

Why train your mentors?



AUTHOR

Maia Gedde

Those in charge of setting and coordinating mentoring programmes face the challenge of recruiting the right people into their mentoring programme. The calibre of the mentors you succeed in engaging in the programme is critical to its success. But do these mentors have to be complete before being selected for the programme, or are there some things that they can learn along the way?

Mentors need to be aligned to your programme and have competence in three different areas in order to be able to serve your programme effectively. These are:

- Experience and background: to meet the objectives of your mentoring programme. For example, if you are running a mentoring programme for innovation entrepreneurs in green technology, you are likely to select mentors who have some experience of running an innovative business, and some understanding of green technology. If you are running a programme for women refugee micro-entrepreneurs, you may want to recruit women mentors from their host community who have also started small business who can also act a role models. Mentors don't need to be specialists in the area of work of their mentee, but they do need to have general experience of that area.
- Foundational virtues and abilities. Empathy, self-awareness and ability to build a strong relationships are key characteristics of any good mentor. Highly rated mentors show high levels of emotional intelligence. This also needs to be coupled with being at a stage of their life or career where they can make time for mentoring, and have the energy to help others. A mentoring programme can't teach these skills and characteristics, the mentors must be selected to join the programme already in possession of these.
- Functional mentoring skills. These are salient behaviours of good mentors, which may not always come naturally to people but can be taught and then refined through practice and experience. For example, approaching the mentee in the right way from the outset, building a rapport and trust so essential for effective mentoring. Being generous listeners, refraining from jumping in with advice too early. Asking powerful and open questions which help their mentees to reflect and having some mental models for where and how to navigate the mentoring conversations.

Mentoring programmes must select mentors who possess the first two; the third is teachable through a focussed mentor training programme. Sadly, many mentoring programmes neglect this last phase, only giving importance to the first two. But this has negative consequences for mentors' preparedness going into the mentoring relationship, and their enthusiasm and satisfaction with mentoring.

Some simple mentor training can be the difference between a marginal mentoring programme, and an effective programme which can really have impact on all those involved.

Let's explore the three main reasons why mentoring skills are so often overlooked and de-prioritised in mentoring programmes and how this can be overcome.

1. **An assumption that a successful manager or entrepreneur can mentor effectively**



Mentoring has impacted how I interact with people. Initially I would impose my expectations on people I work with but this has changed and has allowed me to accept and allow people to set their own expectations then I act as a sounding board, and accountability partner. With this experience I have identified ways to clearly stipulate the goals for my team, and let them break it down and take them forward in their own way. Allowing others to be free with their execution, using their own creativity as long as the goal is met – that freedom of thought has really been relieving for me.

Alice Michira, Kenya

Mentors help their mentees to see and embrace possibilities that they can't imagine for themselves. They help them to reach their potential and to get further, faster. While there is a lot of overlap between the skills of good leaders and good mentors, we can't assume that all managers will possess and utilise these skills in their mentoring relationships. Mentoring is an art and is not always innate or easy to acquire. It requires a different skills-set to that which made them a good manager or entrepreneur in the first place. Since so many never had mentors themselves, they lack mental maps for how it is done well. On the flip side, by developing mentoring skills many people often report that they have also become better leaders, managers and colleagues so the benefits extend well beyond the mentoring relationships.

A good Mentor knows that when they help their Mentee to find their own way forward, they are much more committed to doing things differently and making lasting changes. There are different Mentoring styles which can be adopted, from being more directive to adopting a more maieutic style (ie oriented toward questioning the Mentee). This involves exploring the Mentees' thoughts, and how these link to their emotions and beliefs and values. By expressing, reflecting on and reorganising these thoughts, they can then move on to explore the most relevant solutions. Mentoring has been shown to have the most impact when the Mentor is significantly engaged in the Mentoring relationship and adopts a maieutic style.

The key takeaway here is that managers don't automatically make good mentors, but mentoring skills make managers better leaders.

2. Defer to people who have mentored previously



I had mentored several people, giving input into their business plans, before taking part in the Mowgli programme. I joined Mowgli as a mentor – it was an eye opener. I learned how to mentor properly, using many techniques, I also learned about the importance of mentoring a person as a whole, not just focussing on their business, for them to get the best results. It's all about helping them to find the solutions for themselves, rather than telling them what to do.

Thomas Biotteau, Mentor, PACS Tunisia

In order to get around the need to train mentors, some mentoring programmes prioritise people with past mentoring experience. But past mentoring experience which was not accompanied with good preparation and training, is likely to mean that they have developed and perpetuated their own style of mentoring, which may display traits not in line with best practice.

In fact, a study by St-Jean and Audet³ found that past mentoring experience has a negative impact on most of the psychological functions of the mentor. In their study of 160 entrepreneurial mentors in Canada they found that past experience in mentoring bore no correlation in the ability to provide the psychological functions (reflector, reassurance, motivation, and confidant) of a good mentor. The researchers found that this negative effect is neutralised by continuous training and refreshing of Mentoring skills.

3

In organisations or ecosystems which do not already have a culture of mentoring, it will be hard to find existing mentors, and this may, in your mind, hamper the programme. But as we have seen it need not be the case. A good mentor training programme helps to build mentoring competencies and is underpinned by reflective practice, feedback supervision and commitment to continued professional development. It will provide an opportunity for everyone on the programme to learn, to become more aware of their ego, and to refrain from judgement. Contexts are forever evolving, and therefore the more mentors learn and practice, the better they will be able to flex their mentoring muscles.

2. IBID

3. Simon SA, Eby LT. A typology of negative mentoring experiences: a multidimensional scaling study. *Human Relations*. 2003;56:1083–109. DOI: 10.1177/0018726703569003.

3. Concerns around time and budget

People are busy and as a mentoring programme coordinator you may be worried about the time it may take to train your mentors, and how much this will cost. Will this training requirement make your small-scale small-budget mentoring programme unfeasible?

The answer is it doesn't need to be onerous and the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Studies have shown that Mentoring relationships have three times more chance to succeed if both Mentors and Mentees have been trained. So if you are thinking of a large programme, maybe scale back and focus your energies on getting it right instead. Whether your mentoring is supporting entrepreneurs, career development, or working with unemployed youth, your mentors have privilege and responsibility to be the best Mentor that you can. And as the programme manager it will be your responsibility to design a programme which will enable this.

Mentoring skills building workshops could be spread over a number of short sessions over a period of time, even after the mentoring programme has formally started. They could be delivered in house, utilising different team members skills and abilities or work with an external organisation or expert to lead on part – or all of the training if you have the budget.

It is important here not to confuse mentor training with the onboarding of mentors onto a programme (describing the purpose, parameters and desired outcome of the programme). Onboarding is also important, but it sits firmly with the mentor programme manager, or other senior management behind the mentoring programme.

Mentor training instead must delve into developing the micro-skills and techniques of effective mentoring. Giving space to awareness and practice of key skills such as active listening, powerful questioning, reflecting back, providing feedback and motivating is a start. Later incorporating additional coaching-style framework or tools can also be valuable. A good Mentor Training programme will focus on providing the know-how and skills to develop more valuable relationships. They will also help the mentor to role-model openness and vulnerability, enabling their Mentee to do the same and reaching a place of optimal rapport, where real long-term change can happen.

The Human Edge for example offers a range of very practical and participatory courses ranging from 3 hours Introduction to Mentoring to 8-hours, spread over 4 weeks Mentoring Essentials Course which could be ideal in filling in the gaps to in-house skills. A good quality mentor preparation can be a great incentive to get people to join your mentoring programme, and encourage other to join in future, creating a strong organisational culture of mentoring.

4. Ref Clutterbuck

Cranwell-Ward J, Bossons P, Gover S. Mentoring: A Henley Review of Best Practice. New-York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan; 2004. 256 p.

5. Equally mentees also need to be adequately prepared for mentoring, and increasing their mentorability is also critical. This is another paper.



Although in the past I was doing some coaching and mentoring as part of my work at the bank, when I attended Mowgli Mentoring's fantastic training programme in Jordan, I discovered that what I was doing was right but needed some tuning. I believe that my mentee Mohammed's current success and progress reflects my support and my help. But I have also felt a personal impact from the mentoring experience: I feel that I can communicate my opinions better to my colleagues and to people in my personal life, and I started to change my way of thinking and to take more mature decisions. I also feel ready to be more positive, to treat negative happenings with a positive approach; and I feel ready to play a part in my community and share my stories with others.

Bahaa Dababneh, Jordan

The Human Edge, formerly Mowgli Mentoring, is a mentoring and coaching specialist organisation. We use this expertise as a foundation to design and deliver learning and development programmes and initiatives for entrepreneurs, social impact managers and leaders.

Through our work, we equip people, organisations and ecosystems with the tools, approaches, and skills to overcome challenges, build stronger relationships, steer their organisations forward and achieve greater impact, faster.

We partner globally, and work in multiple languages, across contexts, cultures, and sectors.

Follow us on



[@thehumanedge_uk](https://twitter.com/thehumanedge_uk)



[/the-human-edge-org-uk](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-human-edge-org-uk)



[/thehumanedgeorguk](https://www.facebook.com/thehumanedgeorguk)



[@TheHumanEdgeOrg-UK](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTheHumanEdgeOrg-UK)



www.humanedge.org.uk