

Mentoring – Being a Mentor



A Guide for Researchers

Resource 3 of 4

“Advice is like snow; the softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into the mind.”

Samuel Coleridge

Though mentorship is one of those voluntary good-citizenship acts that people (especially from minority or underrepresented backgrounds) take on, being a mentor confers benefit to mentee and mentor alike and the talents and practices of a skilled mentor are wholly transferable to research supervision or line management. As well as contributing to the development of junior colleagues (motivating in its own right), mentoring:

- Encourages you to renew your ideas and perceptions of your leadership roles
- Exposes you to fresh work perspectives and approaches
- Improves your communication, interpersonal and feedback skills
- Creates new trusted relationships and connections

Finally, in the modern world (especially in research where students and mentees become collaborators and colleagues) professionals are finding that effective mentorship at a local level can dovetail productively with a bigger picture networking – a phenomenon sometimes referred to as ‘mentworking’¹.

In this resource we’ll examine:

- The attributes and qualities of a mentor
- Starting off on the right foot and questions to ask potential mentees
- Designing mentoring relationships and establishing boundaries
- A framework for mentoring conversations
- Taking a coaching approach to mentoring – moving beyond advice and asking powerful questions
- Mentoring skills
- Possible difficulties and what you can do if the relationship isn’t working
- Closing things down – in the right way

¹See

https://www.hr.com/en/magazines/leadership_excellence_essentials/may_2021_leadership_excellence/consider-the-art-of-mentworking.html

The attributes and qualities of a mentor

“Self-awareness – understanding our own motivations, our strengths and challenges – is the key to getting ready to mentor.”

Zachary and Fain, 2022

At first glance, the role of a mentor might seem rather simple – just allow a junior colleague to pick your brains and tell them some stories from your career thus far. However, the role when done well is far more nuanced and requires far more skill.

Enquiry

Take a look at the table below, which lists just some of the things that a skilful mentor might need to be and to do. How many of them would you list as personal strengths of yours?

A	B	C
Conscious focus on own self-development	Enthusiasm	Remaining objective
Can follow a process	Desire to help	Interested in people
Manage time	Patient	Empathetic
Specific technical expertise	Encouraging	Effective listening
Track record of professional achievement and excellence	Well-prepared	Good questioning skills
Sound intellectual judgement	Understand need for outcomes and actions following dialogue	Empowering
Solid critical faculties	Easy to talk to	Feedback skills
Wide-ranging experience	Trustworthy	Can support and challenge where necessary
Well respected in your field	Focused but flexible	Emotionally intelligent

You may be able to tick off some, or even most of these. If so, well done. But take another look and notice that there are some themes in the column groupings.

Column A

Many of the elements in column A are about the personal success of the mentor as a professional. Sharing your experiences (positive and negative) is certainly part of the mentoring role, but if this is all that a mentor does then the focus is on the wrong person.

Column B

These are the absolute essential elements that a mentor needs. You should have ticks in every part of this column.

Column C

Notice that the element in this column all centres on the growth and development of the learning mentee. This ability to question, listen, show empathy, challenge and support in a tailored way is what raises a good professional to a great mentor.

Ultimately, the most important attribute that a mentor can have is a dedication to the success of the mentee. If you don't care, the relationship won't work. That is not to say the mentor needs to own the process or invest a great deal of work, but it does mean that the purpose of everything a mentor does should be to help develop the capability, confidence and commitment of the mentee. It's their journey, not yours.

Starting off on the right foot and questions to ask potential mentees

If a mentoring relationship is going to work it's essential that it places the mentee's experience and learning at the centre of things. As such, we'd suggest some questions to help you set things off in a learner-centred fashion.

Start by finding out about the mentee's priorities and values. Questions like:

- Who are you (the human being)?
- What is important to you?
- Where are you heading?

Find out about their values and the professional (and, if appropriate, personal) big picture that governs their actions.

You may wish at this point to establish some boundaries and parameters (see next section). If the potential mentee is already known to you, you may wish to dig a little deeper into the mentees priorities and agenda are with questions like:

- What is it that you really want to be and do (in X time)?
- What are your goals and priorities? (nb. If they don't have a goal, their first goal might be to get a goal...)
- What are you doing really well that has helped you get here?
- What (are you not doing well that) is getting in the way?
- What specifically do you need to do / learn to get closer to your goals?
- Why are you considering mentoring? What help do you need (from me)?

You may notice (it happens often) that the presented 'goals' are negative states that the mentee does not want to have. (e.g. 'I don't want to still be here as a post-doc in ten years' time'). In this case, ask what they 'Do' want. This might be the most valuable question you ask them!

Enquire as to the type of support and challenge that they seek from you. This may be intellectual (though there could be conflicts of interest here with their supervisors or line-managers), contextual or psychological. They may be looking for something that you cannot directly provide.

Designing mentoring relationships and establishing boundaries

As with most effective professional relationships, there are a few fundamentals that need to be in place to set things up in the right way. In addition to these, it's very helpful to ensure a degree of conscious design to help both parties get the most from things. From first principles, regardless of the mentoring topics, or the mentees professional priorities, you should consider the following areas:

Mutual Respect	Do both parties have and show respect for the other. Almost certainly respect will flow from mentee to mentor (though whether they respect a mentor's time is a different matter) – but is this reciprocated? In the case of a mentor who criticises more than constructs and belittles the mentees decisions thus far, perhaps not.
Trust and Confidentiality	Are both parties certain that what is discussed will stay confidential (unless otherwise agreed)? Are both parties sure that there is no conflict of interests in the relationship? If in doubt, raise this explicitly early in the conversation. Has the mentee discussed their (potential) mentor with their supervisor, tutor or line manager?
Boundaries	Have professional boundaries been acknowledged? For instance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the mentee clear that the mentor is not a line manager or supervisor? • Is the mentor clear that their advice is just that and no more?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are both parties clear that the relationship is not therapy or mental health support? • Are all parties comfortable with the potential overlap between the role of a mentor and the advice given by (for instance) a research supervisor?
Aligned Expectations	<p>What is your understanding of the relationship? What is their understanding? Who has responsibility for what?</p> <p>What does the mentee actually want from the mentor? Does this fit with the mentor's workload / style / agenda etc.?</p> <p>In many mentoring schemes, mentors and mentees sign an agreement 'pact' at the start containing a section for both parties where they write a preparatory statement.</p> <p>Mentee: I am undertaking this mentoring relationship because I need support with...</p> <p>Mentor: My expectations of being a mentor are...</p> <p>And this forms the basis of the first conversation. Following this, both parties sign and date their agreed commitments to the mentoring process.</p> <p>Obviously you don't need to go to these lengths unless it's helpful to you both – but nonetheless, the questions are valid.</p> <p>You can find more about Aligning Expectations via the Mentor Starter Pack – an online resource created by Dr. Kay Guccione.</p>
Logistics Agreed	<p>Mentoring relationships can falter when peoples' diaries get full. It's vital to be clear about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of contact • Location / format of meetings • Who has responsibility for arranging meetings (nb. The mentee...) • Contingency plans in case one party needs to change arrangements • Will any sort of notes / logbook be used (as is sometimes require on institutional schemes)

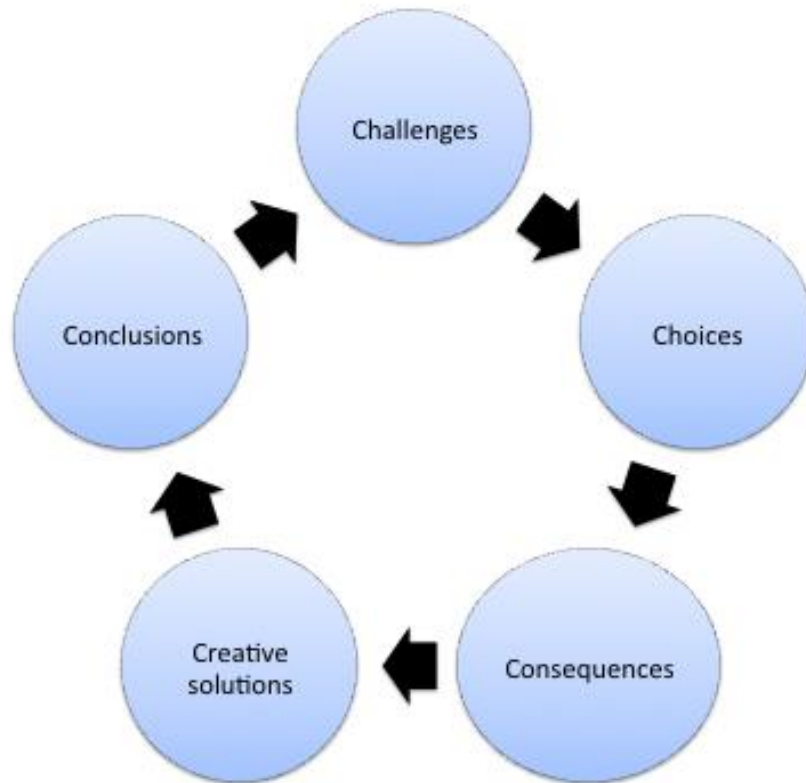
	Unless the mentoring relationship is part of a scheme, agree a <i>trial</i> calendar of (for example) one meeting every couple of months for the next six months. This gives both of you an exit-ramp if things are not working out.
Rapport and Commitment	All of the above elements seem quite rigid and almost prescriptive. They are of course important, but what makes the relationship work is the rapport between the two players. Spend some time just talking about each other's research and career so far, so you can build some empathy and establish some commonalities. Ultimately, this rapport and your mutual commitment to the relationship is more important than any other element.
Conscious Design	Be conscious in the way you design the relationship so that it works for the mentee. Don't assume what you'd need is what they need. Ask questions like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sort of challenge / support do you need? • How do you want me to be with you? • What sort of feedback do you find helpful? • What sort of goals motivate you most? • If this wasn't working for you, what would be happening?
Focus on building a mutually helpful relationship	Finally, remember that productive mentoring relationships are helpful for the mentor as well as the mentee. Don't be afraid to be open about what you need and the things that may get in the way, from your perspective, about this being positive for you both.

Time spent on these elements can prevent all sorts of future problems since ultimately, if both parties are aligned and committed to the success of the mentee and the relationship, it makes it much easier to deal with issues and provide corrective feedback before things break down.

A framework for mentoring conversations

After the initial scoping and alignment conversation, something useful for mentors and mentees alike is to have a scaffold around which conversations can be structured.

This gives the mentor a frame in which to ask questions and to ensure that things don't drift away from a productive focus or stray into the mentor dominating the conversation. Even experienced mentors can get side tracked the following model may help to keep things mentee centred and focused on learning and action.



The model is called the Five Cs Model of Mentoring² and it's particularly valuable for complex issues where a mentee may have myriad possibilities to consider with a range of possible outcomes.

In the table on the next page, the model has been broken down into the purpose of each phase and, alongside, a set of questions that a mentor could ask. Of course, equally here the framework could act as a template to help the mentor pass on their experience more directly – sometimes, as a mentor, articulating your process of thinking through your decisions is just as valuable as sharing the actual results you achieved.

² The 5C Model is from the work of Mike Pegg (see *The Art of Mentoring* (2006) and *The Mentor's Book* (2003) – and adapted here from the work of Emma Ford – *Coaching for Careers*).

	Purpose	Questions to Ask the Mentee
Challenges	<p>Establish the key priorities the mentee has and the issues they face.</p> <p>Identify the focus of the session and consider what they actually want to achieve</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenge would you like to explore? • What do you really want to achieve? • What would be a positive outcome for this subject/challenge?
Choices	<p>Identify options to tackle the challenge in question (a blend of enquiry and suggestion from you may be required here)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your options – X,Y,Z? • What have you already tried? • Are there other options? • Is there anything we haven't thought about? • What happens if you do nothing?
Consequences	<p>Exploring the possible ecology of an action or the potential strategic impact of any given choice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the pro's and con's of that approach? • What might happen? • What's the best and worst case scenario? • What is inside and outside of your control?
Creative Solutions	<p>Thinking outside the box and taking a bigger-picture view of things.</p> <p>Remember, they've probably tried the obvious routes already. It's worth spending more time in this phase than is immediately comfortable. Your job is to help them to think, as well as tell them what you'd do.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you do if you could do whatever you needed to get the perfect outcome? • Have you been in a similar situation in the past which has been successful? • What support do you need from other people? • Are there any more imaginative solutions?
Conclusions	<p>Defining success and creating an action plan of concrete and accountable steps with a time line.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What steps will you take to deliver the solution? • How will you know you have been successful? • What can you do if it doesn't work? • What might stop you from succeeding?

Taking a coaching approach to mentoring – moving beyond advice and asking powerful questions

We know that giving someone ideas as to what they ‘should’ do and how they ‘should’ change to be more effective, often has the opposite effect.

Richard Boyatzis

In order to build a mentoring relationship that is learner-centred and that gives voice to the mentee it is vital that a mentor has the flexibility to move beyond advice-giving and has a range of tools and approaches that they can draw upon. Questioning (and of course listening to responses) is perhaps the most useful tool a mentor can have. To that end, perhaps the biggest mentoring trap is for the mentor to over-talk and under-listen.

Guccione and Hutchinson (2021) define mentoring as ultimately “a conversation with a purpose.” And it is worth remembering that this purpose is that the mentee grows – not that the mentor simply tells stories.

Enquiry

Spend a moment or two jotting down what you believe to be the components of a really effective learning question.

Next time you’re with a mentee or student, notice whether you’re using your own best practice or not.

Mentor questions can come in many forms, but you’ll probably find that the best questions

- Originate from a place of curiosity as opposed to leading questions designed to test
- Are open, and give the mentee space to answer
- Focus on the future. (For instance, “Why do you want to do that?” is a perfectly valid scholarly question, but it tends to provoke past reflection rather than future planning. A different way of asking the same question with a future focus is “So, what will that approach give you?”)

Broadly speaking to ask the right questions in the service of your mentee you’ll need a variety of questioning approaches and to make sensible decisions about how much to probe and check. The following types of questioning approach may be helpful for different situations.

Open questions These are designed to get your mentee talking. Ask them in a spirit of curiosity, but be ready to respectfully step in if required.	So, what happened...? How do you see it...? What would you like to do.....? How is that working....? How do you feel?
Closed questions These are usually a yes, no or short answer – and used to check understanding or to clarify a position. Be ready to follow up with an open enquiry.	Do you want to pursue that approach again? When do you want to have decided by? Did I understand you correctly when you said X?
Hypothetical questions These invite someone to imagine themselves in a situation or be creative.	If you could start again, what would you do? What would happen in an ideal world? What would you say if you met her now? If that falls through, what options do you have?
Focussing questions These are aimed at achieving focussed (but not predetermined) answers.	When you achieve X, what will that actually give you? What's actually important about Y? What's standing in the way of Z?
Reflecting questions With reflecting questions, the mentor may curiously adapt the adjectives, verbs or nouns that the mentee has already used.	For instance: [Mentee] "That will be difficult?" [Mentor] "What specifically will be difficult about it?" [Mentee] "I'm passionate about X..." [Mentor] "I'm curious. How do you channel that passion?"
Challenging questions These questions are designed to crystallise a thought or spur a mentee towards an action.	For instance, the mentor might listen to a range of options and force a prioritised choice. 'If you had to choose, right now...which goal of those three would you prioritise?' Or simply identify a self-sabotaging belief or behaviour. "Is this the same unhelpful behaviour you'd said you'd stop?"
Thought-provoking questions These require new ways of thinking and perspective shifts	If you'd achieved your goal, what would your future self tell your current self? What question would be most useful for me to ask you right now?

There are, of course, many, many other questioning approaches. Regardless of which one you choose you should remember that it's not an interrogation, that a balance must be struck between support and challenge and every question should be asked to facilitate learning or catalyse action in the service of the mentee.

Other Mentoring Skills

The skills of a good coach-like mentor are manifold. Alongside questioning, effective mentors use skills such as Giving Effective Feedback, Active Listening and Observation, Noticing and Reflecting and Driving for Results.

Giving Effective Feedback

At some point during your mentoring you may have to give your mentee some feedback. You might be challenging what they have said, praising their efforts thus far, observing body language or non-vocal cues or questioning the realism of their plans. Such feedback from respected colleagues is vital as a development tool, but it must be:

- Objective and based on evidence
- Balanced and constructive (beware the academic 'critical' predisposition)
- Specific and rooted in behavioural observation or concrete performance indicators
- Selective (i.e. prioritise the things that will add the most value to them)

If you think that they'd benefit from a steer or instruction, you may wish to ask permission first (e.g. Can I offer a suggestion here?).

Listening and Observing

Your focus, as a mentor, needs to be on your mentee – especially

- What they say – the specific word choices and frames they use
- How they say it – their tonality, pace and pitch
- How they look as they say it – their body language

Listen to the non-verbal cues. What do you hear in their tonality? Frustration, confidence, worry? If in doubt, don't guess – ask. ("Your voice changes when you talk about X, can I ask about that?")

You may wish to take a few (confidential) notes – but don't let these get in the way of rapport. A few notes can be useful to reflect the mentee's words back to them. ("You say, X is 'a total waste of space'. Can you unpack that a little?")

You can also use your listening and observation check your understanding and to help your mentee to get a productive point.

“Ok, so, if I have this right, your situation is...”

“From what you’re telling me, it seems to me that you’re stuck in that same loop as before. Am I right?”

Noticing and Reflecting

If you are really listening and observing then you’ll notice that some things resonate with your mentee and some things don’t. A core coaching skill that mentors can use is to really focus on the options that make the mentee come to life. For instance, there is a world of difference between these two mentee responses.

Mentee [with zero resonance]: “Well...yes... I suppose I *might try* and think about that.”

and

Mentee [face aglow with excitement]: “Wow. That’s brilliant. I can already see how I can do that.”

In this case, a mentor would be perfectly justified in feeding back that lack of enthusiasm for the first option.

Mentor: “That first option doesn’t seem right for you?” (Note that this is a question, not a statement.)

This approach requires that the mentor be somewhat detached from their own suggestions. After all, it’s the mentee who is important here, not the mentor’s ego.

Finally here, if you’re really paying attention, you’ll notice they prefer certain linguistic frames. Reflecting these frames may provide more resonant questions. For instance:

Mentee	Frame used	Possible reflected mentor’s response
I can’t picture a future here.	Visual	So, where do you see things going
It doesn’t sound like there are many opportunities for me.	Auditory	With whom would you need to talk to clarify that?
I don’t feel like they’re going to extend my contract.	Kinaesthetic	What concrete evidence would you need?

Maintaining a Productive Focus and Driving for Results

If the purpose of mentoring is to help the mentee to learn, grow and achieve, it’s important that the mentor is able to help maintain a productive focus. Many

mentors actually do the opposite of this as they tell another rambling antiquated story from their youth...

There are few coaching techniques which you may find helpful to maintain this focus – but it's worth using them carefully and only after considering what your mentor needs from you and the way that the relationship was designed at the start.

Locus of control	<p>Keep the focus on things that mentee can effect, control or influence. A tell-tale sign that the locus of control is in the wrong place is when a mentee uses the phrase:</p> <p>“If only they... (e.g. would change their approach)”.</p> <p>At this point, a coachlike mentor could (and probably should) enquire what the mentee could influence in that situation.</p>
Rapport, but not collusion	<p>The mentoring role requires a degree of empathy, but taken too far, empathy becomes collusion and a failure to help confront the key issues. For instance:</p> <p>“Crikey. Sounds like you had a tough week. So what could you do next week to make sure it's better?”</p>
“Bottom Lining”	<p>‘Bottom lining’ is coach-speak for helping someone get out of their story and into a specific insight (i.e. get to the bottom line).</p> <p>“Ok, can I just pause you there (as you tell this rambling story) What did you learn? What can you conclude? What's the lesson there? How could you move that forward?”</p>
Move Towards Goals and Actions	<p>Asking questions like:</p> <p>What needs to happen? What needs to change? What exactly are you going to do? By when?</p>
Clarifying SMART targets	<p>“I might try and think about maybe looking at that.” is not a SMART goal. SMART is a well known goal-setting acronym which appears in various forms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifically (What will they actually do?) • Measurable (What does ‘some’ mean?) • Actionable (Is the goal with the mentee's control? If not, what elements are?) • Realistic (Does this goal fit within their busy life?) • Time-bound (By when will action be taken?)
Ensuring Motivation	<p>Are they committed to any given course of action they choose? Do they act from session to session? If not, what do they need? Ask them what is getting in the way and what they need to change to unblock things. Are their goals resonant to them? Do they need help prioritising or making space? Of course, responsibility for action rests with the mentee, but a good mentor can have a catalytic effect here.</p>

Possible difficulties and what you can do if the relationship isn't working

For all the skill of the mentor and the good intentions of both parties, sometimes things don't work. Some possible pitfalls to watch out for include:

- ☒ The mentor is talking too much and not listening.
- ☒ The mentee is not getting the advice they need (perhaps because the mentor is listening too much!).
- ☒ One or both parties lack time or lack commitment to the process.
- ☒ Mentees sometimes seek out mentoring steer because they don't agree with the way that their boss wants them to operate. A third party sounding board in this case may be useful, but this situation is likely to end in rancour and friction somewhere.
- ☒ Mentees not acting or following up on what they've committed to (leading to a feeling of pointlessness from the mentor)
- ☒ Conversations that go round in circles from week to week (As a mentor, notice this and point it out. But then discuss how the two of you are going to change this situation.)
- ☒ A basic lack of alignment in expectation of what a mentoring relationship would be (i.e. the mentee was expecting network introductions and funding and the mentor definitely wasn't offering this).

Many, if not all of these things can be remedied or avoided in the early stage of the relationship with a conversation about expectation and a consciously designed mentoring alliance.

However, as a mentor, it's vital to dedicate a little time to reflect on how things are going. Ask your mentee whether things are working for them and how you both might need to change things to remedy this situation if they are not.

If you've built rapport and designed your mentoring alliance then it is often a relatively easy conversation to get things back on track. You may be surprised to learn that your perception of whether a process is valuable is different to your mentee's. Regardless, it's still worth broaching this topic. Set a trial window (e.g. three sessions in six months) and if things aren't working for both of you, then you have a natural exit.

If it's not working it's important to not apportion blame to either of you. If you both did your best, think of it as a no-fault separation. But, if the worst happens, before you close things down:

- Ask the mentee to articulate the actions they've derived from their conversations with you.

- Advise them to step back and consider what they've learned so they can prioritise their next steps.
- Potentially help them to identify other folk who might be able to help them. This might be particularly important if the mentee sought topic-based technical insight from you (i.e. how to write a fellowship application) and then failed in this task. (Remember, here you can still offer mentoring in resilience and coping with career uncertainty.)
- If your relationship sits within an institutional scheme, inform the organisers.
- Continue to bear in mind the notions of confidentiality and mutual respect.

Most, if not all, successful professionals have had proto-mentoring relationships that have not worked out. It's one of those complex human relationship things – so don't agonise about it. Reflect, be honest, learn for next time and part on good terms.

Coming to a Productive End - Closing Things Down

Assuming that the mentoring relationship 'works' for both parties – it's sensible at the end of the process to close things down so that both parties know where they stand and can realise learning for any future mentoring relationship (either as mentor or mentee).

You may wish to consider questions like:

- Have the goals formulated at the start of the relationship been met?
- What have I learned (mentor and mentee) from the process?
- How have things changed as a result of the relationship?
- Where is the mentee headed next?
- What future support needs to be in place for the mentee? (Even at the end of the relationship where it is possible that mentee has grown past the mentor's experience range, by asking this question, the mentor can still offer a valuable service by helping to coach the next steps.)

Dr. Steve Hutchinson

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