Mentoring: an overview

Mike Munro Turner

Coaching and mentoring are terms that are often used interchangeably. Mike Munro Turner outlines where the focus of mentoring lies.

Background

The first recorded use of the word ‘mentor’ is in the epics poem The Odyssey. Ulysses left his trusted friend Mentor to take care of his household and his son Telemacon whilst he was away fighting in the Trojan War. Mentor largely failed in his duties, taking care of neither. It was the goddess Pallas Athene (goddess of war and of wisdom) who helped Telemacon, appearing throughout The Odyssey in a variety of human and animal forms, including that of Mentor. As Mentor she acted as a wise and trusted adviser and counsellor helping Telemacon grow in experience, maturity and courage. However, the word didn’t feature in the English language until publication in 1750 of the story Les Aventures de Télémaque, by the French writer Fénelon, in which Mentor was the main character. Les Aventures de Télémaque went on to become the most reprinted book of the 18th century, leading to the word ‘mentor’ being resurrected after a gap of nearly three millennia. It is Fénelon’s Mentor, not Homer’s, that forms the basis for modern usage of the word (Roberts, 1999).

The word ‘mentor’ soon came to represent a wise and responsible tutor – an experienced person who advises, guides, teaches, inspires, challenges and corrects, and serves as a role model. Mentoring is now a widely used and effective tool for personal and organisational development.

What is mentoring used for?

Mentoring has many business uses, including:
- Enabling organisational change through supporting the personal and professional transitions of key leaders.
- Providing trusted support in times of trouble and helping with important decisions.
- Supporting individual career development, ‘opening doors’, and explaining organisational politics.
- Guiding a student through a course of study and competence development.
- Pashing on technical expertise.
- Transferring business skills into the not-for-profit sector.
- Helping people from minority groups move into the working world.

Key learning points

- Definitions of mentoring vary widely, so check assumptions early on.
- Good mentoring always involves a wide range of skills, including coaching, counseling, consulting and teaching.
- Mentoring is a catalyst and support for individual and organisational transformation.
- The Mentoring Wheel provides a holistic approach to mentoring.
- Mentoring cultivates territory with counselling, psychotherapy and coaching.

Executive mentoring

This is particularly suited to senior executives who have risen above the scope of formal management development programmes, and require highly focused development and support, tailored to the particular challenges facing them in their work.

Executive mentoring stimulates and supports the individual growth necessary to deliver performance beyond present levels and beliefs of what is possible. It works by helping mentees:
- Develop a solid physical, psychological and mental foundation for their leadership capability.
- Uncover their value priorities and clarify their personal vision;
- Think strategically and inspire shared vision, mission and values;
- Uncover self-sabotage, recognize repeating patterns and identify their personal winning strategies;
- Help developing leaders make the transition to new roles and identify their personal winning strategies.

Excutives take advantage of the opportunities provided by mentoring programmes in a wide variety of ways. One senior technical expert, realising that he would find it hard to support the next generation of new entrants, used it to develop his interpersonal and people management skills and is now in charge of a £15 million unit. Another used it to support him in raising the commitment level of under-performing staff. A CEO used mentoring to help him and his management team become champions of the organisation’s vision by developing their leadership skills and aligning the team’s and the organisation’s values.

Organisational mentoring

This is increasingly global, fast-moving and competitive business environment is forcing fundamental change on organisations. Many are investing heavily in new systems, structures and processes and in giving people the skills necessary to use them. But often this is not enough. For organisational change to be effective, the people involved are increasingly likely to have to make fundamental transitions in how they see themselves, how they think and how they relate to others.

Organisational mentoring programmes are used to help leaders and other executives make these shifts.

An organisational mentoring programme will:
- Accelerate personal and organisational change;
- Support executives in making the transition to new roles and cultures;
- Help manage the downside risk of change management and maintain performance during periods of rapid change;
- Remove obstacles to successful change by predicting and responding to challenges;
- Develop a solid physical, psychological and mental foundation for their leadership capability;
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- Think strategically and inspire shared vision, mission and values;
- Uncover self-sabotage, recognize repeating patterns and identify their personal winning strategies;
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The future of mentoring

We are moving towards an increasingly ecological view of mentoring. As we grow and mature, we make the transition through a series of predictable developmental stages. At its simplest this series can be reduced to three stages, named egocentric, sociocentric and world-centric or ‘me’, ‘us’ and ‘all of us’ (Wilber, 2001).

The initial focus of most mentoring is on the individual mentee (egocentric). If the mentoring continues (and much mentoring is long term), then the focus will move beyond the individual to supporting transitions in the larger groups to which the mentee belongs, in the wider society or even at the global level. At this stage, the fundamental question the mentor asks the mentee is ‘What is it that the world of tomorrow needs that you are uniquely able to provide?’

References


Dr Mike Munro Turner is a leading executive coach and mentor. He has over ten years’ experience of improving individual and organisational performance through working with senior executives to increase their leadership effectiveness, improve their personal and business performance and accelerate the achievement of the organisation’s vision. He also works with the Centre for Creative Leadership in Brussels on their leadership development programmes and is on the faculty of the School of Coaching, where he trains coaches. As ‘Mike the Mentor’, he publishes a highly rated newsletter on mentoring and coaching.

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Mentoring today

The use of mentoring is widespread across the commercial, education and not-for-profit sectors as a developmental, supporting and helping activity. In Europe, Australasia, Canada and southern Africa, a ‘development-focused’ view of mentoring is most common. By contrast, a ‘sponsorship-focused’ view predominates in the United States – or at least in the literature emanating from there. The difference is encapsulated in the language used, with sponsorship-focused mentoring referring to ‘protege’ and development-focused mentoring to ‘mentee’ (Clutterbuck, 2004). An example of the ‘development-focused’ view defines mentoring as ‘off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking’ (Meggison and Clutterbuck, 1995).

The Mentoring Wheel

The Mentoring Wheel is a framework designed to enable you to grasp the big picture of mentoring.

The purpose of mentoring is always to help the mentee change something – to improve their performance, develop their leadership qualities, learn new social skills, make a career transition and so on. This movement from where they are (‘here’) to where they want to be (‘there’) provides one dimension of mentoring.

The means by which the mentee gets from ‘here’ to ‘there’ is by interacting with their surroundings. This requires an expressive and receptive interplay between the person and their environment and provides a second dimension.

The resulting two-dimensional developmental space within which the mentoring occurs is shown in Figure 1. This ‘M’-shaped wheel describes a process made up of four perspectives:

- **Doing** (top right), whilst also coaching them to improve their relationship with their surroundings. This requires an expressive and receptive interplay between the person and their environment and provides a second dimension.

- **Being** (bottom left), which describes a process made up of four perspectives:

- **Envisioning** (top left), where the mentor helps the mentee answer the question ‘Who am I?’

- **Attaining** (bottom right), where the mentor helps the mentee answer the question ‘How will I achieve my vision?’

- **Implementing** (bottom left), where the mentor’s role is to inspire the mentee and to help them answer the question ‘Where am I going?’

The process is guided by the ‘feedback loop’ shown in Figure 2. For example, a development-focused mentor may primarily help their mentee through a major life transition (top right), whilst also coaching them to improve their relationship skills (bottom right) and helping them align with the corporate culture (bottom left).

Mentoring, coaching and counselling

Mentoring, coaching, counselling and psychotherapy cover broadly the same territory, but focus more strongly on different parts of it (Figure 2). For example, a development-focused mentor may be primarily helping their mentee through a major life transition (top right), whilst also coaching them to improve their relationship skills (bottom right) and helping them align with the corporate culture (bottom left).
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The resulting two-dimensional developmental space within which the mentoring occurs is shown in Figure 1. This Mentoring Wheel describes a process made up of four perspectives:

- **Freeing up:** liberating ourselves from the ties that bind us.
- **Envisioning:** reaching up to our potential and vision.
- **Implementing:** transforming vision into action.
- **Attracting:** consistently attracting our heart’s desire.

These four perspectives are not discrete activities that the mentor moves between – at any moment all will be present and active though one may be in the foreground.

It is one of the mentor’s jobs to keep all four perspectives alive for the mentee. Individual mentors will prefer working in some quadrants rather than others.

**Freeing up**

Personal history and current life situation both dramatically influence our ability to make choices now. A key task for the mentor is to help the mentee be sufficiently free of these influences to be able to discern and then make the choices they yearn for. ‘Freeing up’ describes a process of developing the autonomy, responsibility and confidence to be able to choose freely. When working in this phase, the mentor’s stance is nurturing and supportive, aiming to help the mentee develop a strong, positive self-image. The fundamental question, which the mentor helps the mentee answer, is ‘Who am I?’

**Envisioning**

Envisioning is about connecting with a sense of purpose, identifying and choosing personal value priorities, creating a compelling and stretching vision, and committing to realising it. Key at this stage is the ability to create and hold a tension between the current reality and the stretch vision. What makes this difficult is that it requires us to embrace our own potential to make a difference in the world – and this can be scary. But without the courage to hold this ‘reality gap’, we can end up holding a vision that is little different from the current reality – with the result that little changes. The mentor may therefore have to hold on to the vision for the mentee until such time as the mentee can take it for themselves.

**Implementing**

The mentor’s role is to inspire the mentee and to help them answer the question ‘Where am I going?’

**Attracting**

Every action we take attracts a response from our environment. We can’t help but attract (particular outcomes, people, situations and so on) – the challenge is to attract our heart’s desire, not the same old stuff we have always attracted. The role of the mentor is to challenge the mentee to see clearly the impact of what they are doing and to help them answer the question ‘Am I creating my vision?’

Underpinning the whole mentoring process is the development of key skills – the ability to be self-aware and the ability to exercise will. One of the most empowering things we do as mentors is to help people see reality, as well as their part in creating that reality, and the thoughts, feelings and other responses that the reality evokes in them with unflinching clarity. This level of self-awareness often leads naturally to appropriate action. When it doesn’t, we also help the mentee develop and exercise their will – their ability to choose and fully express who they are and take action in support of this. The degree to which the mentee enhances these two skills is a good indicator of the extent to which the mentoring has created lasting changes in the mentee’s effectiveness.

Being mentored should be a challenging and stretching experience, inviting both mentor and mentee to draw on and develop hidden personal resources and qualities. And it is an exciting, stimulating journey of self-discovery and development that opens up new opportunities for personal fulfilment and professional achievement.

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An organisational mentoring programme will: accelerate personal and organisational change; support executives in making the transition to new roles and cultures; help manage the downside risk of change management and aligning performance during periods of rapid change; remove obstacles to successful change by predicting and managing personal and organisational regression; promote balance and provide a stable base during periods of major organisational and career change.

**The future of mentoring**

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