences, good or bad

Friendly, yet providing subtle guidance

Can point you towards your objectives

Makes you feel relaxed, understands your perspectives

Deepak mentally went through the impressive wish list that mentees had shared with Nick; he could not help noting how close this was to his own list of the feedback he had received from mentees based on his formal mentoring sessions. The two mentor friends concluded that no matter whether the mentoring mode was formal or informal, the characteristics, behaviours, strengths and sensitivities that mentees want to see in their mentors are generally similar.

Deepak then also related to Nick his own experiences of how his mentees respected his maintaining a diary, sticking with pre-agreed meeting schedules and not changing dates, maintaining punctuality, and being socially aware and connected.

What mentees need to do

Deepak could not resist relating how, in his formal programmes, he patiently strove over several initial meetings to create a climate of trust, build confidence with the mentee and generate a modicum of faith. Sure, a mentee in a formal mentoring programme is responsible for certain key elements that need to be followed for a successful and satisfying interaction: commitment to the process, faith in the mentor, confidence in the Senior Management who nominated him/her to the programme, commitment of time,

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involvement in the steps for self-improvement, analysis of in-house feedback and an innate belief that awareness and application will help bridge those identified areas for improvement. But then look at it from the mentee's angle for a moment. Firstly, the mentee is still wondering why he/she was chosen for this programme – was there some shortcoming in him/her? Deepak was convinced that there

often resides in the mentee an initial disappointment, and a sense of suspicion about the process, doubts and questions over the choice of the mentor and anxiety over why the CEO/HR have embarked on this crazy new-fangled Mentoring Mantra. And all this while work pressure remains unabated, results are to be delivered and performance is being watched. Whilst the mentee is physically present in those first two or three mentoring sessions, mentally he is just about beginning to pull out of that initial daze, and is beginning to look at the process more kindly because he realizes he is only one of a very few chosen ones for the programme. Deepak explained that seasoned mentors mark time over this period, gently and patiently letting the mentee know about the mentor's background and equally skillfully getting to appreciate the strengths of the mentee. Clearly, Deepak wisely remarked, this is not a period to push ahead with goal-setting agendas and expectations out of the mentoring exercise. Recounting his earlier experiences to Nick, Deepak chuckled as he explained how patience does indeed pay in building sustainable relationships over the long term. Deepak's experience showed that those very same initially 'tentative' mentees would, a year later, admit that mentoring was indeed a process whereby the experienced mentor holds up a mirror to the mentee in a soft light, but enough for the latter to recognise his blemishes quite clearly. Over the months, mentees begin to see that the confidentiality of the arrangement is working well, and that the Company is not surreptitiously seeking feedback from the mentor about the mentee.

Once the mentee in a formal programme has got over the initial phase of apparent disappointment, suspicion, anxiety and concern, he/she ought to engage in the programme with enthusiasm, commitment and zeal. Watching and studying the mentor and

noting his strengths can in itself be a great learning – from the art of active listening to framing and asking the right questions that encourage the mentee to come out with the solutions by himself/herself, to total interest in the well-being and development of the mentee – what he/she wants to learn, develop, and achieve.

In the area of informal mentoring, of course Nick did not come across the issues related to the initial 'introductory' period that mentees in a formal mentoring programme found themselves in. Naturally! For here, Nick observed, a mentor was not chosen by the Organisation; the mentee sought and chose his/her mentor. In doing so, the mentee knew his/her expectations and goals, and what they wanted out of the time spent.

Nick concluded that the role of the mentee is becoming more active. Instead of waiting for mentors to choose them and to propose mentoring goals, mentees are seeking mentors, negotiating relationships, and proposing mutually satisfying goals and activities. This is not to suggest that mentors cannot reach out, approach potential mentees and help guide the relationships.

What's in it for mentees

Deepak knew from experience that mentees gain immensely from having a mentor they can trust and confide in, someone they can share their anxieties and doubts with, a sounding board they can use to check out various career options – within the Organisation, or outside. It is this mentor who, in time, becomes a friend, a confidante, an honest provider of valuable feedback.

And from his own experience, Nick knew that mentoring programmes are better when mentees direct and manage the relationship, for they are the ones that benefit from the initiative. He felt that mentors must, however, help mentees lead the process

by letting the aggressive ones learn sensitivity and protocol, and the shy ones by being more encouraging. Providing mentees positive feedback on their performance is extremely important, according to Nick.

Many mentees feel a little awkward receiving focused attention and help for an extended period of time. It helps when mentors make it known that they too are enjoying and benefiting from the relationship. Mentees actually love it when mentors treat them with top priority.

As Deepak and Nick warmed to the subject, they concluded that as mentoring relationships go through phases, it's natural to transition into different arrangements when your



mentees have learned a sufficient amount. Deepak opined that relationships sometimes go from formal/structured mentoring to informal mentoring, turn into business friendships or even end up as close personal friendships. Nick quipped that sometimes your former mentees end up becoming your mentors in certain key areas. And he was being serious.

Can mentees make good mentors

Deepak was emphatic that every one actually needs a mentor; often this is not a fact easily recognized or conceded. This is the reason why Organisations identify key candidates possessing leadership skills to undergo a mentoring programme with an external mentor. Mentors can be of all ages, although Corporates would tend to pick external mentors who have themselves experienced leading Organisations.

Mentoring really begins with the needs of the mentee. Merely by going through a mentoring experience, many mentees subconsciously absorb and acquire mentoring skills, knowledge and

serves. When a leader gets it into his head that the credit for the Organisation's success and growth is his alone, his downfall begins. Anticipating Nick's question, Deepak explained that humility and an absence of arrogance were essentials for sustained success and recognition. Elaborating, he drew parallels from the true leadership style of Mahatma Gandhi, who gave up a profession and the lure of wealth, name and fame only to serve.

The second message for Nick's mentees was the fact that we need to rise above narrow parochialism – we are Indians first, and Indians to the end, no matter where we are born or what our mother tongue is. To serve our nation is a unique opportunity; and in order to do so, we must recognize that we need to serve our Organisation or Unit in a broad-minded manner that will make our motherland proud.

Third, said Deepak, there can be only one leader in an entity and we must give that leader the respect due to him and follow his direction without demur. We should treat our Unit head as our Guru, and give him/her due respect.

Fourth, Self-discipline and Teamwork wins us matches on the field and orders in business. Teamwork makes for sustained success in Organisations. Trying to play solo, not sharing information at work or not seeking timely support only helps competition to win the game.

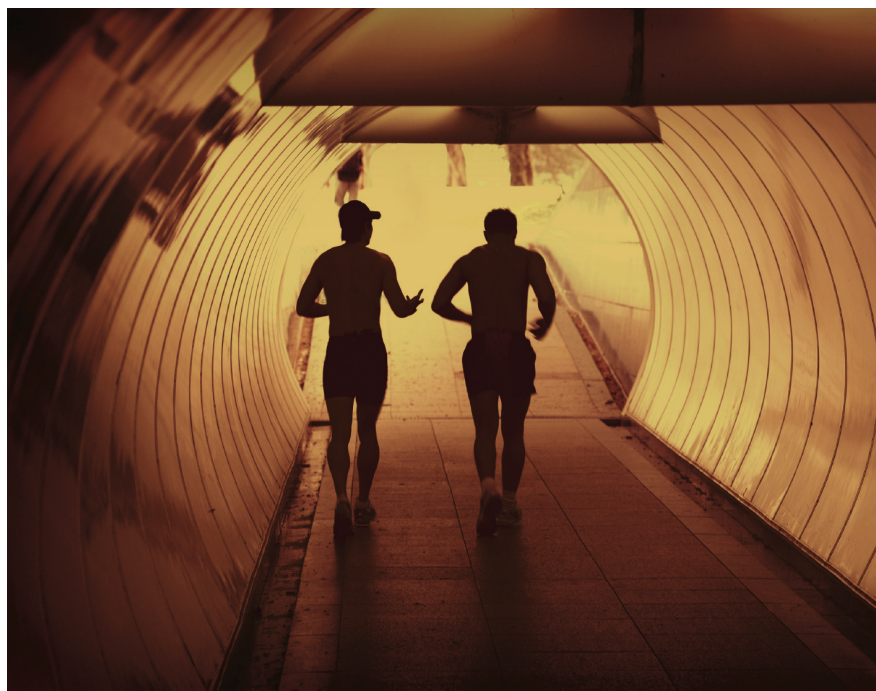
Fifth, respect your team mates, appreciate their skills, share in their joys and sorrows and be empathetic. Rejoice in their success for it is, after all, the team's success. Shun jealousy, bury it and treat every team mate as a part of you, not a threat to you.

Sixth, never underestimate competition. One may not always win. When one loses, one should sit together as a team to analyse strengths and weaknesses: not merely ours but also those of competition. Contribute constructively in the analysis process as a good team player, be prepared to listen, accept criticism and above all, follow what is best in the team's interest.

Seventh, celebrate success big time, as a team! Be prepared to give the spotlight to your team members and do not hog the light yourself. Gandhiji became a Mahatma by serving, not seeking – he never sought the title or the limelight.

Nick was delighted. Ever since he had met Deepak at my home and discovered he shared a common love – mentoring - with him, Nick respected his views. On the learnings from Chakde! India, Nick found his views aligned with Deepak's, and saw this as a positive way forward to share these learnings with his mentees.

This article is inspired by readings from HBR, The Mentoring Group and The Coaching & Mentoring Network. The author is former MD Wartsila India, Past Chairman CII(WR) Past President Bombay Chamber and Founder Chairman of The Listening Post.



attitudes directly from their mentors — without specific training. They very often go on to become good mentors themselves, having acquired a natural skill set. Other mentees require more explicit training in mentoring competencies and processes.

Good mentees learn that the best mentors are those who provide ample encouragement and also honestly and tactfully assist their mentees to recognize and work on areas needing improvement.

What mentees can learn from Chakde! India

Nick was keen to learn what Deepak had written last month in his column after seeing the film Chakde! India with his children, what parallels he drew to the working in Corporates and what he could use in his experience-sharing exercises with his mentees.

Deepak's clear, focused, no-nonsense approach was first and foremost that no employee is bigger than the Organisation he

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