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MAKING THE MENTORING PROCESS WORK

In the third of three articles about mentoring, Patrick O'Brien, Managing Director of The Amanuenses Network, explains the process of mentorship and why it is mutually beneficial, both for the mentor and mentee.

Mentoring is a collaborative learning process between two individuals, each committed equally, to the personal growth of the other. The mentor brings their experience and connections, coupled with an ability to guide and advise. The mentee brings a desire to grow, underpinned with a willing commitment to become different in the future.

Growth though is not instant. It requires learning, which happens over time. Learning requires scaffolding and support, which happens within a social relationship. Relationships involve trust, which happens during the drumbeats of regular, constructive, growth conversations.

Mentoring involves a process shaped by different perspectives, with differing roles. Effective mentoring thus requires mutual commitments. Each must invest the time and resources to build constructive relationships, from which both will expect to see results that realise benefits.

Though mentoring involves many aspects, five are important enough to warrant special attention. The first three relate to the outcomes of a successful initial meeting. The remaining two relate to the ongoing relationship; on taking measurements and managing motivations.

1. Hold a 'kick-off' meeting

The term 'process' suggests a persistent course of action intended to achieve

known outcomes. Within a mentoring context, mentor-mentee dialogue sessions are the usual conduit to discuss those actions. It is therefore important, early on in the process, to agree dates to hold a regular series of dialogue sessions.

That said, the very first mentor-mentee meeting is especially critical, as it creates the foundations for how both parties want the process to run. It's a 'kick-off' that provides each party with their first impression of the other. It also sets a tone that influences how each wants their own journey to evolve. And finally, it brings formality into how each party chooses to interact. It creates a 'contract'.

It's a high-stakes meeting, as it requires early agreement across a number of areas. So, drawing on good EQ (emotional intelligence) will help forge strong early connections. It's important to put others at ease by conveying confident feelings using body language and vocal tone. It's also wise to select a neutral venue, in order to allow more comfortable conversations to flow.

Attitude is important, too, as a positive mindset is the precursor to a good first touch. Take time to help each other relax using 'chit chat'; it brings both safety and influence. Put aside your 'device' to focus attention onto your partner. This ensures you are fully present, which also helps to build rapport. Relationships require trust,

so do everything in your power to create a space that looks, sounds and feels safe for your partner.

2. Determine desired needs and expectations

Enabling a mentee to achieve change – deep, transformational change – is the real purpose of a mentoring programme. Therefore, the mentor's role is to create a safe, supportive environment that fosters accountability around their mentee's self-development and growth needs.

To achieve this, a mentor must first get the mentee to share their desired goals, their chosen destination and direction. This will help the mentor focus relevant conversations about resources around the mentee's needs. Knowing where their mentee is heading also helps them know how, as a mentor, they are best able to contribute.

An effective mentor often has personal 'growth' goals, too; things they want from the process. It is therefore important that the mentor articulates what they also need from their relationship. Affording each the opportunity to share early on contributes to a more effective relationship.

That said, personalised sharing requires honesty, transparency and foresight. It requires the courage to be vulnerable and air private thoughts with a new 'friend'. Purpose-related conversations can be quite

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challenging, as they require answers to difficult topics, such as:

- Why each is participating
- Where they are looking to grow
- How each can help the other reach their desired outcomes.

3. Clarify expectations in a 'mentoring agreement'

Progress requires decisions and actions; both mentor and mentee contribute to the decision-making process. In doing so, they must fully capture and respect the different expectations and assumptions each has, the contrasting roles they play and the perspectives they hold.

Thus, in order to focus efforts, acknowledge contributions and recognise progress, it's vital to draw up a 'mentoring agreement'. Confirming a set of workable 'ground rules' brings closure to the initial meeting. Rules adopted set pace and cadence to meeting sessions, becoming the glue to bind them on their growth journeys and helping them to work through issues if conflict arises.

The agreement codifies details of expectations shared and agreed during the kick-off meeting. For instance, some of the areas typically covered in agreements are:

- The key roles, responsibilities and accountabilities
- Timing of the relationship, frequency and duration
- Intended outcomes sought by both participants
- Meeting preferences, for both regular and ad hoc
- Process for sharing ideas, expertise and insights
- Mechanism for evaluating personal growth
- Procedure for giving relevant feedback
- Need for encouragement and support
- Channel to reflect and journal
- Respect for confidentiality.

Summarising the 'whats, whos and hows' of expectations brings clarity to the type of governance framework that's required for a sustainable mentoring relationship.

Codifying mechanics and ground rules in a simple, contractual form allows each to express their commitment to the other for the duration of the programme.

Good governance is core when driving a mentoring process towards successful outcomes.

4. Regularly reflect to evaluate progress

Remember that the purpose of mentoring is to foster mentee growth in a desired direction. Progress, however, is not binary; it is determined along two compellingly different axes.

The first axis measures 'where the benefits are achieved'; the second measures 'how the journey is experienced'. The 'where' examines desired outcomes, bringing visibility to competences gained and the learning that's occurred. The 'how' examines the quality of the mentoring dialectic, examining the relationship created and the extent to which it created safety for mutual sharing.

In a well-constructed mentoring process, quantitative benefits flow, leading to mentee and mentor growth. Research suggests that some of the more common benefits sought by a mentee are:

- Potential to experience deep, transformational change
- Access to a trusted confidant who can provide impartial advice
- Mechanism for challenge and exposure to new ways of thinking
- Potential to achieve recognition with improved organisational visibility
- Environment for safe application of ideas that develop relevant competences
- Ability to deepen competences to allow a mentee to strengthen confidence levels.

For a mentor, research also suggests that some of the more common benefits sought are:

- Personal satisfaction from seeing the difference they make to others
- Increased self-awareness of their leadership approaches and styles
- Opportunities to enhance their leadership and coaching skill set
- Realisation and strengthening of their functional expertise
- Greater influence within their personal networks
- Space for their own reflection and growth.

Progress achieved is always measured by looking back in both quantitative

and qualitative terms. However, it's also important to cast ahead and assess what else may be required for the next stage of the growth journey. So, where appropriate, share feedback that reinforces and develops.

5. Pay attention to manage motivations

'Beginning is easy' states an old Japanese proverb, yet 'continuing is hard'. So, the last aspect addresses the need for both to remain motivated in order to stay on track. Stickability is especially important given the long run-time commitment required of a mentoring programme.

'Motivation' means having strong and compelling incentives to act. That said, a person's motivations are either 'intrinsic', or 'extrinsic'. Intrinsically motivated behaviours arise from within; they provide us with a deep sense of satisfaction. Extrinsically motivated behaviours arise from the outside; they usually arrive as rewards following actions performed for others.

A mentee derives intrinsic motivation when performing activities that they personally value. For instance, choosing to focus on their stretch goals, working on a project to build new skills, or, deepening skills in an area they enjoy. Decisions they make around 'possibilities' often reveal internal desires, too. Curiosities, inclinations and passions, all tend to signal intrinsic motivations.

Mentor actions that seek to reinforce those intrinsic motivations can be intensely powerful, too. For instance, dialogical listening so the mentee feels heard, acknowledging action, immersing in dialogue, sharing ideas, complimenting progress, giving praise and responding to feedback; these are all constructive actions. They energise the mentee and help them to feel in control.

A final note

In closing, remember that a mentoring process always requires a long-run game. It's not just about the beginning, there's a middle and an end.

Get aboard for the right reasons, help each other to collaborate, learn and grow. Have the 'hard will' to develop the 'soft skill' and so reap the benefits. Enjoy the process and the results.