

# What is MENTORING?

A focus on mentoring for entrepreneurs.



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## What is mentoring?

“Get a mentor” is one of the more ubiquitous pieces of advice given to entrepreneurs and business professionals. We read that most successful people have had one, and that mentoring was and often is a critical piece in their puzzle of success.



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**Wherever I find an entrepreneur who's been very successful in any measure, I always find a mentor.**

**- Tony Bury  
Founder, The Human Edge**



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As a specialist mentoring organisation, with a **mission to make effective mentoring more available and accessible for entrepreneurs and leaders**, we at The Human Edge are constantly faced with a challenge of definition and differentiation.

- What exactly is mentoring?
- Where does the value lie?
- And how does it differ, and complement other types of entrepreneurship development support?

In order to create effective and supportive entrepreneurship ecosystems which enable mentoring to take a central role, there is a need for clarity. “Mentoring” has unfortunately become a catch-all term for many different types of support an entrepreneur may receive, which is part of the problem. Mentoring is something quite specific with key factors determining its effectiveness. This paper aims to enlighten and clarify any questions you may have on mentoring.



## The uniqueness of mentoring

At The Human Edge we use this formula provided by Timothy Gallwey in his book, "the Inner Game", to highlight the power of mentoring with the green arrows indicating the effect of mentoring.

**PERFORMANCE** 

**equals**  
**POTENTIAL - INTERFERENCE** 

*Timothy Gallwey, The Inner Game*

Everyone has potential, however, there are external and internal interferences which hold them back and prevent them from turning this potential into progress and ultimately performance, be it in business, career or any other pursuit.

### **Interferences may be external or internal.**

- External interferences refer to knowledge and skills gaps, which can be addressed through access to the right courses, education and training books in addition to advice and connections. This is typically where people focus their attention when looking to unlock their potential.
- Internal interferences refer to fears, insecurities, limiting beliefs and psychological factors developed from as early as childhood. These inner struggles are rarely recognised, explored nor addressed and therefore are not recognised as key barriers to performance. This is because one needs a trusted and safe space where they feel secure that the listener will hold what they say as confidential, will not judge or ridicule them and have the skill to be their companion as they explore, reflect and determine how they wish to move forward.

A mentor supports a mentee on a 360-degree basis, supporting them to recognise, explore, reflect upon and address their external and internal interferences, developing confidence, stronger leadership and the internal resources to better deal with and approach adversity and challenges in the future.

## The role of a mentor.

**A mentor encourages, supports and guides a mentee to strengthen their personal leadership to make the most of their business or career.**

The role of the mentor is to be a trusted confidante, helping the mentee to gain clarity of their vision and to make informed choices through a more detailed analysis of options and exploration of opportunities, contacts and opportunities available. A mentor tells a mentee what they need to hear, not necessarily what they want to hear.

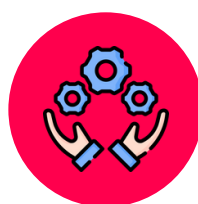
**They are a powerful mirror which shows them their strengths and blind spots.**

Effective mentors support mentees on a 360-degree basis and use active listening, provision of feedback and powerful questioning to help their mentees think through their personal and professional challenges to find their own solutions and take action. They share relevant personal experience to highlight options and outcomes, and may, as a last resort, offer advice, but they do not tell their mentee what to do: the final decisions will always be in the mentee's hands.

### THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE MENTORING



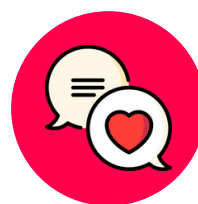
Active listening



Sharing experiences



Powerful questioning



Providing feedback

A mentor employs the techniques of a good coach and brings with them their personal experience, contextual understanding and/or professional know-how [1] to be able to impart that critical tacit knowledge.

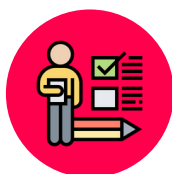
[1] Mentoring is often referred to as Coaching Plus, as it can bring with it all the benefits of a good coach, but also provide that bit extra.

They are a sounding board, a voice of reason and reflection who does not shy away from asking those difficult questions, but always with the best intentions at heart. They can also be a **connector**, linking their mentee to people and opportunities within their network.

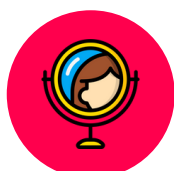
## IMPORTANT ROLES OF A MENTOR



Conveyor of tacit knowledge



Accountability Partner



A mirror for self reflection



Motivator

An important role of the mentor is as a **conveyor of tacit knowledge**. As past experiences are shared, mentees pick up how their mentors came up with their great idea, how they brainstorm, find solutions, network and interact with collaborators, and so on—knowledge that is difficult to codify and is often learned by doing. Tacit knowledge has been shown to be the best source of long-term competitive advantage and innovation[2], and as vital for the smallest micro-entrepreneur working in the most challenging of context as for an innovation entrepreneur aiming to scale and reach new markets.

Mentoring provides an all-important **accountability partner**. Unbridled entrepreneurs often run their business off the rails, seduced by opportunities, impulsively changing direction or hiring too many staff without considering impact. The simple act of explaining what you're doing to someone you trust and respect is a powerful way to stay on track, especially if this is mutually analysed and confirmed to be the best way forward. For any entrepreneur who wants to succeed, accountability has proved to be crucial.

Mentors may draw on different models and techniques to help their mentees to consider options and analyse different scenarios. If a mentee is stuck or despondent, they can help them to find motivation, perhaps by referring back to earlier times when they were very motivated, and remembering why this was; if a mentee is confused or facing some difficult decisions, a mentor can help them to map out and analyse alternatives, helping them to find the best path forward. A mentee faced by a large project, and lacking the confidence to achieve it can learn how their mentor approached a similar challenge, perhaps breaking it down into smaller and more manageable tasks and committing to address a few each week. Mentoring works because it brings the things a mentee may have been pushing aside, ignoring or simply not seeing to the fore, and helping them to address it.

[2] Ma, Yifang, Satyam Mukherjee, and Brian Uzzi. 2020. "Mentorship and Protégé Success in STEM Fields." *PNAS*. 117(25): 14077–83.



## Why is the mentor-mentee relationship so important?

**Mentoring provides a 360-degree approach with the person at the centre.**



Some structured mentoring programmes or platforms make a pool of mentors – with different profiles and areas of expertise – available, for mentees to draw on as and when needed. So, one week a mentee may choose to speak to a person who has experience in loans and investment, and the next week someone who has HR expertise.

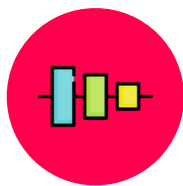
Whilst these short interactions may be valuable for specialist advice or insight into a specific matter, the secret ingredient of an effective mentoring relationship comes from the **long-term supportive relationship** developed between the mentor and mentee. These one-offs encountered may be termed mentoring conversations, but they generally do not develop into **mentoring relationships**. Only by getting to know each other well, and over a period of time, can barriers be broken down and a lot of the important work described above be achieved with mutual benefits for mentors and mentees.

To be effective, a mentor does not only focus on a single aspect of the business or career, but also gets to know what motivates the person behind the business, helping them to make the choices which are most important and true to them. Unlike business advice or consultancy work, **mentoring is unique in that it provides a more holistic or 360-degree** approach with the **person at the centre** (which is why we opt for the term **entrepreneurial mentoring** rather than business mentoring).

A mentoring relationship is a long-term trusted relationship, which requires work and investment from both parties, and develops over time. The most effective mentoring programmes know that it is vital to create these mentoring relationships as this is where the real value and sustainability of mentoring lies.



## SUCCESS FACTORS FOR MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIPS



Expectations alignment



Good matching



Mutually invested time

The successful mentor – mentee relationship, arises

- from aligning their expectations of mentoring and being ready, open and prepared<sup>[3]</sup> for the sometimes-uncomfortable mentoring journey
- from a good match between mentor and mentee and
- through mutually invested time to build the relationship. This will help to create mentors and mentees who know each other well and are highly engaged.

**Starting a business is a lonely journey**, and even the most confident and resilient of people suffer moments of self-doubt, wanting to give up and experiencing lapses in the clarity of their direction. The ones who succeed will have grit, be open to increasing their business acumen and develop a growth mindset enabling them to become more resilient, and take ownership of their decisions as they gain clarity through the fog – with the support of a mentor. The relationship between mentor and mentee creates a safe space to open up, question and build internal resources to find solutions on both a personal and professional level. It enables the mentee to feel empowered and able to find their own solutions. Authenticity, transparency and vulnerability in both mentor and mentee lead to the most honest conversations – it is where the real value of mentoring lies.

**[3] Evidence strongly suggests that the success of the mentoring relationship within structured mentoring programmes is directly correlated to the preparation and training received by mentor in mentoring techniques and mentees in terms of expectations and how to make the most from mentoring.**

For this reason, the best mentors have a number of foundational virtues and abilities, such as integrity, business acumen gained through experience, caring and acting in their mentees best interests. **A number of functional mentoring skills and strategies of good mentors can be taught through mentor training.**

Effective mentoring programmes manage the selection, and training of mentors and mentees and help them to build trust-based relationships. The best mentors are also generalists. They may have in-depth experience in a particular sector, but this does not necessarily have to directly match the business focus of their mentee (there is great opportunity for cross-learning with diversity).

This is not to say that entrepreneurs do not need technical support and expert input, but the need for this support may be identified with a mentor, and sought out independently.

## What mentoring is not.

### MENTORING VS. EFFECTIVE MENTORING



Mentor



Effective Mentor

All too often in business, mentors are quick to jump in with questions, and putting forward their opinions, advice and solutions:

- What is your turnover?
- What is your business or investment goal?
- Show me your business plan.
- What technology are you using and why?
- What exactly do you need my advice on?

These questions are important, and help the inquirer to understand the business better, but don't serve to build strong foundations on which an effective mentoring relationship can thrive. A technical advisor or consultant may ask these questions first, but the mentor would be wise to start from a different angle:

- Tell me about yourself?
- Tell me about your life so far?
- Tell me about your current situation?
- What is your vision for your future life and why?
- What are your values and beliefs?
- Where does your business fit it?
- What motivated you to start your business?
- What gives you energy?

Mentoring is often equated with providing advice and direction. While this is often a result of mentoring, directly offering solutions and telling mentees what to do up front before enabling them to explore it for

themselves, is not part of the methodology an effective mentor should adopt. In fact, a mentor who does this often has the opposite effect, undermining or demotivating the mentee, and their advice may throw them off their own course. It also doesn't build the mentee's capability to solve challenges, make decisions and lead themselves.

In some programmes mentors can be expected to take on the role of a manager, with their mentee reporting to them. Again, this is not the remit of a mentor, but instead that of a business manager. A mentor can help an entrepreneur to be a more effective business manager, or help them to see the opportunity and making the decision to hire one, but not taking on this role directly.

Mentors are often frequently confused with teachers. A mentor may identify certain skills and/or knowledge gaps their mentee has, and then advise them to go off and read or understand the topic, reflecting back after. **Mentors can enhance and complement formal training by supporting mentees to think about what they have learnt, what and how they may put learning into practice**, but formal training is much more effectively implemented in a group setting with a structured curriculum. Mentors should not be expected to adopt the role of a traditional teacher but a learning companion helping the mentee to drive the digestion, thinking and implementation process.

There is some debate and controversy about the role and interlink between mentor and investor. Some investors turn into de-facto mentors. Others may start off as mentors, and once they get to know the business and the entrepreneur, decide to invest. Our stance at The Human Edge is that an important criterion of an effective mentor is their impartiality. As soon as the mentor's money is in the business, they may no longer be impartial and be more inclined to influence the business rather than support the entrepreneur. As long as there is awareness of this and it can be avoided, it can work.

## Differentiating mentoring from other types of support.

It is important to differentiate mentoring from other types of support which entrepreneurs need, especially so when talking about mentoring for entrepreneurs or start-ups, because we find a whole range of individual, bespoke and tailored support labelled as **'mentoring'**. When it is confused, it leads to sub-par results. In these cases, mentors and mentees have a mixed experience, and evidence indicates that poor mentoring can be worse than no mentoring at all. This is why developing an understanding of effective mentoring and supporting mentors, mentees and brokering organisations to invest in the mentoring relationships is critical to us at The Human Edge.

The following table helps us to define what these different types of support may be and how they differ from mentoring. All are critical in the development of strong start-up ecosystems, but we must be clear that they are different and unique interventions. We need to make sure that expected results are well understood and that the type of intervention is then selected accordingly.

Type of support	Defining Criteria	When it is to be used	Results to be expected
<b>Mentoring</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusses on the long-term trust-based relationship</li> <li>• Holistic, focusses on the person as whole as well as on the business</li> <li>• Mentor is a fellow entrepreneur or business owner/leader and does not expect financial remuneration for mentoring</li> <li>• Mutually beneficial engagement for the mentor and mentee</li> <li>• Encourages, supports, connects, helps to gain perspective, contacts and open doors as well as being an accountability and learning partner and advocate</li> </ul>	Entrepreneurs at every stage of their business can benefit from mentoring	Development of skills, knowledge, behaviours, confidence, resilience, motivation and mindset

Type of support	Defining Criteria	When it is to be used	Results to be expected
<b>Business Coaching</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually a short term engagement</li> <li>• Focusses on the development of a specific skill/ competency to help provide a clear improvement e.g. time management or prioritising</li> <li>• The coach is usually a coaching professional and is paid for their services</li> <li>• Helps to identify challenges, provides techniques to create solutions and is a 'loose' accountability partner.</li> </ul>	To address specific problems or challenges	Development of skills and competencies
<b>Action Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focus here is learning by doing</li> <li>• Help pre-entrepreneurs develop an entrepreneurial mindset, e.g. by working together to set up a business, where the main outcome is learning, not profit. It helps individuals to think like an entrepreneur.</li> </ul>	Pre-entrepreneurs e.g. developing entrepreneurial graduates	Development of an entrepreneurial mindset
<b>Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A short term one-way flow of knowledge, from trainer/teacher to the trainees</li> <li>• Usually in a formal classroom setting or online courses following a structured curriculum, set learning outcomes, delivered by one trainer to many trainees</li> <li>• Typical training for start-up entrepreneurs may focus on the key stages needed to set up a business.</li> </ul>	To impart knowledge or information to a large number of people	Increase in knowledge of a particular subject, but this may not always translate into action and/or behaviour change
<b>Business Advisory Services/ Consulting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entails custom work which is tailored to a specific challenge faced by a business and will often recommend details of implementation</li> <li>• Designed to overcome challenges or weaknesses and plug knowledge/skills gaps in the business, across the range of business functions. Examples may be financial management, accounting, marketing, HR, etc.</li> <li>• Business advisory work is often short term in nature and has a strategic focus</li> </ul>	When specific knowledge or expertise linked to the business function is needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialist business function information and advice to the entrepreneur</li> <li>• Providing short-term stop-gap expertise</li> </ul>



Type of support	Defining Criteria	When it is to be used	Results to be expected
<b>Technical Assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical Assistance focusses on specific knowledge-based areas, and can take the form of sharing information and expertise, instruction, technical support and skills training, transmission of working knowledge and may also involve doing part of the work. For example, a tech company may require input</li> </ul>	Specific one-off technical knowledge needed.	Provides very detailed support into a specific technical aspect of the business' core function.
<b>Business Manager</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsible for overseeing and supervising a company's activities and employees</li> </ul>		
<b>Business Investor /Angel Investor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial support to entrepreneurs in the form of grants, loans, equity, etc.</li> </ul>		

*An effective mentor can have a significant impact on a mentee when both parties are committed, open, engaged and well prepared for the mentoring relationship. This can result to the strengthening of the mentee's leadership, performance and in turn impact the success of the business.*

*The Human Edge facilitates a series of short interactive workshops on demand if you are interested to explore more in depth what mentoring is and how it can support your team and organisation to make a bigger impact.*

*To know more about these workshops, contact us at [info@humanedge.org.uk](mailto:info@humanedge.org.uk)*

## About The Human Edge

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Building thriving businesses and social impact organisations that drive lasting positive change takes confident leadership, skills, and connections.

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 programmes and initiatives for entrepreneurs, 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.

For more information, visit [www.humanedge.org.uk](http://www.humanedge.org.uk)



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**Having someone with experience, especially in your domain, to talk to in tough situations is really a blessing that is not acquired from the classroom. I would encourage every entrepreneur to engage a mentor, especially in a structured form like The Human Edge's.**

**- Kamal-Deen Yakub  
The Human Edge Mentee, Ghana**



Connect with us and learn more about The Human Edge, our mentoring programmes and how our entrepreneurs, mentors and facilitators are being inspired, inspiring others, connecting and evolving:

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