

Mentoring Foundation Research Papers

Moments in Mentoring

Research Paper 1:

The Process of Mentoring

The context

In our role as directors and facilitators of the FTSE® 100 Cross-Company Executive and Next Generation Women Leaders Mentoring Programmes, we are sometimes asked by those on either side of a mentoring relationship, 'Is this working?' 'Am I doing this right?'

For the Mentee, this may arise from her own high expectations as she embarks upon the Programme, as all our Mentees are ambitious and resourceful women and they are keen to take full advantage of the opportunities that flow from being mentored by an experienced and prominent Mentor. The Foundation has specific aims for its Programmes, including : (1) bringing the challenges faced by female executives to the attention of Chairmen and Chief Executives of top companies and organisations in the UK; and (2) helping the women Mentees, through the advice and guidance provided by their Mentors, and by learning and development events organised as part of the Programme, to manage their own careers so that they can attain a Board position or otherwise progress their careers. These aims are intended to serve as guiding principles within which individual relationships are encouraged to flourish. Although only "guiding", they provide an anchor in the powerful context within which these relationships sit. That context includes political, regulatory and press focus on the question of women's representation at the top of UK businesses.

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The achievements of UK corporates in relation to Lord Davies' government-supported targets of 25% female Board representation in FTSE 100 companies are to be evaluated at the end of this year. To achieve Lord Davies' goals, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on "change" – changing women and changing organisations. Interventions are expected to be "transformational". The combination of individual expectations and pressure from the broader context results sometimes in our Mentees beginning to question whether they are going about their mentoring in the best way to get the best results.

As for our Mentors, even the most seasoned are self-aware and questioning. They too operate in the broader context of pressure for transformation and change. The Mentor may feel that his Mentee is coming to him (or her) looking for answers and that the Mentor must be an "expert"; able to offer solutions to her. As a result Mentors frequently ask of themselves and us, 'Am I doing it right?' 'What else should I be doing to help this Mentee?'

This central question of what they are trying to achieve, as individuals and as a mentoring pair, will determine how each relationship is constructed and evolves, as well as how it is assessed.

This Paper, drawing on our learning over more than a decade of working with more than 160 Mentors and Mentees, introduces the notion of mentoring as a range or spectrum. We reject the idea of a one-size-fits-all approach and question the role of Mentors

and Mentees as experts and recipients, respectively, of knowledge. Each is encouraged to pay attention to their individual needs from, and contribution to, the mentoring pair and to build a common understanding and working alliance with their Mentor or Mentee. The work of some – even many – mentoring pairs will lead to transformational change, but many will not: affirmation, encouragement, support and more gentle evolution – or, as one Mentee described it, “multi-dimensional nudges in the right direction” are equally valued outcomes for our Mentees and their Mentors.

Getting started: the continuum of expectations

Traditionally, the term ‘mentoring’ is applied to the passing on of support, guidance and advice from a more experienced to a less experienced colleague. This support focuses on the development of qualities and strategies aimed at enhancing career and personal development, and embraces the sharing of experience, wisdom and ‘tricks of the trade’ between the more senior and junior member of the relationship.

The women who enter our Programmes come from a range of different backgrounds and experiences; they have achieved their career success to date through different strategies and approaches, according to their personal styles, strengths and preferences. It is therefore not surprising that their expectations of the Programme fall along a wide continuum.

At one end are those who are very clear about the goals they want to achieve and are looking for tangible guidance on the types of practical steps they need to take to achieve those goals.

Case Study

Elizabeth Corley, CEO, Allianz Global Investors, joined the Executive Programme at a point of change in her career. Newly appointed to her role as Global Chief Executive at Allianz Global Investors, she was looking for her Mentor to support her through this transition. Her Mentor was well able to do this, but in addition he also encouraged her to think about her more long-term NED ambitions. He impressed on her the importance of preparation for taking on NED roles at a time when otherwise she would have remained focused on her executive responsibilities. This unanticipated outcome was as appreciated by Elizabeth as the work on settling into her global role. In matching Elizabeth, we were conscious that her Mentor’s extensive corporate experience equipped him both to act as a sounding board for her in her new role and also to help her look beyond her more immediate executive challenges and goals to how she might begin planning the next phase of her career.



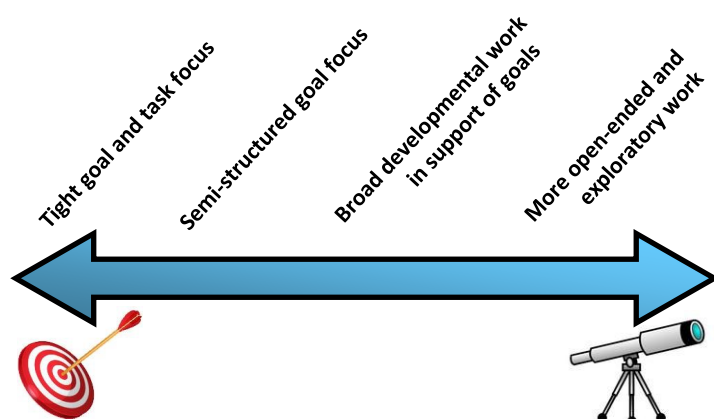
‘It was important for her to work with a Mentor who would help his Mentee tease out the things that mattered to her and to understand that she had an equal role to play in deciding her future’

At the other end of the continuum are the Mentees who, while knowing that they want to progress their career, are much more open (or sometimes just less certain) about the course of their future development and the way in which mentoring will help them.

Case Study

The story of one of our current Mentees is not unusual. Her employer, a large retailer, nominated her to the Programme as part of her preparation for possible succession into a leadership role on the Executive Committee. But the Mentee had broader and more general questions on her future career aims. She was evaluating the extent and strength of her ambition and how her future executive life would be shaped. In particular, she was questioning whether her career aspirations matched those of her employer and how she would reconcile the promotion with her family life. It was important for her to work with a Mentor who we knew was particularly interested in the process of broader career management and decision-making, helping his Mentee to tease out the things that mattered to her and to understand that –although being placed in the plan for top-level succession by her company was a powerful affirmation – she had an equal role to play in deciding her future.

The mentoring continuum: an illustration



Our case studies, and the continuum analogy, illustrate the varying nature of mentoring relationships and, accordingly, the need for pairs to be well matched from the perspective of what each individual brings to the relationship and their style and preference in relation to their work together. The Foundation connects each pair based on one-to-one conversations with both Mentees and Mentors. Judgements born out of long experience allow us to ensure that Mentors meet the expectations of their Mentee but at the same time are well placed and willing to challenge her where appropriate and to broaden the focus of the discussions. In addition to the matching process, each proposed pair meets for an initial exploratory discussion – the “chemistry meeting” – so that they can decide whether and how they would like to work together. This double-layered matching process maximises the chances of success.

Being open to the emergent and unexpected

The case studies we have outlined suggest that wherever the Mentee initially positions herself along the mentoring spectrum it is not necessarily a reflection of where she will stay, or of her deeper development needs. A fine balance must be maintained between building a structure within which to work, whilst avoiding being constrained by overly rigid agendas and goals. Mentoring is a tailored process of one-to-one adult development, aimed principally at helping the mentee in the relationship develop capacities beyond those she already has. These capabilities can include an extended vision of her own potential. Whilst they are all different, feedback from our mentoring pairs demonstrates that certain characteristics promote more effective relationships. These can be summarised as:

- safe, confidential time and space, outside the Mentee’s organisation, created through mutual trust, in which both parties can reflect and express themselves;

- an open, reflective stance by both the Mentee and Mentor, who are prepared to consider new ideas, leading to fresh insights; and
- a commitment to take forward learning and, where appropriate, experiment with new behaviours or strategies.

One of our Mentees, Sharon White, Chief Executive Officer of Ofcom, has described the special atmosphere of trust within which these new conversations and learning take place: *“In my nearly 25 years of training and development in the civil service, the last 18 months working with my Mentor have been the most precious, the most interesting and the most challenging. My Mentor shifted my way of thinking; we had different sorts of conversations.”*

“Shifts” in ambition, perspective and insight are an important outcome of many of the relationships we facilitate. For these to occur, there needs to be less focus on a particular outcome, allowing the process to move the individual Mentee to the optimum place for her, even if it’s not where she originally thought she would end up. To draw an analogy, Mentees may start the process steering (or being steered) determinedly in the direction of Alaska only to emerge, two years later, in Antigua where they realise in fact they wanted to be all along and wonder how they ever thought otherwise.

Bringing power into partnership

Power is integral to the mentoring relationship, since it brings together someone who is more senior, who is seen to be more knowledgeable and experienced, with someone more junior, less experienced, who in their own opinion and that of their organisation would gain benefit from counsel and support. In the Executive Programme the power differential is more complex – with up to three elements in a single relationship, as mentoring pairs span different management levels, are mostly of different genders and are often from different generations.

It is not uncommon for our Mentees initially to feel daunted by these differences and – consciously or unconsciously – to feel the need to perform well in front of the Mentor. As one of our Mentees described it: “I want to be a good Mentee.” She may feel anxious about wasting her Mentor’s time. Making a good impression is of course important, but over-anxiety about ‘performance’ might hinder development and growth. It is easy to see how these power dynamics might impede the ability of the pair to create the openness that is so central to a successful mentoring relationship. They can also serve to perpetuate the hierarchical *status quo* that the Programme is designed to challenge, and in turn reinforcing the Mentor’s potential impression that their role is to be that of the expert, with all the “answers.”

The key to bringing partnership into this power relationship lies in seeing mentoring as a process of mutual

learning. David Clutterbuck, a leading thinker and writer in the field of mentoring, cites 'never admitting that this could be a learning experience for you, too', as one of the twelve habits of a toxic mentor. Put the other way round, the mentoring relationships that are most productive are those where the Mentor shows by their demeanour, language, and attitude that they don't have all the answers in relation to what it takes to be a successful senior leader, and that the mentoring relationship is a joint, shared endeavour. In "levelling" the power playing-field in this way, our Mentors help each Mentee establish herself as an equally proactive participant in the mentoring work.

Sarah Breeden, Director, International Banks, Bank of England describes this process when she talks about the evolution of her relationship with her Mentor: *"My Mentor has almost taught me enough so that I don't need him. At the beginning [2 years ago] I was learning every time, but the relationship teaches you how to do it yourself. Is this what you call moving from unconscious incompetence to conscious competence? It's an affirmation rather than a nudge. It's a transfer of knowledge."*

Our Mentors, particularly the most experienced, recognise this part of their role in establishing a good mentoring dynamic. There will of course always be a sense in which they have the greater experience and Mentees often describe how "nuggets" of wisdom from their Mentors can be instrumental in their development. Monica Burch, Senior Partner, Addleshaw Goddard, LLP, one of our early Mentees and now a Mentor on the Executive Programme described the value of this advice:

"My Mentor on the Programme gave me insights that I did not otherwise have, in terms of some of



Lord Rose, Chairman, Ocado plc

'The Mentee can reflect upon the feedback without the additional pressure of internal judgement'

the more granular and practical detail. I also received one of the most practical pieces of advice I have ever received, which continues to help me, years later."

Our Mentors frequently tell us that openness, honesty and a willingness by both parties to share weaknesses as well as strengths are critical components of a successful relationship. One of our long-standing Mentors, Lord Rose, describes how this mutual disclosure is central to getting to the heart of the Mentee's needs: *"There's an element of trust on both sides. So I have to be open with her about some of my experiences at work past or current, because they can illuminate the problem that she might be having. Equally she's got to be prepared to trust me with the sort of situations she might find herself in. It's time out from a business environment, where you can actually be honest with somebody and talk to them about your fears and your worries and equally your ambitions without having it all reported back to HR."*

Building a robust foundation for both support and challenge

Our experience shows that each Mentor has his or her own distinctive personal style. Some see themselves as a "mirror" or a sounding-board through which the Mentee works out her own path. Others view their approach as more guidance and experience-based. One Mentor described his style as predominantly "anecdotal" – sharing his past experience to help illuminate his Mentee's current dilemmas. Most use a combination to greater or lesser degrees and part of the matching process is designed to ensure that the Mentor's style will work with his particular Mentee and that her approach to her development will also suit the Mentor.

John Heron, in his work, 'Helping the client' emphasises the importance of the 'helper'



Monica Burch, Senior Partner, Addleshaw Goddard LLP

using both Authoritative and Facilitative styles to add most value. Authoritative interventions provide advice, information, direction and feedback, while Facilitative ones aim to help the client think through the issue themselves and develop the emotional awareness and resilience to face situations differently. Clearly an over-emphasis on one type over the other has the potential to limit personal growth – the skill lies in being agile enough to draw on either approach in a way that helps the client most at any point in time.

One way in which a Mentor can help a Mentee is in giving feedback, which can sometimes be difficult for the Mentee to receive. The mentoring relationship provides each Mentee with a unique environment in which to receive feedback on their authority, presence and impact from a senior leader. When our Mentees talk to us about the feedback they have received, they are – without exception – hugely appreciative of it. It is well received because it is given in an atmosphere of trust, outside of the Mentee's organisation. The only motive for the feedback is the Mentee's development and she can reflect upon it and consider how to act on the feedback without the additional pressure of internal judgement and feared impact on her executive career development.

Feedback of this nature is not only difficult to receive – it can be equally challenging to deliver. On the occasions when this kind of feedback is given the Foundation can work with both Mentors and Mentees if they feel that additional support outside the mentoring pair is needed. But often, the atmosphere of openness and trust is such that the mentoring pair can give, receive and process the feedback as part of a trusting and supportive professional relationship.

Whilst we don't specifically refer our Mentors to his work, the guidance we give them in our Mentoring Guidelines as well as the stance they often spontaneously adopt in their mentoring, reflects Gerard Egan's model of the "Skilled Helper" (1982). Egan breaks down the process of productive helping into three phases: establishing how things are now; helping the client work out where they would like to be; and helping them devise strategies to get

'We have built a strong relationship based on trust and openness. He brought incredible insight, balanced perspectives and at the same time has challenged me at all the right times to push myself that much harder to achieve my ambitions.'

Gabby Beaver, Chief Administrative Officer to COO, Barclays plc

there. In each phase the core skills of listening, remembering, reflecting and responding are employed. Time and again our Mentees describe their Mentors as using these skills to great effect.

Conclusion

Mentoring relationships come in all shapes and sizes and differing styles can provide equally strong results for the mentoring pair. In our experience a well-matched pair will work out what they want to achieve, will remain open to change and new learning and will emerge at the end of their relationship with many outcomes – transformational, developmental or a series of "nudges" – many of which could not have been anticipated at the outset. The constant features in all these relationships are trust and confidence, mutual disclosure and a willingness to act on new learning. If there is a "recipe" for success, this, in our view, is it.

Peninah Thomson OBE, Clare Laurent, and Dr. Hilary Lines

The Mentoring Foundation

May 2015

'The Rise of the Female Executive: how women's leadership is accelerating cultural change' by Peninah Thomson and Clare Laurent with Tom Lloyd, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in Autumn 2015.

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