



Pradeep Mallick

The Mentor in Mentoring

The DNA of mentors: Are they born or do they evolve?

As Deepak drove down that morning for his meeting with Nick, he went over the points he had wanted to clarify, points that any experienced mentor like himself would come across from time to time, points that help reinforce ideas, affirm practices and develop convictions. He had met Nick socially at my place once and Deepak and he had hit it off. Being in the same work sphere helped the meeting of the minds; the fact that Deepak was more into formal mentoring and Nick into informal mentoring did not matter. Deepak knew the potential that existed for sharing of ideas between them, and being a people-person himself, knew the value that an experienced exchange with Nick would yield.

What is it that mentors have

Nick had mentioned to Deepak in their first meeting how informal mentoring works for him. Deepak took off from there, enquiring what makes his mentees come back to him month after month, what they discuss, how he conducts his sessions. Indeed, he was reinforcing his own ideas on what it is that mentors have. Deepak wrote feverishly as Nick rattled off from the top of his head the qualities that his mentees had candidly provided to him as feedback -

- Genuinely interested in people and shows personal concern
- Is caring, open and facilitative
- Listens actively then asks right questions
- Provides positive, honest and constructive feedback
- Never blames – encourages debate, discussion, dissent but stays neutral
- Provides subtle guidance based on experience, never thrusting his decisions on us
- Patient, unhurried, understanding, empathetic
- Easily accessible, approachable and never intimidating

Deepak mentally went through the impressive list of

qualities, concurred with Nick's observations and remarked on the exceptional value such a mentor brings to his mentees.

Are mentors born or do they evolve

By now, Deepak and Nick had settled into a comfortable and easy exchange on the subject of their passion, and quite naturally, the powerful characteristics that exceptional mentors possess begged the question – where do you find such mentors? Are they born with these qualities? Do they evolve as magical mentors sent down to unravel the hidden leadership qualities in mortals?

Deepak was the first off the block. He enunciated his favourite lines "Firstly, mentors have to possess a real interest in others, and specifically in their development and learning. This is crucial, as it



Formal mentoring involves the mentor charting the mentee's progress

is this that drives their ability to put the issues and concerns of their mentees ahead of the other things that the rest of us find more important. Surely, the mentors' role is essentially to accelerate the rate at which a person learns".

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

We know from our own experiences that 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.

Nick, who himself had had a lot of exposure to mentoring felt it was possible to develop mentor competence, but only with those who possess interpersonal skills - either potential or existing. That, he felt, provided the base for further competence building. The paradox he kept seeing repeatedly was that those most keen to become mentors did not have the innate people skills, and that equally, many intuitive, 'natural' mentors did not recognise their own abilities.

Nick and Deepak were in total agreement that mentoring was serious business. It was not to be taken lightly, as it is potentially a powerful intervention in the development of others, dealing with a lot of personal issues. Mentors have to accept that in all likelihood, they will have to put a lot more in than they get back.

What's in it for mentors – the *Gurudakshana*

But what *do* Mentors get back?

My own observation, as articulated to my mentees, is that I would derive joy when one of two things happen – a (former) mentee calls me to share his/her joy of a promotion, a big post, or similar; or when a former or current mentee calls to say he/she is down in the dumps and wants a shoulder to cry on. What ultimate joy for a mentor!

Deepak readily recalled receiving an e-mail from a former mentee, a banker, who was announcing his joy on a recent posting to Hong Kong in an important office. He nostalgically recounted receiving soon thereafter, an sms from an institutional banker, also a former mentee, announcing his promotion and the associated joy and pride. Deepak was naturally elated to read the closing lines of the sms "Wish to thank you for your kind guidance". And the crowning glory, Deepak said, was when he received another sms – this time from a current mentee - announcing news, just released, of his promotion and increased responsibilities. I felt vindicated that my own inner feelings and observations had come alive through these examples. What better reward for one's karma – to work for the love of developing others to realize their full potential, and receive expression of gratitude and love delivered with sincerity and good feeling?

Nick, who had been listening patiently all along, was now eager



Informal mentoring is more casual and without the pressures of goalsetting

to share his experiences too. He too had heard from his informal mentees (current, as these engagements have a longer tenure by their intrinsic nature) and they all paid him glowing tributes -

"I believe that you were sent my way to mentor me for life and I really think you play a very significant role in my understanding of life and people in addition to the other aspects of work. Thank you for all the time you are spending on me when you could be doing many other worthwhile things".

"You deserve all the warmth, joy and respect in the world".

".....I earnestly thank you for guiding me to stay on my path..."

"Thanks my special friend, for your affection, friendship and time. Truly appreciate the sharing and thought inputs I receive from you on a variety of subjects. Thoroughly enjoy your company..."

"I am so grateful to the Lord that I have you to unburden myself with your wisdom and your affection..."

"I feel blessed that I have a friend in you..."

Developing skills in mentors

Continuing on their thoughts, Deepak and Nick agreed that it was a tough call to make whether mentors were born or if they evolved. They were in agreement that effective mentoring required a lot more than common sense and enthusiasm. And like in leadership, the individual needs to have the basic ingredients of active listening, empathy, building trust, love for people, a genuine interest in their well-being and development. There are some individuals who are additionally gifted in the art of encouraging and inspiring others and providing them positive, corrective feedback in a manner that is received in the right spirit. With these basics, they were sure it was possible for mentors to evolve. It was certainly possible, they felt, for aspiring mentors with potential to imbibe and hone mentoring skills.

Narrating his own experiences in skills development, Deepak mentioned the benefits of self-instruction using mentoring resources such as workshops, videos and articles. Nick too had had experiences in attending and conducting such skills development programmes and concurred with the approach. He added the dimension of counseling, tutoring and one-on-one coaching as effective tools for self-development.



Mentors - Formal or informal?

Deepak had had no personal experience with informal mentoring and he was keen before the meeting ended to learn the key aspects of Nick's approach. Nick on the other hand, knew something of formal mentoring but felt he would gain from the insights that Deepak, more experienced in this area, would share.

Nick explained how, with informal mentoring, the relationships usually just evolve. The start is casual, without a structure or intended, planned approach. "You are," Nick continued, "the senior, wiser, experienced person. The younger one may have worked with you or heard of you from his father or from another senior colleague. Over time, you listen, share experiences, provide feedback and add to the person's well being and growth. Your help is informal and casual. You don't even refer to each other as 'mentor' or 'mentee'. Although you see each other by design, you don't necessarily schedule developmental mentoring sessions."

These relationships can continue for years, without a formal 'charting of progress'. On a query from Deepak, Nick clarified that the informal feedback on how well the relationship is unfolding is

in the kind of inputs he had received from his mentees and which he had shared with Deepak earlier in their meeting. The fact that the relationship and the meetings continue for years is testimony to the positivity of the relationship.

Nick concluded that informal mentoring was a beautiful method of helping someone without the pressure of setting goals. There is a natural coming together of the two persons in the relationship.

Deepak explained that with formal (or structured) mentoring, a formal tri-partite arrangement is worked out between the mentor, the mentee and the organisation who engages the mentor. The relationship is actually planned, and rules and expectations are set. Formal mentoring relationships usually last upto a year, with the parties meeting an average of 2-3 hours each time, once a month.

Because of the manner in which the relationship comes together, Deepak explained that the first few meetings (months) are spent in getting to know each other, building trust and confidence. One then needs to set the tone of the expectations and the platform for providing and receiving honest feedback. Gradually, over months, an understanding develops. Deepak postulated that it was best when the formal mentoring relationship moves naturally, seamlessly into an informal mentoring arrangement. The relationship may never be as close as when an informal mentoring relationship gets going, but sometimes the initial time spent in building the relationship over the year or so helps in bringing about a good understanding between the two, with openness, trust and confidence in each other.

For the happy ones like me, who are both informal and formal mentors, the non-threatening aspect of the relationship and the trust the mentee develops in one is fundamental to the ongoing process. As I mentioned in my last column, 'In the years ahead, I see healthy and inclusive informal mentoring relationships evolving quite naturally from genuinely caring formal mentoring programmes'.

Meanwhile, Deepak and Nick agreed to meet the following month to share their new-found common passion for the magical mysticism that a good mentor-mentee relationship brings. Furthermore, Deepak had only just completed his column on the management and leadership learnings from the inspirational, motivational, will it – want it – achieve it film 'Chakde! India', which he saw with his children the previous week. He agreed to discuss with Nick the parallels he drew from the film to the functioning of 'silo-ed verticals' in Corporates and to crystallize his thoughts on carrying these teachings to their mentees.

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

