

Pradeep Mallick



The Mentor-Mentee Magic

The human dimension of mentoring is what makes it work and also what makes it nearly impossible to measure

What is mentoring?

Mentoring, 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.

Mentoring is a journey, which 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 relationship in which latent competencies are unfolded, potential skills are honed and both parties – the mentor and the mentee – experience mutual learning. It cannot be a structured process. The irony is that the more organized and structured you attempt to make mentoring, the less likely it is to work

Mentoring is often referred to as the ‘transfer of wisdom’.

Why mentoring

Although the concept of mentoring started in the West only in the 1980s, the growing popularity is a response to compelling needs. Mentoring is now widely recognized in the West for its impact in leveraging personal and organizational development and as a highly effective way to quickly ramp up an employee’s performance.

The challenge before organizations today is profitable, sustainable, inclusive growth with a compelling need for care for the environment. The challenge before executives today is containing attrition, recruiting the right talent and retaining high performers. In the process, executive after executive works longer hours whilst helplessly witnessing a deteriorating work-life balance. Escalating corporate profits provide mounting performance bonuses, but little opportunities for executives to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Every one is stretched, and this tells on nerves and on family harmony. The acceleration of productivity in businesses brings along with it challenges in managing and

“Mentoring is a journey, which encapsulates a relationship rather than an activity, without necessarily having an expiry date.”

It is the process by which an individual learns from someone who has worn the same shoes and travelled the same path, someone metaphorically older and wiser. Mentoring is a customized, unique method of improving executive effectiveness through active listening and the use of questioning techniques that honour the person’s individuality.

enhancing relationships. Today, executives expect emotional intelligence from supervisors and colleagues, but find its supply scarce.

Organizations implement mentoring at all levels of a company structure, from graduate recruits to top management. However, as with any programme or initiative, success is dependent ultimately on a high degree of senior level buy-

in and commitment. Without such support, programmes risk death through lack of co-ordination and focus or even disruption by power groups or individuals seeking political gain.

The mentor

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 is come to be known as the facilitation of an individual’s learning process, enabling the individual to take ownership for their own development. After all, each one of us must take control of our own destiny.

Thinking of a mentor might conjure up visions of a wise druid in a white beard and flowing robes. It is believed that mentors can help influence mentees reach major goals in life. 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,



Observe and absorb, oh young one!

behaviours and attitudes in a constructive manner. Above all, the executive gains an ally whose primary motivation is his/her success.

The mentee

The mentee must of course define his or her goals and expectations, and must believe in the process. 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.

My friend Deepak, an experienced external mentor, explains what his mentees could expect from him – commitment, confidentiality, understanding, relationship of trust and sharing, a sounding board and broad shoulders, a friend, honest and fair feedback. Equally, Deepak expects his mentees to demonstrate commitment, confidence,

ambition and goal-setting, openness and trust, understanding of their own expectations, and an understanding that they are indeed the masters of their own destiny and that the Mentor does not have all the answers.

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 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

Making the mentor-mentee magic work

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.

My other friend Nick, an informal mentor, who himself has had a lot of exposure to mentoring, maintains it is possible to develop mentor competence, but only with those who possess interpersonal skills – either potential or existing. That, he feels, provides the base for further competence building. An irony he kept seeing repeatedly was that those most keen to become mentors did not have the innate people skills. Equally, many intuitive, ‘natural’ mentors did not recognize their own abilities, or just did not have the time and inclination to plunge into it.

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.

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 track and trace their career path and options. Above all, they have the comfort of an external, unbiased, one-step removed, non-threatening, wise and senior person in whom their trust increases with time, and whose judgment they can rely on. It is this mentor who, in time, becomes a friend, a confidante, an honest provider of valuable feedback.

Deepak firmly believes that every one actually needs a mentor; often this is not a fact easily recognized or conceded. This is the reason why organizations 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 organizations. Not everyone, however, is a natural mentor. However, if there is a serious intent, those with inherent mentoring skills can learn to become effective mentors.

Imagine having a wise, experienced person alongside you to help you set important life goals and develop the skills to achieve them; someone whose prime motivation is your success; someone immune from but aware of company

“Sometimes, even roles could change - former mentees could start mentoring the mentor in key areas!”

dynamics and politics; someone who takes time to listen and to guide you without any personal or political agenda; someone who is unbiased and non-threatening. There are few who would not benefit from such a relationship. This argument lends greater credence to external mentoring.

The human dimension of mentoring is what makes it work – and also what makes nearly impossible to measure. Basically, mentors provide individual leaders the objective feedback needed to nourish their growth and help them excel.

For it to succeed, formal mentoring must create a triangular relationship between the mentor, the mentee and the client, who all agree on a set of explicit goals that genuinely further their own interests as well as the common good of the organization.



Inter Galactic Mentoring

Cementing the mentor-mentee bond

Most mentees feel a little awkward receiving focused attention and help for an extended period of time. They would like to know that the mentor too is enjoying and benefiting from the relationship. They may even wonder why the mentor spends so much time doing this for them. It is when the mentor tells them, shares with them and watches how open communication and honest feedback work wonders that lasting relationships are formed and cemented.

Deepak always considered his mentoring meetings a top priority, a sacrosanct affair. He demonstrated it by never cancelling a meeting or turning up late and never taking a phone call during a meeting. Nick agreed wholeheartedly and in a similar vein, shared his mentee experiences. He also explained how he would share with his mentees specific areas that he had benefited from through his learning experiences with them. Mutual sharing and learning is the bedrock on which relationships are built and developed.

Mentoring relationships go through phases, and when mentees have picked up the nuances sufficiently, it would be natural to transition into different arrangements. The relationship could perhaps move from formal/structured mentoring to informal mentoring. Perhaps they will transform into business friendships or even personal friendships. Sometimes, even roles could change - former mentees could start mentoring the mentor in key areas!

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.

