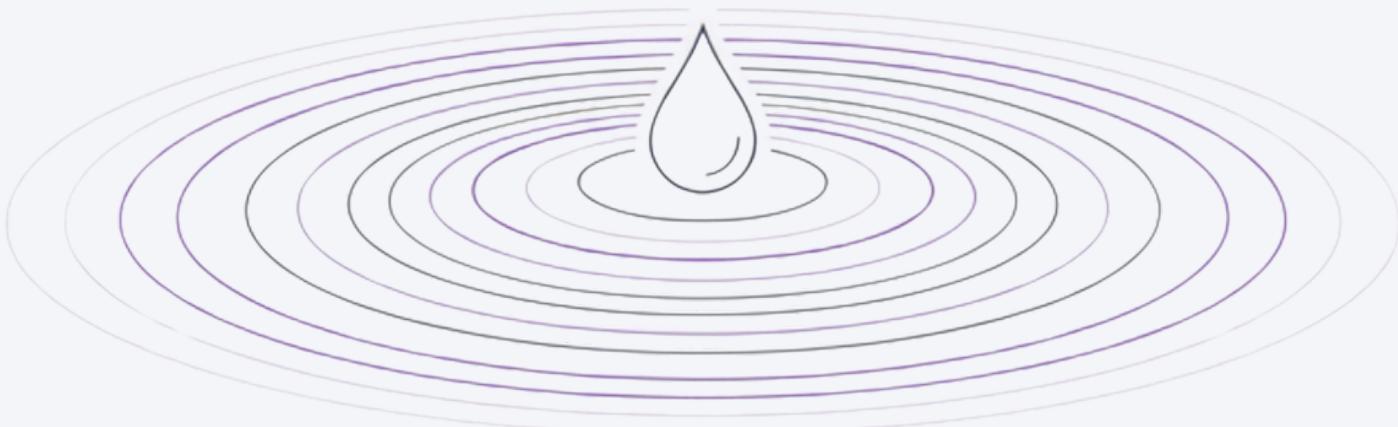


INSIGHTS

WHAT 2025 REAFFIRMED ABOUT MENTORING THAT WORKS



Mentoring is widely included in programmes but often lightly invested in and expected to “just work.”

In 2025, we worked with ten organisations across 3 continents. They faced vastly different challenges, from supporting climate communicators in contested policy spaces in Europe to strengthening women's leadership networks in the Gulf.

In most cases, mentoring sat alongside other forms of support: leadership development, skills training, cohort programmes. It became the space where learning translated into practice, where leadership development or skills training moved from concept to real-world application.

What stood out was not how different these programmes looked on paper, but how consistent the patterns were when mentoring was intentionally designed and supported. Across contexts, similar shifts emerged again and again.

This piece reflects on what's becoming clear about mentoring that works, what it actually shifts, why design plays such a central role when mentoring is strategic and why getting this right matters as the future of work demands more human capability, not less.

What organisations were really trying to solve through mentoring in 2025

Across the organisations we worked with in 2025, mentoring was rarely introduced to fix a single problem. Instead, it emerged in response to very different realities:

- **The European Climate Foundation** sought to support early-career climate communicators working on complex and often contested built-environment issues. Participants were technically capable and highly motivated but many were working in isolation, under pressure and without access to trusted sounding boards or peer support.
- In the **Taking Care of Business** case, mentoring was already happening across multiple regions in South Africa. What was missing was shared and consistent standards, role clarity and support structures that would allow mentoring quality to be sustained at scale.
- In the New Economy field, professionals are expected to address urgent systemic challenges but often operate in silos, lack the skills to lead across traditional boundaries and struggle to sustain themselves in slow, complex systems change work. **Partners for a New Economy** sought to strengthen the sector through a grantee capacity building programme focused on collaborative leadership, resilience and peer networks.
- In **a long-running initiative supporting women across Oman**, mentoring brought together early-career professionals, graduates and aspiring entrepreneurs with experienced female mentors from across sectors. The focus extended beyond individual career progression to intentionally create cross sector connections, diversify pathways for career advancement and strengthen confidence and leadership capability.
- In **Pollinate Impact**'s Catalyst Circle, a structured nine-month peer mentoring programme co-designed with The Human Edge, mentoring was used to help incubator leaders and support staff in the Global South learn with and from peers, build reflective practice and strengthen mentoring and leadership capabilities in contexts where structured support is otherwise scarce.
- In **a bespoke leadership and peer mentoring programme for foundation leaders**, mentoring was introduced to support people leads navigating complex systems, diverse teams and sustained uncertainty. Participants were balancing relational demands, transactional partnerships and the personal cost of purpose driven work.



European Climate Foundation (Global)

Challenge: Supporting technically capable but isolated early-career climate communicators working under pressure in contested policy spaces.



Taking Care of Business (South Africa)

Challenge: Sustaining the quality and consistency of existing, multi-regional mentoring at scale for grassroots entrepreneurs.



Partners for a New Economy (Global)

Challenge: Strengthening collaborative leadership and resilience for professionals tackling systemic challenges in silos.



Women's Leadership Initiative (Oman)

Challenge: Building networks, confidence and leadership capability for women.



Pollinate Impact (Global South)

Challenge: Strengthening mentoring and leadership capability among ecosystem builders supporting entrepreneurs in complex, resource constrained environments.



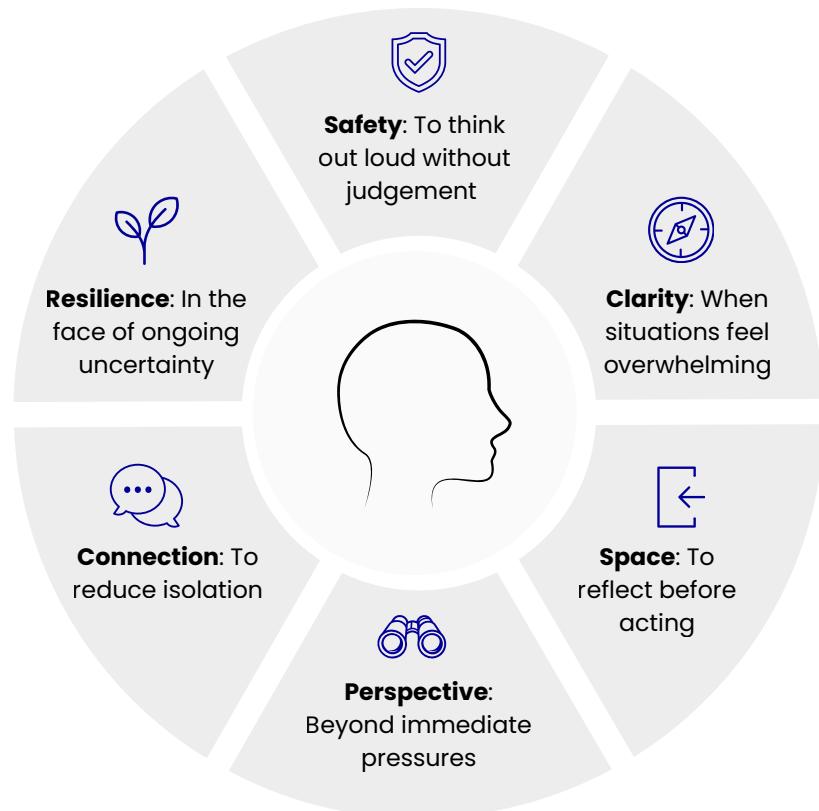
Foundation leaders' Initiative (Global)

Challenge: Supporting foundation leaders to lead collaboratively across complex systems, diverse teams and high uncertainty while sustaining effectiveness and wellbeing.

Despite the different contexts, these situations pointed to a shared set of needs: people needed **space to pause and reflect**. They needed **trusted relationships** where they can test their thinking **without judgement**.

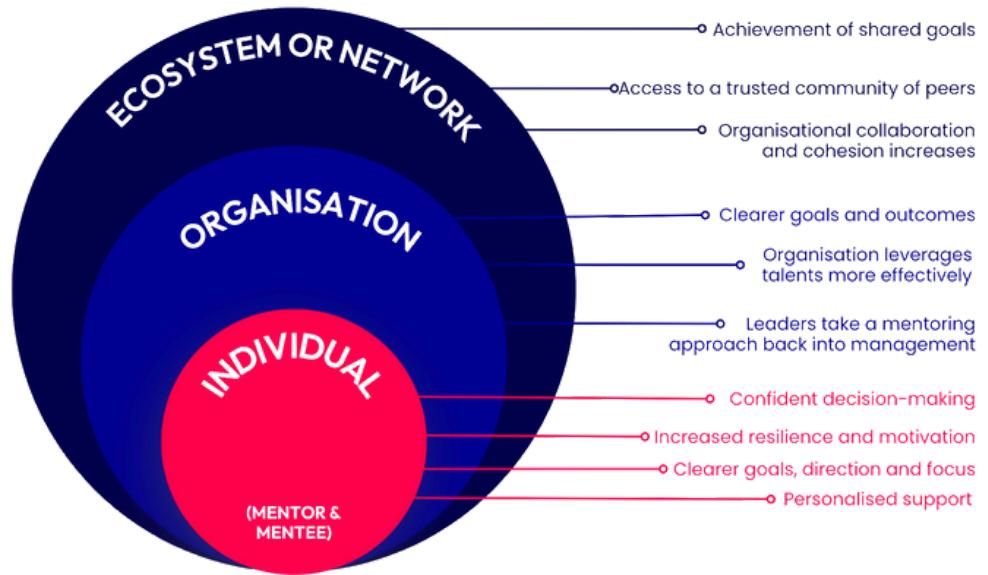
They needed support that strengthens judgement and leadership capacity, enabling them to lead well and drive their sectors forward in the face of ongoing pressure and uncertainty.

Organisations turned to mentoring because they needed a way to support people without adding more demands. They weren't looking for more training, more content or more performance pressure but for something that could support the application of learning and leadership development in real work situations. **They were looking for something that could help people think more clearly, navigate complexity, do their jobs better and sustain themselves over time.**



When designed well, mentoring meets those needs and offers something many organisations are missing: **a structured, relational form of support** that helps people make sense of complexity and act with greater clarity. This is why it showed up across such diverse programmes in 2025. Not as a generic leadership add-on, but as a response to human and organisational needs that existing forms of support were no longer meeting.

A simple way to understand what mentoring shifts



One of the challenges with mentoring is that its most important effects are often the hardest to see.

Organisations are used to tracking outputs and immediate results. But mentoring rarely creates change in a straight line. It does not usually start with new skills or visible actions.

Over the course of 2025, as we looked across programmes in very different contexts, we found it helpful to think about mentoring impact in layers.

The personal level: where change begins

At the centre are the shifts that happen inside a person. These aren't always visible at first, but they shape everything that follows.

People spoke about feeling safer to think out loud and suggest ideas without judgement. In **New Economy Leaders Academy** delivered with **Partners for a New Economy**, **95%** of participants recognised the value of actively seeking feedback on their leadership, signalling increased confidence to reflect openly rather than lead alone.

In the **Catalyst Circle Peer Mentoring Programme with Pollinate**

Impact, which focused on strengthening the mentoring and leadership capability of ecosystem builders supporting entrepreneurs, **90%** of participant felt more confident in their mentoring capability pointing to greater quality and effectiveness of their mentoring practice, while 100% of trained mentors in the **Sickle Cell Society** reported higher levels of confidence in building trusting relationships with their mentees.

Reduced isolation was particularly consistent across contexts. In the **New Economy Leaders Academy**, **95%** of participants reported expanded peer networks and planned to continue relationships beyond the programme. With the **European Climate Foundation**, mentoring also addressed the isolation experienced by early career professionals with **70%** of participants saying the programme helped them expand their network and collaborate with others in the built environment field.

“ *I'm not good at networking but have come to understand (more than before) that professional relationships can transform your mindset around work (great word: thinking partners). So I'm going to put more conscious effort into building connections in my career”, European Climate Foundation's programme Mentee.*

Across the European Climate Foundation's mentoring programme and the New Economy Leaders Academy, **100%** of participants reported strengthened mentoring skills, knowledge and confidence.

“ *I have gained confidence and deep connections to other leaders in the New Economy field. I [also] feel better able to recognise my own wants and needs - and act upon them. Mentoring during the Academy has provided me with clarity and stability in turbulent times and a weekly space for conscious reflection. The most significant change for me has been saying "yes" to opportunities that scare me and being bold in leading beyond my formal authority. I am forever grateful for this opportunity, hard to overstate how impactful it's been on my development!"*
Anna Leitner, Campaigner at GLOBAL 2000 - Friends of the Earth Austria – New Economy Leaders Academy.

These internal shifts matter because they change how people show up. When someone feels clearer, confident and more grounded, they communicate and react differently. They ask **better questions**. They make decisions with **more confidence** and less defensiveness. They deepen their self-awareness and self-leadership.

The organisational level: how personal shifts ripple outward

Over time, these internal shifts lead affect teams and organisations.

Across programmes, mentoring contributed to changes in how people related to one another at work with an increased collaboration at the forefront of these changes: **95%** of the **New Economy Leaders**

Academy participants said that they now recognise the value in bringing in wider perspectives when making key decisions and are ready to build strong working relationships.

In programmes where mentoring capability was strengthened internally, shared standards and clearer roles enabled mentoring relationships to hold quality more consistently over time.

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As a result of this training, our team of mentors can step into the mentoring space with a greater sense of purpose and a clearer picture of what the mentoring end result looks and feels like. As a leader of an organisation or a programme, knowing your mentors share this foundation and can deliver to a consistent standard is a huge value add. Jane Naude – National Programme Manager at TCB

And in peer to peer mentoring programmes like **Catalyst Circle**, these shifts translated directly into organisational practice. Participants did not simply improve their mentoring conversations; they began applying those skills in their organisational roles. As one participant reflected:

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I discovered tools for building rapport, setting direction progressing the mentoring relationship and winding it down. These are valuable tools that I am already applying in my work supporting entrepreneurs.

The ecosystem level: the unexpected multiplier effect

In some cases, the effects of mentoring extended beyond individuals and organisations, shaping how people connected, learned and supported one another across wider systems.

In programmes focused on leadership and systems change, mentoring contributed to the formation of ongoing peer networks.

In the **New Economy Leaders Academy**, **95%** of participants planned to continue relationships with fellow alumni, and **90%** committed to ongoing peer mentoring beyond the programme.

Support did not end with the final session, it continued through informal collaboration, shared reflection and mutual accountability.

In peer mentoring initiatives, mentoring practices also travelled beyond the original relationships. Participants applied mentoring tools in their wider work supporting entrepreneurs and peers, helping to spread reflective, non-judgemental approaches across networks.

In programmes operating across countries and regions, such as **Taking Care of Business**, setting **shared mentoring standards** and approaches helped stabilise **quality** across the service offering, organisation and network. Rather than relying on individual effort, mentoring became a more consistent and portable form of support, strengthening the ecosystem as a whole.

Across contexts, these patterns point to an important **multiplier effect**.

When mentoring is designed well, it does not stay contained within a single relationship or programme. Learning spreads through peer networks, confidence and perspective travel further and ecosystems become more resilient over time.

This is why we often describe mentoring impact as working from the inside out or in layers:

- 1. At the personal level**, mentoring creates the conditions for clearer thinking, confidence, agency, self-awareness and self-leadership, which show up in greater openness to feedback, stronger judgement and more confident decision making.
- 2. At the organisational level**, those shifts influence leadership behaviour, communication and culture, contributing to more collaborative ways of working, better quality conversations and greater consistency in mentoring and people management practice.
- 3. At the ecosystem level**, they contribute to stronger relationships, collaboration and resilience over time, enabling learning and support to travel beyond individual programmes.

This way of looking at mentoring helps explain why its impact can feel both subtle and profound. It also explains why mentoring often appears modest at first yet becomes more valuable as time passes.

What made the difference: design over motivation

As we looked back across the mentoring programmes we supported in 2025, what stood out was not a new insight, but the growing importance of designing mentoring that can adapt to the evolving needs of today's organisations and communities.

When mentoring is **intentionally designed** and **well supported**, the quality of the experience and the depth of impact is consistently strong.

Across contexts, we saw mentors and mentees engage deeply, relationships sustain momentum and meaningful shifts emerge over time.

What stood out was not the level of motivation, mentors showed up with commitment, mentees were engaged and organisations were invested in their people. What made the difference was how mentoring was designed and supported around that motivation.

The difference between mentoring that transforms and mentoring that disappoint is rarely motivation.

It's design.

The industry reality: most mentoring programmes fail

Despite **98%** of Fortune 500 companies running mentoring programmes, only **37%** of professionals actually benefit from them ([Harvard Business Review](#)).

When mentoring is left to goodwill and informal effort, its impact is fragile. When it is intentionally designed, it becomes something organisations can rely on.

What we learned with our partners delivering mentoring themselves

This became especially clear whether organisations were strengthening existing mentoring or launching it for the first time.

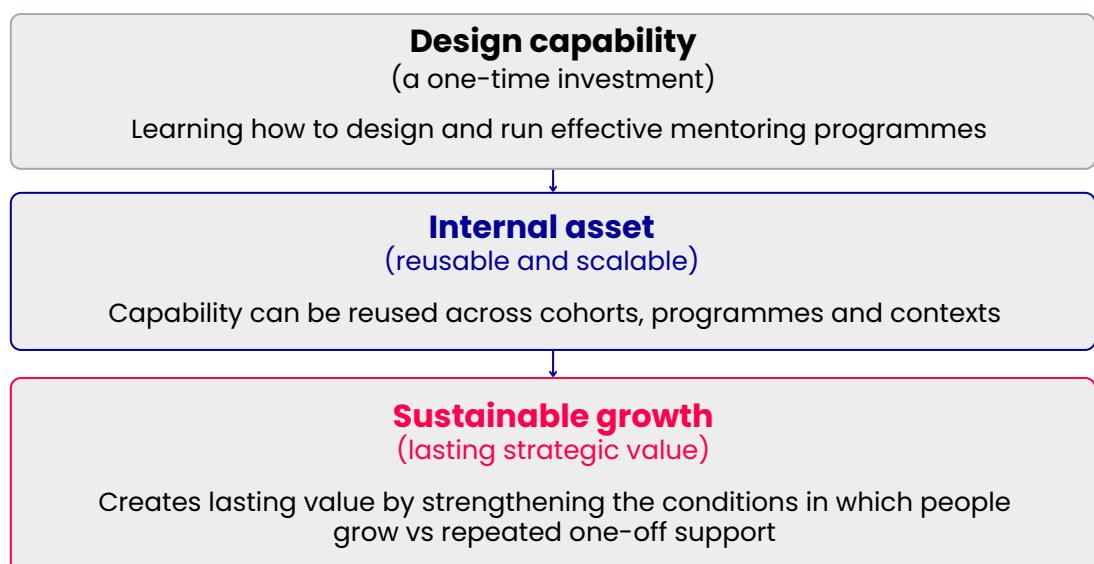
In **Taking Care of Business**, mentoring was already embedded across multiple regions and cohorts, with committed mentors and strong intent. The challenge was not whether mentoring mattered, but how to sustain quality and consistency at scale. Clarifying purpose, setting shared standards and strengthening mentor capability helped reduce variation, increase confidence and shift responsibility from individual effort to the system itself. What began as a focus on improving service delivery also contributed to a shift in internal culture, reinforcing shared expectations around quality, support and learning.

For **Pollinate Impact** launching mentoring for the first time, the challenge was different but the solution was the same. Building clarity around purpose, roles, quality and structure moved mentoring from intention to practice, laying the foundations for programme managers and participants to develop confidence and capability over time.

Across both contexts, the result was similar: clearer roles, a shared approach and standards, more confident programme owners and mentors, reduced coordination burden and mentoring quality that could be sustained and repeated rather than hoped for.

And importantly, this work is often a **one-time investment**. Learning how to design and run effective mentoring programmes builds internal capability that can be reused across cohorts and contexts. Compared to many forms of ongoing support, it creates long term value by strengthening the human capital systems through which people grow, learning is applied and leadership capacity is sustained over time.

Designing mentoring is not just a programme decision. It is a capability investment that compounds over time



Why this transfers across contexts

TAcross nearly 200 mentoring programmes we have supported, including those delivered in 2025, the realities varied widely. They involved different types of organisations, different roles and different pressures. The contexts weren't the same either, with constraints, cultures and expectations varying widely.

And across these contexts, mentoring worked well because it addressed a set of fundamental human needs that showed up everywhere we worked:

- **Safety** to think out loud without judgement.
- **Clarity** when situations felt complex or overwhelming.
- **Space** to reflect before acting.
- **Perspective** beyond immediate pressures.
- **Connection** that reduced isolation.
- **Leadership confidence** to make decisions, influence others and take responsibility in uncertain conditions.
- **Empathy** to support others well, including teams, peers and partners.
- **Resilience** in the face of ongoing uncertainty.
- **Hope and motivation** when challenges felt heavy.
- **Agency** when decisions carried real weight.

When these needs were met, people did not just **feel supported**. They **thought differently**. They **communicated differently**. They made more **considered decisions**. And over time, those shifts influenced teams, organisations and wider ecosystems.

This is why mentoring proved **adaptable** across such diverse environments in 2025. Not because it looked the same everywhere, but because it worked at the level where change actually begins.

Mentoring can be relevant across diverse portfolios not because it delivers uniform activities, but because it strengthens the underlying **human capacities that allow people to lead, collaborate and adapt in complex systems**.



What this means going into 2026

Taken together, and building on our work since 2008, the patterns visible across the programmes we supported in 2025 point to a clear conclusion: **mentoring is a high-impact way to support leadership, resilience and growth across organisations and ecosystems. But it isn't inherently effective. Its impact depends on how intentionally it is designed and supported.**

When mentoring is treated as a standalone activity or a light-touch add-on, its impact is fragile. When it is approached as a designed experience, with clear purpose, preparation, support and learning built in, it becomes **a strategic tool that organisations and funders can rely on.**

This matters because the kinds of challenges people and organisations are facing are forever changing and not short term. They involve leading under pressure, making decisions in complexity, sustaining resilience over time and supporting others to navigate uncertainty without burning out. Mentoring, when designed well, strengthens precisely these capacities. And because **it builds internal capability, it often represents a more sustainable and cost-efficient investment than repeated, one-off forms of support.**

How we think about partnership

This understanding — that mentoring works best when it is intentionally designed to meet context specific needs and build internal capability — shapes how we work. The most effective mentoring programmes we supported in 2025 were not delivered to organisations but **co-created** with them.

Learning was built in from the start. Design decisions were made deliberately, based on context and desired outcomes rather than templates. Programme managers were supported rather than left to carry the work alone and capability was strengthened so that mentoring could continue to be run well over time.

In those partnerships, mentoring became more than a programme. It became part of **the system that supports people** to think clearly, lead with confidence and sustain change, while building the capability of those participating to carry this work forward.

The opportunity ahead

As organisations and funders look ahead to 2026, the opportunity isn't simply to do **more** mentoring. It's to invest in mentoring systems and capability that is designed with intention, supported with care and treated as the strategic lever for human and organisational change that it can be.

That is the lens we will continue to work from.

If you're considering mentoring as part of your 2026-27 portfolio or questioning whether your existing mentoring investments are delivering value, we'd welcome a conversation.

Contact us at info@humanedge.org.uk

The Human Edge Team



The Human Edge is a mentoring and coaching specialist 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.

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