**The Human Edge**

WHY ARE MENTORING PROGRAMMES HARD TO EVALUATE

AND SOME SOLUTIONS FOR A NUANCED APPROACH

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Mentoring programmes are not inherently difficult to assess - at least not at the level of outputs. If the aim is simply to establish relationships and get people talking, basic metrics like number of pairs formed, meeting frequency, satisfaction levels and retention rates can provide an indication of success. The higher these numbers, the more likely the programme delivered on its intent.
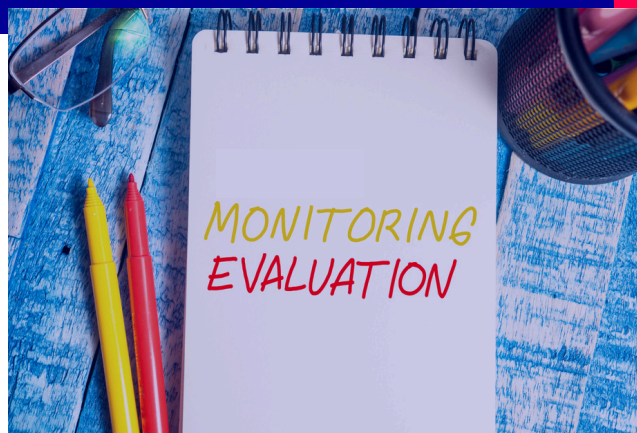
But for funders, programme designers and ecosystem builders who are investing in mentoring as a means to enable broader outcomes such as leadership development, entrepreneurial resilience, gender inclusion or systems change, this is where things become more complex.

The challenge lies not in measuring interactions, but in capturing what participants gain, how they change and the ripple effects they catalyse within their organisations, networks and ecosystems.

Drawing on The Human Edge's global experience across diverse regions and sectors, this paper explores these complexities and proposes a grounded, context-sensitive approach to evaluation that speaks to both rigour and relevance.

The Basics of Mentoring Programme Evaluation

At a high level, many mentoring programme evaluations rely on:

- **Participant numbers –** How many people participated? How many were from X or Y target category?
- **Engagement levels –** How frequently did mentors and mentees meet?
- **Satisfaction surveys –** Did participants feel their expectations were met?
- **Retention rates –** How many pairs completed the programme?

These metrics offer useful operational insights. For reporting purposes, they provide structure and can help indicate whether a programme was delivered as planned. But they fall short of telling us what matters most: what actually changed for participants as a result of the programme, whether that change is meaningful or lasting, and whether it contributes to wider intended outcomes.

Intentional supporters of mentoring initiatives (funders, partners, advocates etc.) want to know not just that a programme ran, but that it worked—that it led to stronger leaders, better decision-making, improved business performance, stronger sector networks, more inclusive growth and so on. Standard implementation metrics don't go far enough to answer these questions.

At The Human Edge, we recommend grounding evaluations in a programme-specific Theory of Change that clarifies what success looks like, what change pathways are expected and which outcomes can realistically be measured at what stage. Our evaluation approach is supported by models such as Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Learning, which consider not only participation and satisfaction, but also behavioural and performance outcomes over time.

Why Many Mentoring Programmes Fall Short Before Evaluation Even Begins

Mentoring programmes aren't generally hard to evaluate because evaluation is inherently difficult. They're difficult to evaluate because they're often not designed for wider outcomes or sustainable impact in the first place.

Common pitfalls include:
- Lack of clear goals, shared objectives
- Unprepared participants
- Superficial pairing without structure and intention
- No support mechanisms to guide and strengthen relationships
- A short-term outlook that misses mentoring's long-term benefits

Without a solid foundation, even the most rigorous monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) approach won't yield meaningful insights.
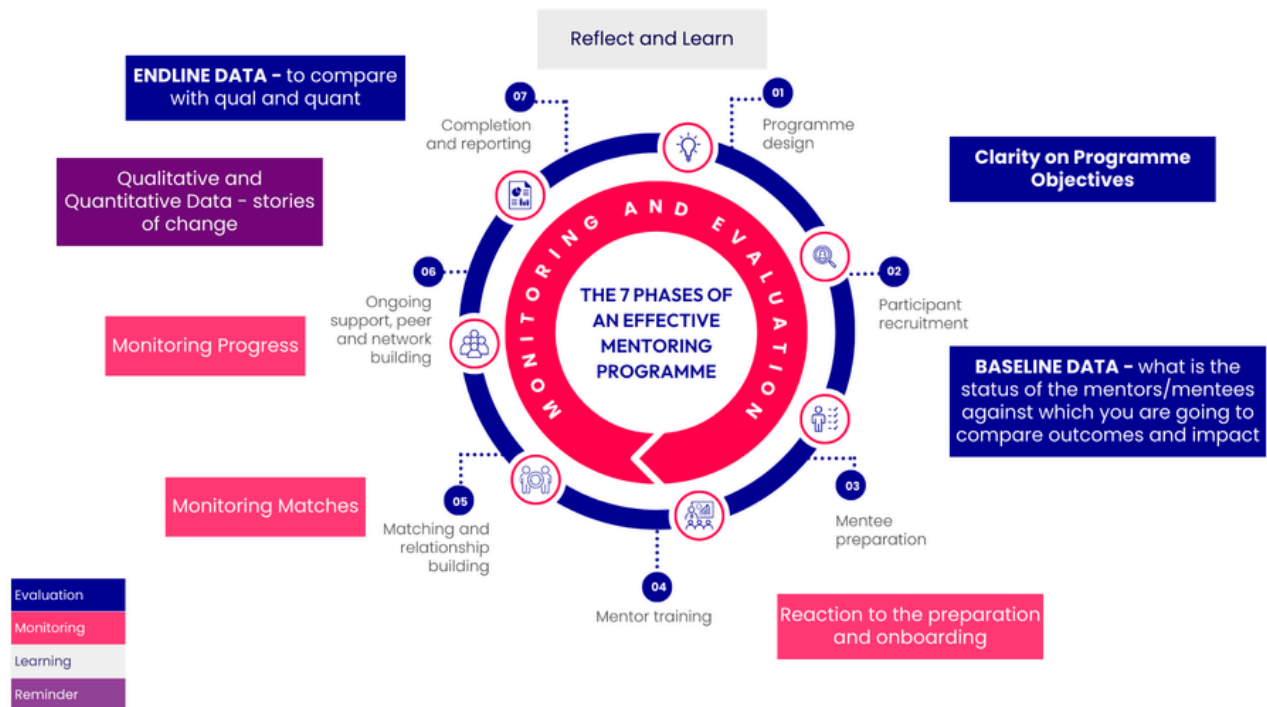
At The Human Edge, we use **our accredited 7-phase mentoring framework** to design programmes that are not only impactful, but also measurable. MEL isn't an afterthought, it's embedded across all seven phases, from initial design to final wrap-up.

Phase 1: Programme Design is especially critical and it's where many initiatives fall short. In this phase, we work with partners to:
- Define clear and specific short- to long-term objectives
- Identify the right participants and matching criteria
- Establish the structures that support effective, trust-based mentoring relationships
- Build readiness and support mechanisms for both mentors and mentees
- Define the evaluation approach and M&E framework, clarifying what to measure, when and how, in alignment with the programme's goals

This upfront clarity is what sets effective programmes apart. It lays the groundwork for deeper outcomes, greater ownership from participants and a robust evaluation process that reflects what really matters.

MEL within the mentoring programme framework

Reflect and Learn

ENDLINE DATA – to compare with qual and quant

Qualitative and Quantitative Data – stories of change

Monitoring Progress

Monitoring Matches

Evaluation
Monitoring
Learning
Reminder

07 Completion and reporting

06 Ongoing support, peer and network building

05 Matching and relationship building

04 Mentor training

01 Programme design

Clarity on Programme Objectives

02 Participant recruitment

BASELINE DATA – what is the status of the mentors/mentees against which you are going to compare outcomes and impact

03 Mentee preparation

Reaction to the preparation and onboarding

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

THE 7 PHASES OF AN EFFECTIVE MENTORING PROGRAMME

The Challenge of Evaluating Individualised and often Short-Term Journeys

Mentoring is not an end in itself; rather, it is a robust vehicle for reaching a destination defined uniquely by each mentee. So mentoring programme evaluation becomes challenging because it is necessarily and uniquely linked to the specific personal and professional goals or outcomes defined by each individual mentee.

No two mentees follow the same path or seek the same outcomes. For some, the journey may lead to tangible milestones like business growth, career progression or stronger networks. For others, the transformation is more internal: increased self-awareness, renewed confidence, clearer decision-making or deeper purpose.

This diversity is a core strength of mentoring, but it also complicates measurement. Success is deeply personal and often subjective, making it difficult to define and standardise across participants.

What adds to the challenge is time. Many mentoring programmes are designed with short delivery cycles—three to six months—while the most meaningful outcomes often emerge over a much longer arc. A mentee may shift their leadership style, pivot their career, or begin mentoring others a year or more after the programme ends. These long-tail effects are significant but rarely captured in traditional MEL frameworks or reporting windows.

In our mentoring-centred leadership programmes, especially those supporting middle/people managers, systems change leaders or entrepreneurs, these internal shifts are often the most catalytic.

Yet these outcomes often fall through the cracks of traditional M&E approaches. The challenge isn't that they can't be captured—it's that most output-level M&E frameworks aren't designed to account for the nuance, subjectivity or variability of mentoring journeys. Instead, they risk flattening a dynamic, human-centred process into simplistic, one-size-fits-all metrics.

For a deeper exploration of how mentoring can challenge traditional impact frameworks, see Petrela's reflection on 'Measuring the Unmeasurable'.

Attribution vs. Contribution: A More Honest Lens

The challenge of evaluating mentoring isn't unique, it's common across many social interventions. As explored by New Philanthropy Capital, much of what creates real, lasting change in people's lives doesn't fit neatly into standard measurement frameworks. But that doesn't mean the impact isn't real.

In mentoring, the difficulty often lies in how we assess success. Most programmes don't include a control group (an equivalent set of people who didn't receive mentoring) so it's hard to establish whether a specific outcome, like a promotion or organisational growth, happened because of mentoring alone. Other factors, such as timing, motivation, opportunity or external support, often play a role.

But that doesn't mean mentoring didn't make a difference. It just means we need more realistic and meaningful ways of understanding how it contributed to someone's progress. One of the most common pitfalls is that evaluations only measure what happens during the programme. They overlook what happens because of the programme, months or even years later.

A mentee might develop confidence or clarity during a six-month mentoring initiative but only apply for a new role, launch a business, or step into leadership a year after it ends. Unless long-term tracking is built into the MEL approach, these delayed but significant outcomes often go undocumented and undervalued.

That's why, at The Human Edge, we encourage evaluators and partners to adopt a contribution-based lens:
- **Attribution** asks whether a mentoring programme directly caused an outcome like a promotion or business growth.
- **Contribution** acknowledges that mentoring is usually one of many enabling factors. Other inputs like personal motivation, access to resources, timing, and networks also play a role. The key question becomes: t*o what extent did mentoring help unlock or accelerate this progress? Would it have happened in the same timeframe if mentoring was not present?*

Trying to attribute complex outcomes to mentoring alone is not only unrealistic, it risks undervaluing the real but long-term effect mentoring can also offer. Outcomes often emerge months or even years later: a mentee might pivot their career path or launch a social initiative long after the programme ends. These delayed or indirect impacts often fall outside traditional evaluation windows.

A contribution-based approach invites a more nuanced, context-aware understanding of mentoring's role. It helps us assess proportional influence over time without flattening a dynamic human process into binary success/failure metrics.

Evaluating Mentoring Outcomes: The Need for a Mixed-Methods Approach

Given the complexity of mentoring, a one-size-fits-all evaluation approach won't work. Mentoring outcomes are often non-linear, highly personal and unfold over time, so traditional, short-term or purely quantitative measurement risks missing what matters most.

Instead, **programme managers and evaluators need to combine methods: quantitative and qualitative, short and long-term to build a fuller, more meaningful picture of impact.** At The Human Edge, we use a mixed-methods approach across the lifecycle of our programmes and beyond. We combine tools intentionally, depending on what needs to be understood, when and why.

How to Actually Capture the Impact of Mentoring

There's no single formula but there are tested methods that help make sense of mentoring's complexity. Below are some of the tools we use across different stages of our programmes:

1. Quantitative Tools
   - Surveys and questionnaires

These can capture data on engagement levels, satisfaction, and perceived success. Surveys might ask questions about the frequency of meetings or how aligned the relationship feels with each participant's goals.

   - Pre- and post-assessments

These help track changes in confidence, clarity or decision-making over time. Interpretation is key: a drop in self-assessed scores doesn't always indicate failure. In fact, it often signals growth. As participants become more self-aware, they rate themselves more critically—a shift we've seen repeatedly and that mirrors the Dunning-Kruger effect.

In the GoRise programme in Tunisia, we used pre- and post-assessments to track both internal and external change. This included tangible business outcomes like revenue growth and job creation as well as improvements in confidence, decision-making and leadership clarity. The data helped demonstrate that mentoring significantly supported both personal growth and business performance, especially in early-stage entrepreneurs navigating uncertainty.
Check out the full case study here.

Similarly, in the Safaricom Women in Leadership programme in Kenya, pre- and post-assessments helped track mindset shifts among emerging women leaders. While some participants saw tangible progression within their roles, others reported stronger boundary-setting, improved communication and clearer alignment with their purpose, all of which were reinforced by structured mentoring relationships.
Check out the full case study here.

2. Qualitative Tools
  ○ Interviews and case studies

These add depth and context, surfacing transformation stories that quantitative tools can't always detect. They help us understand not just what changed, but how and why. More importantly, they allow us to hear the human voice behind the data—something that's critical when evaluating relational, mindset-driven interventions like mentoring.

In the **Imarisha programme in Kenya,** follow-up interviews revealed significant shifts in mentees' self-belief, leadership mindset and decision-making confidence. These insights would have been missed through surveys alone. What stood out was the ripple effect: many mentees like Justine expressed a desire to become mentors themselves, and mentors like Alice reported deep personal growth, including enhanced empathy and listening skills. These aren't just soft skills, they're foundational to building trust, holding space for others and supporting growth without taking over. In both mentoring and leadership contexts, the ability to listen with empathy is often what enables real transformation.

The evaluation also highlighted the value of real-time feedback loops such as monthly check-ins and peer calls—which helped us to adapt the programme mid-course to meet the emergent needs of the participants.
Check out the full case study here and stories of participants including Alice Michara and Justine Awino.

In the SANAD TAF Micro-Entrepreneur Mentoring Programme in Jordan, interviews helped illuminate not only reported business improvements, but also a deepened sense of belonging, connection and confidence. These relational and emotional shifts were vital outcomes—yet unlikely to emerge through standard metrics alone.

Check out the full case study here and watch more about the SANAD TAF Micro-Entrepreneur Mentoring Programme.

3. Long-Term Tracking
  ○ Alumni follow-ups and longitudinal studies

Mentoring outcomes often continue to unfold years after a programme ends. That's why we advocate for long-term follow-up — two, three or even four years post-programme, especially in leadership development and systems-change contexts.

The MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy (a 5-year leadership academy), focused on conservation professionals across Africa and Europe, is a powerful example of this. Several years after the programme ended, our data showed that many participants were still actively mentoring others — multiplying the impact and reinforcing a culture of leadership within their fields.

It also revealed that some mentees who had taken part in the earlier cohorts had grown in confidence and leadership maturity over time and later returned as mentors themselves. This cycle of growth illustrates how mentoring can build not only individual capacity, but also long-term, self-sustaining leadership ecosystems.

This outcome wasn't immediately visible, but long-term tracking showed how mentoring had planted the seeds for systemic change and the strengthening of the sector. *Check out the full case study here*.

What these examples show is that mentoring's impact is rarely linear and often most powerful in the long run. A nuanced M&E approach doesn't just help us prove impact — it helps us understand **how** it happens, so we can design better programmes, adapt in real time and support sustained growth.

For practitioners, the message is clear:
- Be intentional about *what* you're measuring, *when*, and *why.
- Look for both internal shifts and external outcomes.
- Track change beyond the life of the programme, because mentoring doesn't stop when the funding ends.

Measuring What Matters: Refined Measurement Techniques

To address the complexities inherent in evaluating mentoring, programme designers and funders need more than standard tools — they need clarity on what they're measuring, why and how best to capture it.
We recommend starting with the question:

> **What types of change are we expecting and how will we know if it's happening?**

Mentoring can lead to a wide range of outcomes, from internal mindset shifts to external performance gains. Each requires a different lens and often, a different measurement method. The table below offers a practical guide beyond simple engagement metrics to mapping evaluation techniques to outcome types and key questions.

Mapping Tools to Outcomes: A Practical Guide

Outcome Type	Evaluation Questions	Tools & Methods	Timing
Internal shift (e.g. confidence, clarity, resilience)	What has changed in how mentees see themselves, make decisions, or handle challenges?	Reflective journaling, Most Significant Change (MSC), Pre/post self-assessments, 1:1 interviews	During & post-programme
Relational change (e.g. trust, collaboration, leadership style)	How have mentoring relationships influenced how participants relate to others?	360° feedback, Peer feedback, Case studies, Facilitated group reflections	Mid-point & post-programme
Behavioural shift (e.g. new habits, role changes, action-taking)	What are participants doing differently? Are they taking more ownership or initiative?	Goal-tracking, Behavioural journaling, Action plans, Follow-up surveys	During, post, & 6-months after
Organisational or business outcomes (e.g. promotion, performance, strategy clarity)	What visible outcomes can be linked to mentoring support?	Baseline vs endline metrics, Manager feedback, Revenue/job data, Participant testimonials	Post-programme & 6 – 12 months later
Long-term ripple effects (e.g. mentoring others, influencing systems)	How has mentoring shaped longer-term impact? Are mentees now mentoring or influencing others?	Longitudinal interviews, Alumni surveys, Case narratives, Mentor/mentee tracking	1–3 years post-programme

- ***Most Significant Change (MSC)***: *This participatory monitoring and evaluation method captures the most significant changes participants experience as a result of the mentoring programme. By asking mentees to share stories of the biggest impact mentoring had on their lives, MSC highlights qualitative outcomes that might otherwise be overlooked.*
- ***360-degree feedback:*** *Engaging stakeholders such as colleagues, managers or peers in the evaluation process provides a more holistic view of a mentee's growth. These external perspectives can shed light on outcomes that might not be visible to the mentee or mentor themselves.*
- ***Reflective journaling:*** *Encouraging mentees and mentors to keep regular journals helps them to track their thoughts, experiences and progress over time. This practice adds richness to the evaluation process by capturing incremental changes and subjective insights that may be missed in formal assessments.*

Key Areas to Explore in Evaluation

Before choosing tools or metrics, it's important to get clear on what you're trying to understand. The following five areas and the questions within them are not just for participants. They're strategic prompts for programme designers, MEL leads and funders to guide the design of a meaningful evaluation approach.

Each one helps clarify:
- **What kind** of change you want to capture
- **What tools** will be most useful
- **When** to measure it
- **How** to interpret what you find

1. Self & Mindset

- What feels different in how mentees approach challenges, decisions or setbacks?
- Have they noticed changes in confidence, clarity or sense of purpose?

These questions highlight internal, subjective outcomes, the kind often overlooked by traditional M&E. They suggest using reflective tools like journaling, interviews or Most Significant Change to surface shifts in self-awareness, mindset, confidence or decision-making.

2. Relationships & Leadership

- What's changed in how participants communicate, collaborate/build relationships with or support others?
- Has the mentoring relationship influenced how they lead? If so, how?

This points to relational and behavioural change, which can be explored through 360º feedback, peer reflections or group discussions. It also justifies including questions around trust, inclusion and psychological safety.

3. Action & Progress

- What concrete actions have participants taken as a result of mentoring?
- Are they setting boundaries, launching initiatives or trying new approaches?

This focuses on observable behaviours helping you design tools like action plans, goal trackers or follow-up surveys to monitor change in real time and beyond the programme window.

4. External Results

- What outcomes, professional, business/organisational or strategic, can participants link to mentoring?

> - What has become possible and/or accelerated through mentoring, that wasn't before?

These questions guide the identification of tangible results, such as promotions, revenue growth or strategic clarity. They suggest combining self-reports with external feedback or organisational data.

5. Multiplier Effects

> - Have participants gone on to mentor others, whether by increasing their number of mentees as mentors, or by stepping into mentoring roles as former mentees?
> - Are they actively contributing to change in their organisations, communities or sectors, for example, by launching new initiatives, influencing workplace culture, supporting peers, or advocating for mentoring?

These prompts highlight longer-term, systemic outcomes. They justify including alumni tracking, follow-ups one – three years later and looking beyond the individual to wider impact across teams, communities or ecosystems.

Rethinking the role of MEL

Evaluation shouldn't just validate impact; it should also shape better programme design.

At The Human Edge, we've used insights from our own as well as external evaluations to shift how we work. For example, early data revealed that mentees often struggled to fully engage without proper preparation. So, we began including mentee readiness training which ensured both people coming into the relationship had clarity on their why and role. It deepened outcomes and increased the quality of the relationships themselves, including increasing the rate of relationships continuing after the end of the structured programme.

This kind of learning loop, where feedback drives programme evolution, is at the heart of effective MEL.

Designing for Impact, Evaluating for Learning

Evaluating mentoring programmes is complex but not impossible.

The key is recognising that mentoring, when done well, isn't a transactional support mechanism. It's a strategic catalyst for long-term change. It strengthens leaders, not just outcomes. And while that change can't always be measured in a quarterly dashboard, it can be captured if we ask the right questions, use the right tools and give it the time it needs.

At The Human Edge, we work with partners to design mentoring programmes that are impactful and can be evaluated. We help embed MEL not just as a reporting tool but as a source of learning, reflection, equity – by amplifying diverse voices and experiences and growth.

Because the true value of mentoring isn't always in what can be measured today, it's in the lives, decisions and systems it shapes tomorrow.

Ready to Rethink How You Evaluate Mentoring?

If you're designing, funding or scaling mentoring programmes and want to go beyond outputs to truly see the evidence and legacy of your investment, we'd love to work with you.

At The Human Edge, we partner with foundations, public institutions, CSR and ESG teams, SMEs and NGOs to:

- Embed mentoring that leads to real results – from stronger leadership, inclusion and confidence to organisational performance and resilience
- Build MEL frameworks that reflect complexity, not just compliance
- Turn evaluation into a learning loop, fuelling better design, equity and sustainability
- Simplify complexity so it's easier to track what matters, share what works, and learn along the way

It's our joint responsibility to design programmes that not only add significant value for participants and the organisations or communities they serve, but that are also worth learning from.

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The Human Edge

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The Human Edge is a leadership development organisation that has been supporting entrepreneurs, managers, and leaders since 2008.

We design and deliver integrated leadership, mentoring and coaching programmes that equip individuals, teams, and organisations with the skills, tools, and approaches needed to drive lasting positive change.

Building thriving organisations requires clear direction, confident leadership, strong relationships, and the ability to overcome challenges.

Our programmes and courses focus on deepening self-awareness, strengthening leadership capabilities, and fostering connections and cultures that help people, organisations, networks and ecosystems achieve greater results, faster.

We collaborate globally with foundations, public institutions, CSR and ESG teams, SMEs and NGOs , working across diverse contexts, cultures, and sectors, and in multiple languages.