

# An Overview of Mentoring

## *A perspective from mch: positive impact*

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Increasing the positive impact of individuals, teams and  
organisations through staff development

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## Focus and Characteristics of Mentoring

A mentee enters a mentoring relationship with a desire to develop themselves as a person. Consequently, all areas of the mentee's life are potentially within the scope of the mentoring relationship.

The mentor is ideally asked by the mentee (and, if not asked, is certainly willing) to assist in this development process. A great mentor is independent, experienced and skilled, and their sole focus is to help their mentee. In practice, the mentor often learns as much from the mentoring relationship as the mentee, however this should be considered an 'added bonus' rather than a primary aim. The primary focus is on the development of the mentee.

Mentoring, like any relationship, needs nurturing and nurturing takes time. Consequently, it is crucial that both the mentor and mentee give enough time to the relationship to enable genuine progress.

The following table summarises the key characteristics:

Focus	The mentee as a person
Relationship	Self-selecting
Source of Influence	Power free relationship – the mentor's influence is proportionate to the perceived value they bring
Scope	The mentee's life

A crucial point to make is that mentoring is not just about talking, it's about doing. Furthermore, mentoring is not just for life's big decisions (e.g., Is it time for a career change?), but it is also for the day-to-day (e.g., How can I present my views more effectively?). Consequently, in addition to reflective conversations, mentoring can also involve iterating a key document together, or gaining feedback on an important presentation/conversation the mentee wants to deliver/have.

The scope of mentoring acknowledges that while many people often try to compartmentalise their lives, different areas invariably influence others (e.g., what's going on outside of work can influence work performance and *vice versa*). However, while the whole of a mentee's life *can* be in scope, there may be good reasons for the scope to be restricted. An obvious reason for this would be if either party is very uncomfortable discussing the proposed topic. Another is if the mentor does not have the skill or expertise to assist the mentee (please see the reference to mentoring vs counselling below). This illustrates the importance of setting boundaries within mentoring and creating sufficient levels of trust to enable both parties to candidly feedback to each other.

Within agreed boundaries, the mentee sets the agenda. The mentor may challenge that agenda, but ultimately their role is to facilitate it.

## *The Dynamics of Mentoring*

Given the above characteristics, mentoring can be considered as an umbrella term for a range of potential relationships:



The extent and timing of each potential relationship will depend on the issue being dealt with, mentee preferences and the one that the mentor believes will be most valuable. The skill of great mentoring is getting the most effective balance between all these possible relationships.

In *mch*'s experience, there is often confusion around the differences between coaching and mentoring. The International Mentoring Association provides a useful summary of the differences;

*'Coaching is technical support focused on the development of techniques [that are deemed necessary for someone] to know and be able to do, while mentoring is the larger process for learning all of the other professional and personal skills and understandings needed for success.'*

In coaching, the consistent primary focus is often on improving performance. Furthermore, the means through which performance is improved stems from either:

- Asking great questions, so the mentee generates their own next step to solving their problem or achieving their goal

Or

- Providing timely and effective feedback

Mentoring can encompass this (coaching is under the mentoring umbrella after all), but it affords other possibilities, such as offering advice, which is the antithesis of coaching. Furthermore, aspects such as greater self-awareness, rather than performance, may be the primary focus within mentoring.

One relationship that is *not* covered by mentoring is counselling. Consequently, while the mentee's life as a whole remains in scope, if the mentor considers that certain issues require specialist counselling or therapy, then they would discuss ways to obtain such assistance, rather than the issue itself.

## *The Qualities Required*

As already outlined, mentoring is first and foremost a relationship. The qualities *mch* believes are required for successful relationships are listed below. Ultimately, success depends on both parties exhibiting the qualities outlined; however, it can be incumbent on the mentor to initiate these qualities.

### Trust

In *mch's* view, four elements combine to create trust:

- Reliability
  - Promising what you do and doing what you promise
- Acceptance
  - Who you are is O.K. with me
- Openness
  - Sharing who you are and what you feel
- Congruence
  - Practicing what you preach

### Respect

Both parties feel listened to and never feel patronised.

### Commitment

The mentee and mentor know that the relationship involves concrete inputs e.g., giving each other feedback, or devoting a designated amount of time each month to the relationship.

### A Balance of Challenge and Enjoyment

Both the mentee and mentor understand that the relationship is designed to challenge their needs, values, feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Although challenging, *mch* has yet to come across a successful mentoring relationship where there's been an absence of laughter and enjoyment.

Like all relationships, the more emotional intelligence both parties illustrate and the greater the skill in active listening and questioning, the more successful it's likely to be.

## *Practicalities*

With the above fundamentals in place, each mentoring pair can then work out what works best for them with respect to where they meet, how often they meet, and for how long.

### **Method**

Developing the sufficient level of trust required for mentoring can be greatly helped by meeting face-to-face. However, it is not essential, and mentoring conducted *via* phone or on a virtual meeting platform can prove very effective.

### **Duration**

*mch* has known successful mentoring relationships that have stuck quite rigidly to sessions of 50 minutes, while others have spent the whole day mentoring. Others have simply agreed that a session will end when both feel it's reached a natural endpoint, or when one of them gets tired, whichever comes first. In *mch's* view there is no magic duration for a mentoring session. It is more important that both parties come to a session 'switched on' and fully present (rather than thinking about what's already happened that day, or what's still to come).

In terms of the overall duration of a mentoring relationship, again there is no magic number. *mch* has known mentoring relationships that have lasted decades and others that have lasted weeks, and in all these cases the mentees have considered their mentoring to have been life changingly positive.

### **Frequency**

*mch* has observed that while a significant proportion of mentoring relationships meet roughly once a month, there's not a strong correlation between the success of a mentoring relationship and a specific frequency of sessions. Some successful relationships have met at the same time every month, others have had several sessions over a number of days and then had a significant pause. The key determinant for success seems to be that sessions occur when they are most needed by the mentee.

### **Location**

In *mch's* experience mentoring works best when it takes place away from the mentor's and mentee's place of work (even if it is being conducted virtually). This prevents disruptions and many people find that a new location prompts a new way of thinking.