

## IN FOCUS: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# THE BENEFITS OF WISE MENTORING

During challenging times it can be invaluable to have a mentor for support and guidance. **Linda Aspey** offers some ideas towards making mentoring work well for everyone involved.

Who comes to mind when you think of a mentor? A teacher? A peer? A wise old uncle? A former boss? In fact, anyone can be a mentor – young or old, from personal or professional sources, on a formal or informal basis. However, mentoring is mostly performed on a one-to-one basis, where a less experienced person turns to a more experienced one for support and advice.

Imagine that you have just started a new job and you are navigating the unclear waters of the organisation. Or you are preparing for an initial public offering (IPO), learning how to deal with and make credible presentations to the banks. Or you have been given the new and daunting task of implementing an ERP system. In such situations, chewing things over with a mentor can help.

#### Who makes a good mentor?

Whether seeking a mentor, or interested in being one, certain things are required. The first of these is impartiality. A mentor's focus should be solely on a person's learning and development. So, while line managers can support, coach, guide, and advise, their primary responsibility for the performance of those they manage means they lack the 'distance' to be true mentors to those they manage.

Some core personal qualities are also important. Research amongst finance professionals, conducted last year by Aspey Associates, showed the following five main qualities to be considered important.

1. Trustworthiness – being able to speak freely in the knowledge that you will be taken seriously, that your mentor has no agenda other than your success, that you can trust their judgement, and that what you say will not go further, is essential for an effective mentoring relationship. (Remember, though, a key element of this mutual trust is defining and agreeing its limits at the start – so that later, particularly if a risk is highlighted, you both know what is regarded as confidential, and what the proposed course of action is when something cannot be kept so, legally, morally or financially.)

2. Experience – people generally want their mentor to have faced, and successfully overcome, similar problems to those that they themselves face. The mentor does not need to know the mentee's job inside out, or even to work in finance, but they do need an awareness of the likely issues and the wisdom to know how to manage them. In reality, most mentoring conversations are

around dealing with relationships, developing political 'savvy', solving problems, making decisions, developing broader business awareness, becoming an effective leader. The mentor's role is to listen, ask shrewd questions and offer alternative perspectives.

3. Honesty – equally important is the mentor's ability to be a 'critical friend' when needed - offering challenge, feedback and drawing attention to blind spots, offering a fair balance between support and stretch.

4. Humility – a skilled mentor is a mixture of coach and adviser – using a coaching style to help the mentee think effectively for themselves and, only when relevant, offering direct advice. If a mentor is doing most of the talking, their ego and experience may be getting in the way.

5. Enthusiasm – a good mentor is someone who genuinely wants to be one. People take on mentoring roles for all sorts of reasons – to be involved, to give something back, to see another person's career develop, for their own continuing professional development (CPD), to develop their skills and knowledge – whatever the reason, willingness and commitment to putting in the time are essential.

#### Where to find a mentor

If your organisation already has formal mentoring processes in place, and you feel that they are relevant to your needs, obviously that is a good place to start. If not, or if you would like to find one yourself, you'll need to draw on

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your network. Who do you trust? Who has inspired you? Who has experience and enthusiasm that you could benefit from? It might be someone you work with (but not for), a person who is unrelated to your work, a previous line manager, someone from an organisation you previously worked for, or an individual you met on a course. You could apply to join the ICAEW's F-TEN programme\*, offering peer group learning, networking and mentoring. You could even approach someone you do not know, but admire. The sources of mentors are many.

### How to get the most from mentoring

It is important to be clear about your goals and what you would like to get from mentoring, and for you both to agree these, along with success criteria. The relationship does not need to be overly structured but it must feel purposeful. Even if you are to meet only occasionally, you will both benefit from agreeing the main elements of the overall 'contract', eg:

- the confidentiality framework;
- the meeting arrangements (frequency, duration of sessions, duration of the relationship, review points, venue and format of meetings);
- whether or not your mentor is happy to be called at other times; and
- what to do if it is not working for either of you.

In relation to the last point, regular cancellation can signal ambivalence, a lowered

commitment or a feeling that the mentoring 'is not working', so it is useful to discuss how you will raise this in a constructive, professional and timely way if it does arise.

### Interested in becoming a mentor?

What if, rather than seeking a mentor, you are considering becoming one? A useful starting point is to check whether you tick the five boxes on what makes a good mentor. Do you have the time, energy and skill? Can you add value – and if so, how? What do you want to get from it and can you balance this with the needs of the mentee?

If you are asked to mentor someone within your own organisation, having an initial conversation with their line manager can clarify that the mentoring itself is confidential and is about the mentee and their development, and that you are not taking the role of a manager.

I would recommend that you read up about mentoring so that you are well prepared and, if some relevant skills training is on offer, that you take the opportunity to brush up on yours.

For the mentoring sessions themselves, a good road map is provided by the acronym CLEAR, standing for:

- contracting;
- listening;
- exploring;
- action planning; and
- reviewing.

However, the quality of the listening, conversation and

relationship matters more, in mentoring, than whether or not a structure is used.

### Conclusion

Mentoring has been described as the ultimate win-win business tool – where the employee, the mentor and the organisation all derive benefit. Usually the mentoring relationship is time bound, and its end needs to be planned for, if it is not to come as a shock for both sides. However even when a formal mentoring arrangement has ended, many mentors and mentees continue an informal friendship that can last a lifetime. ■

\* The ICAEW's F-Ten programme is a peer-to-peer leadership network helping potential future leaders make the transition from finance specialist to business leader. Contact astrid.kirchner@icaew.com.

Recommended reading: *Everyone Needs a Mentor: Fostering Talent in Your Organisation*, by David Clutterbuck, CIPD Publishing, 2004



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