

mentoring @ UniSA

a good practice guide for staff



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Introduction

I am really pleased to write the introduction to this UniSA publication on mentoring. Without doubt, mentoring is one of the most effective methods for helping individuals achieve their personal aspirations and goals in the work place.

According to the dictionary, a mentor is:

1. a wise and trusted counsellor or teacher
2. an influential senior sponsor or supporter.

Today the term is often used interchangeably with 'coach' and 'trainer', however, those terms do not convey the essential elements of the mentor/mentee relationship which I see as being trust, support and empathy. Certainly, in my own experience as mentor and mentee, it is these qualities which have been the foundation of the most rewarding relationships.

This book explores how mentoring can be arranged for mutual benefit of the participants and the organisation. It suggests some ground rules and design specifications and provides some case studies that will help you decide whether you want to participate in a mentor relationship.

If you decide to seek a mentor, I recommend that you think very carefully about the outcomes you would like to achieve, particularly any objectives you have in mind. These may be:

- to gain a continuing post or promotion
- to complete a PhD
- to stay sane
- to decide on career priorities or
- to help you make critical decisions.

Frequently, we are faced with competing options. I have found that mentors can be extremely useful in helping to define the options and to delineate pathways to a personal objective. They can also open doors by setting up contacts internally and externally and introducing the mentee to high-visibility activities.

And, to those who decide to take up the role of mentor, let me assure you that there will be valuable personal rewards for you too, particularly from the sharing of new perspectives and the sense of fulfilment that you will gain.

Ms Ruth Blenkiron

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What is mentoring?

Mentoring is based on the belief that one empathetic person can make a difference in the lives of others. It is a voluntary process involving deliberate pairing of a skilled or experienced person with a less experienced, usually junior person. Mentors provide encouragement, act as sounding boards, challenge, support, and share experiences. While mentoring is usually discussed in terms of the work environment (career mentoring), it can be beneficial for all aspects of personal development (personal mentoring).

How does it work?

It can be a formal program where people are matched according to knowledge, experience and personal goals for the mentoring relationship, or it can be informal, where the partners self select each other and initiate the process.

Why mentor?

Benefits for the mentor

- personal satisfaction
- opportunity to gain knowledge
- opportunity to revitalise ideas
- acknowledgement by the organisation as stepping 'beyond the call of duty' to help others
- enhances self esteem
- allows reflection on own practice
- uses all skills and talents
- offers feelings of altruism
- enthusiasm following mentee's progress
- offers feeling of being needed
- professional recognition.

Benefits for the mentee

- can 'walk with' a person who has done it before
- helps with career promotion
- allows skill and knowledge acquisition
- enhances self worth and confidence
- helps develop a sense of professional identity and personal competence
- provides exposure-visibility and sponsorship
- offers fresh insights and perspectives.

Benefits for the organisation

- professional development of staff
- on the job learning opportunities for employees
- knowledge sharing and creation
- sharing of knowledge about an organisational culture
- increased staff attraction and retention.

How to choose a mentor

Clarify your purpose for wanting a mentor. Is it self development, skill development, or understanding the corporate climate? (Table 1, page 16) Choose somebody who you know is experienced and has succeeded in these areas.

For a career mentor consider:

- management perspective
- organisational know how
- personality match
- accessibility
- communication skills
- capacity to empower and develop people
- empathy with the culture of the organisation
- creativity
- confidence
- intelligence
- standing/credibility in organisation
- trustworthiness.

For a personal mentor look for:

- listener
- supporter
- challenger
- encourager
- protector
- wise counsellor.

Clarify the functions you want your mentor to perform as listed in Table 2 on page 17.

Determine accessibility – how often do you want to meet and how (face-to-face, email, telephone?) It is important to take geographic distance into account when choosing a mentor as this may impact on interaction frequency.

Consider whether you want a mentor within or outside of your department:

- In previous research, partners from the same department reported greater mentoring quality, possibly because of increased interaction opportunities.
- Research shows that mentees report greater role modelling when there is less difference in rank between mentor and mentee (possibly due to identification factors) whereas mentors report greater role modelling when there is greater difference in rank (possibly because identification is not necessary to be a good role model, and in fact they may believe they are better role models because they have more expertise, experience or authority).
- It is recommended that your line manager act as a coach, rather than as a mentor, and that your mentor come from elsewhere in the organisation. This avoids conflict of interest in the reporting relationship.

How to ask a person to mentor

People often hesitate to ask high performers to be mentors because they think they would be too busy or they have nothing to offer in return. However, research has shown that mentors gain from successful mentoring relationships as well. If they are not asked, they are not being given the opportunity to make their own decision. If they do say no, they may have other suggestions for mentors. Examples of some approaches you could use are:

'I've identified time management as an area of improvement for me. I've noticed that your time management skills are very good. Would you be willing to give me some advice in that area?'

'I would like to have someone assist me in the development of an action plan. Are you available and willing to mentor me through this process?'

'I'm new to this organisation and need to get a better understanding of the culture. Would you be willing to help me?'

First steps in establishing a mentoring relationship

Set realistic expectations

It is important that both people understand the purpose of the relationship. That is, the mentee clearly states their clarified purpose for wanting a mentor and the kinds of functions they would like, and the mentor clearly states the strengths they could bring to the table. In this way, they both can discern whether there is a match between needs and strengths. Tables 3 (page 18) and 4 (page 19) may help you here.

Set ground rules such as:

- **Accessibility.** An agreement should be reached about the type, duration and frequency of meetings possible between the parties. Shall the meetings be a once weekly coffee meeting, a once monthly formalised meeting in a meeting room, ad hoc emailing or weekly phone calls? Of course, the geographic distance between the parties will be a confounding variable here.
- **Time frame.** Do the parties expect to achieve their goals within a particular time frame – 6 months, 12 months, or longer?
- **Confidentiality**
- **A no blame exit clause**

Establish a statement of agreement

This could either be a signed document, or a verbal agreement, but really should contain all the elements contained in the sample agreement in Table 5 on page 20. The most important element of this agreement is the confidentiality clause which should be clearly stated and understood. A clear understanding of the mentor's availability is also an important aspect of the agreement.

Mentor and mentee responsibilities

The responsibilities of mentors are to:

- set the learning climate and encourage risk-taking because making mistakes is part of learning
- ask lots of questions and help the mentee look at ideas from a variety of perspectives by listening actively and questioning intuitively and respectfully
- give constructive, specific feedback, and suggest areas for improvement
- act as co-learners and ask for feedback
- agree to commit to the ground rules set in the agreement
- agree to maintain confidentiality, so that information shared remains between the two parties
- agree to a no-fault conclusion clause with no negative consequences.

The responsibilities of mentees are to:

- agree to commit to the ground rules set out in the agreement, including the confidentiality and no-fault conclusion clauses
- seek feedback and take it on board respectfully
- be willing to look at issues from a different perspective and listen actively
- respond to questions and challenges thoughtfully
- recognise that mentors are not super-humans.

Developing the mentoring relationship

The essence of mentoring is found more within the kind of relationship that exists between mentor and mentee than in the various roles and functions performed by the partners. There are many factors which ensure the success of mentoring relationships. Some of these include:

- structural factors such as selection, purpose, and institutional support
- a clear working agreement
- the experience of mentor and mentee
- interpersonal skills
- mutuality and respect
- the length of relationship
- functions performed by mentor.

The success of the relationship depends on the skill of both parties to work **together**.

Once the initial phase of the relationship has been dealt with and the purpose, goals, ground rules, obligations, and procedures have been settled, it is time for consideration about the components that can help or hinder the development of a great mentoring relationship.

Potential pitfalls in mentoring

Mismatch

Sometimes a personal mismatch between parties can develop. This may be through a clash of values or personality or may just be inability to establish the rapport needed for a mentoring relationship. Using the guidelines on choosing a mentor and finding out about them in advance may minimise potential mismatches. However, it is also important to acknowledge that somebody with a different personal style may provide a perspective that you may learn from. Mentoring from a person too similar to you may not stretch or challenge you in the same way.

In cases of a mismatch honest feedback can be hard to give or hard to receive, and personal feelings come into play. Trust your intuitive judgment and acknowledge any mismatch as soon as possible. The earlier it is addressed the easier giving feedback will be. Keep in mind, and refer to, the “no-fault no-blame” clause that was agreed to from the beginning. Sometimes there may be a real or perceived power imbalance inhibiting the mentee from speaking openly about this issue. In this case either the mentor should delicately and professionally introduce the issue, or an outside person could act as mediator.

Clearly there is no necessity to specify the personal aspects of the mentor or mentee that you find difficult. The ‘no blame exit clause’ allows this to be accepted without full explanation. For example if you find that a mentor is too critical and directive and that this will be a major inhibitor in your learning it is sufficient to say “I’m finding that our styles are so different that I am having difficulty following through on your suggestions. I think that it may work better for me to find a mentor with a style more like my own.” As a mentor you could say “I’m finding that I can’t support you in the way I think you need and it may be better for you to find somebody who has a similar style and approach to your own.” Addressing the issue is difficult but not addressing it may be more difficult as expectations of, and commitment to the mentoring relationship advance.

Expectations

Mentees may have idealized and unrealistic expectations about what will happen as a result of the mentoring program, underlining the importance of frank and open discussions in the setting-up phase about goals and expectations. Mentors are not faultless super humans, but humans with faults and flaws, strengths and weaknesses just like the rest of us.

Time

Time is often found to be an issue in mentoring relationships which breaks down. It could be true that mentors and mentees do not invest the time and effort required of the relationship. Lack of time is one of the most common reasons given for a mentoring relationship breakdown. This is why the mentoring agreement is important – it helps to be realistic about time commitments at the start of the agreement. However, some people over-commit at the beginning without realizing that it may be difficult to keep to that agreement. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of renegotiation around this issue if time investment becomes a problem.

Intimacy

Sometimes issues arise in mentoring relationships around appropriate levels of intimacy. Clearly, in short-term relationships where skills-building is the goal, the level of intimacy will not be an important issue. However, at times where the mentee requires a sounding board for personal issues, then disclosure and confidentiality are important matters.

Personal style

Inflexible mentoring style may sometimes be a problem. For example, a mentor who prefers a directive style of communication may result in the mentee becoming frustrated with or dependent on the mentor. On the other hand, a mentor who prefers to be non-directive may not challenge the mentee, resulting in the learning component of the relationship not flourishing. Additionally, it is important for mentees to be prepared to adapt their learning styles and step out of their comfort zone, to be prepared to be challenged, to think independently or to follow advice at times.

Skills

Sometimes mentors do not have the necessary skills to act as mentors. They may be overly critical, controlling or negative, or may be rescuers. They may have used these styles all their lives and not be aware of them. Some mentees seem able to work around this, as they may have done with managers they have had in the past, and some mentors see this issue as an opportunity to role-model and seek mentoring for themselves as well, to address these issues. Open communication and seeking feedback is important in this situation. Ultimately, the mentoring relationship should be one in which both parties learn and grow, particularly if mentors are co-learners.

Ending the mentoring relationship

The mentoring agreement indicates the agreed length of the partnership. Mentoring relationships move through a series of stages, similar to groups (forming, norming, storming and performing) and, at the end of the relationship period, it is time for the mentor and mentee to recognise the end and celebrate the learning that has occurred. Sometimes mentors and mentees agree to continue the relationship, but usually in a different form.

A final meeting could be spent reviewing progress and working out where to go from there for the mentee. Learning is life-long, and many mentees go on to act as mentors themselves.

Case studies

Some mentees and mentors were interviewed for this guide to provide their individual perspectives of mentoring @ UniSA.

Mentee 1

1. Why did you decide to find a mentor?

It was recommended at a performance appraisal. It seemed sensible to look for someone at a higher level who knew the system. I knew I could talk about issues confidentially with a mentor and I wanted someone who had no reporting relationship with me.

2. How did you come to the relationship?

My boss discussed mentors with me, and I thought about this person then. I felt I could talk to her, that we could communicate and engage. She was in my department but not in my building. The PVC talked to her first, and then I did, making sure I gave her an 'out' if she didn't want to mentor me for any reason.

3. What do you see was the key to success in the relationship?

I think the close locality helped. Also, my boss was supportive which I felt was crucial. I never felt I shouldn't be taking the time from my work. It was easy to ring her and we had an easy relationship with really good communication. I was not in awe of her, we had mutual respect for each other which we had established in prior dealings.

4. What did you most get out of it?

She is outside my work environment, therefore gives unbiased advice about further study etc. She asks me why I think/decide certain things.

5. Were there any pitfalls?

None at all.

6. What are the main qualities your mentor brought to the relationship to make it work?

She is very grounded and she knows the system. She is honest, genuine, emotionally mature and doesn't pander to me or boost me falsely. She is positively challenging.

7. Is the relationship ongoing?

Yes. It started about 9 months ago and was comfortable from the start.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

If I had known about a university webpage I would have used it and I will in future if necessary. My current mentor would probably be able to guide me in a career direction change, but if not I would go to the website for a suitable mentor. However, I would have to have some control/final say in mentor matching. This is the first time I have been a mentee, but I would do it again and I would mentor in the future.

Structure wise, we try to stay under 1 hour for meetings. There have been no formalisation proceedings, but we have discussed a 'no-blame' ending.

Mentor 1

1. Why did you decide to be a mentor?

I felt like I should make myself available to help others as I thought I had something to offer. I initially had some reservations as I came from a public service background where, before equal opportunity legislation, some (mainly men) were given a foot up and others did not have the same access. I wanted to be sure that this mentoring was open and transparent and available to all.

2. How did you come to your current mentor relationship?

I have been in the formal mentoring programme, although my current mentee approached me. I think people find me if they need me, we have some conversations, then they move on.

3. What do you see is the key to success in mentoring relationships?

Well that is up to the mentee. They know what they want. I offer my services, but don't like to be directive or systematic. I will generally ring to say "Hi, you've been assigned to me", set up the first couple of meetings, set the parameters i.e. that I like to work in an unstructured manner. I tell my mentee that anything they tell me is privileged and that they can ask me anything. I expect them to use me however they need. It is up to them to lead the relationship after that.

4. What do you most get out of it?

I like talking to younger people and I like the chance to help with the clues that I could have used early in my career but didn't receive. For example, the 'politicals', that at times one just has to accept realities particularly in higher education settings where the employees have a whole different world view. They can play the game without compromising their integrity. The questions I get are usually about reactions and frustrations rather than asking for information.

5. Have there been any pitfalls?

Only once, a person presumed on the relationship as a way to gain an advantage to get ahead. This is not the role of a mentor. I guess time can be a pitfall – mentor relationships sometimes fizzle out because other priorities take over. I have had a kind of performance anxiety when relationships fizzle, wondering whether I met my end of the contract.

6. What are the qualities your mentee brought to the relationship to make it work?

A willingness to be open, ask questions and clarify as we go along what they actually want from me. I see it as a mutual relationship and they need to take the lead and let me know what they need.

7. Is the relationship ongoing?

Yes I have a current mentee. Others have fizzled out but none have ended on a bad note. Sometimes previous mentees ring out of the blue, establishing me as part of their network.

8. Anything else you would like to add?

I have never made formal arrangements. Usually mentees just want to chat for a bit. Formal endings require some warm and fuzzies and I am not good at that. I like a commonsense approach.

The one relationship which was a bit presumptuous was not due to unclear guidelines, but to the person's differing world view.

I don't get much feedback about how the mentee felt about the relationship and I hardly would put out an evaluation form (laughs). I would like to know whether the mentees are getting what they want. It's a bit like a teacher who likes the 'aha' from the student. There is no immediate, tangible benefit in a mentoring relationship, but it is more a long term resource for the mentee.

Mentee 2

1. Why did you decide to be a mentee?

I was in the Early Career Researcher programme in 2005. I was new to UniSA. I attended a workshop regarding mentoring and thought it might be useful to understand UniSA and how I can do research. I thought that my passion would not be enough, I needed support with funding and protocol in a new environment. I didn't have a target mentor so involved myself in the programme and was given my mentor. I didn't expect much, to be honest, because he was so busy, in a different building and sometimes at a different campus.

2. How did you come to the relationship?

I filled out a form and listed my needs. The programme coordinator said I should not have a superior and that the relationship should be equal, not with a power imbalance. I needed to be able to talk, not be intimidated, so I needed somebody who could be that regardless of their level.

3. What do you see as the key to the success of the relationship?

We both had full commitment, we met regularly but now I have found my feet and we meet less regularly. Also my mentor was very willing to make himself available and to help me.

4. What did you get most out of it?

Two main benefits I can see. First, I was looking for funding and was working on a proposal at the time I met him. He sent me in the right direction for funding and knew what supporting documentation and information I needed to provide. I got the funding.

Second, I was new to the state and the university. I felt quite isolated (except for my small team of 3 ½ people). My mentor gave me ideas about how to create networks and opportunities – meetings, seminars, conferences, journals etc.

5. Were there any pitfalls?

No

6. What are the main qualities your mentor brought to the relationship to make it work?

Commitment, not a top down relationship. He was helpful and friendly.

7. Is the relationship ongoing?

Yes

8. Is there anything else you would like to proffer for people considering the programme?

In the ECR programme, they ran workshops and demonstrated/explained the difference between mentoring and management. That was helpful, but there were too many workshops. One or two would have been enough. I think that if you expect too much from a mentor, you may be disappointed and if, as I did, you expect too little, you may be pleasantly surprised.

Mentor 2

1. Why did you decide to be a mentor?

I was asked to do it for the ECR programme. I was already a teacher of Professional Development and I liked the mentoring approach to education, so I agreed to it.

2. How did you come to the relationship?

It was through the ECR programme – my mentee approached me.

3. What do you see as the key to the success of the relationship?

My mentee was able to enter the relationship with complete honesty. His frankness with me went beyond his academic situation into a personal situation as well – i.e. loneliness. He would go to research seminars, and was shy and had nobody to talk to.

We were personal equals – there were no power trips, no status games, no awkwardness.

I knew the university process as I have been there so long. For example I knew the process and the timing of the research grant process, I had insider knowledge. My mentee was new to the university.

4. What did you get most out of it?

Friendship, it was good to see him at functions. It reinforced my belief in mentoring as an approach to personal development. I got emotional payoff as well. I think that any process that promotes connectedness is good in a sometimes soulless and isolating environment.

5. Were there any pitfalls?

Yes – time was sometimes a problem, though my mentee did arrange our meetings ahead of time, and understood when I had to cancel or reschedule.

6. What are the main qualities your mentee brought to the relationship to make it work?

Honesty, willingness to learn, listening and taking advice on board. He understood the benefits to him, and acknowledged that he was new and needed my support.

7. Is the relationship ongoing?

Yes, but not formally. He has spread his wings more.

8. Is there anything else you would like to proffer for people considering the programme?

Mentors need to enter for the right reasons – not for payoff to them. For example, altruism, collegiality, to share what you do.

Mentees need to look at the relationship as developmental rather than as nepotism – you know, that their mentor can pull strings and do favours.

Mentor 3

1. Why did you decide to be a mentor?

I needed help in a very specialised area, and only one person in Australia had the knowledge. So she mentored me long distance, and I then passed on the knowledge to my new mentee, also long distance.

2. How did you come to the relationship?

She needed the same information I had needed, and so I passed it on.

3. What do you see was the key to success in the relationship?

The mentee was so very grateful for my help and for the templates I sent her. I could identify with her difficulties as I had faced them myself.

4. What did you get out of it?

It made me feel good to pass on the knowledge, which only one other person in Australia had (my previous mentor).

5. Were there any pitfalls?

Well, there was a time difference between the states which could be awkward, and if somebody was on annual leave or a flexi it was sometimes an issue. Otherwise, no pitfalls.

6. What are the main qualities your mentee brought to the relationship to make it work?

Gratitude, she was polite, apologetic for taking up my time and conscious and appreciative of my time commitment

7. Is the relationship ongoing?

Yes but not as a mentoring relationship now because a new specialist has moved to Australia and we have all established a network now.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Email is ok, a good medium for transmitting documents, but phone conversations are much better. Locality is not really an issue except for the time difference. The phone worked well for us in our very specialised capacity, but a professional or personal mentoring relationship might need face to face meetings I think. In our case, contact happened when it needed to and there were no guidelines as the relationship was not originally recognised as a mentoring relationship. I would look at a university website. I am not yet ready to mentor in a general sense, due to my level of expertise and time in Australia. I would, in fact, appreciate a university mentor myself, but I want an active role in matching. The mentor should be from the same area of interest, but quite removed from my line of reporting. The crucial qualities in a mentor for me would be trustworthiness, confidentiality, expertise and knowledge in the area, approachability and a genuine interest in mentoring, not just to make their CV look good.

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TABLE 1

CLARITY OF PURPOSE FOR REQUIRING A MENTOR

Self development and growth: learning to be?

If this is what you want, then you may be looking for a strong one-on-one relationship with a mentor who will be your guide to the future. Your mentor's role may be that of the **counsellor** – someone who acts as a sounding board and gives you personal and emotional support.

Skill development: learning to do?

In this case you may choose a number of people who can help you to gain new life-long learning skills. These people will be your **coaches and consultants**.

Understanding the corporate culture and the marketplace: learning to know?

In this instance you may cultivate influential people who can provide you with challenging assignments and organisational 'savvy'. These people are likely to act as **sponsors**.

Forming contacts with other people: learning to live together?

In this case you will be looking to form networks with a variety of people both inside and outside the organisation. A one-on-one relationship may not be as important to you as forming valuable business relationships with many people including peers. Consider joining and taking a leadership role in professional associations.

TABLE 2

MENTORING FUNCTIONS

Consider which of these areas are important to you and discuss your needs and expectations with your mentor(s).

Coaching:

- Sharing knowledge
- Teaching skills
- Providing performance feedback
- Motivating by encouraging, supporting and challenging mentee

Consulting:

- Assisting with business/career plans and goal setting
- Providing advice

Counselling:

- Acting as a sounding board for ideas
- Assisting with reflection through questioning and probing
- Helping to look at the world differently
- Giving personal and emotional support

Sponsorship:

- Speaking well of you to decision-makers
- Offering challenging assignments
- Introducing you to influential people
- Helping with career planning
- Encouraging risk taking and challenging assignments
- Providing 'inside' information about the organization

TABLE 3

PREPARING FOR THE FIRST MEETING (MENTEES)

You might like to discuss some of these areas with a potential mentor before making a commitment.

Where am I going? If all goes the way I plan, where will I be in 2 years' time?

What are the opportunities out there in the global marketplace?

What are my strengths so that I can take advantage of opportunities?

What's stopping me? What skills do I need to learn?

Learning Goals

How am I going to achieve my learning goals?

Resources I require

Support required from Mentor?

TABLE 4

CONDUCTING THE FIRST MEETING (MENTORS)

Clarifying purpose of meeting.

- How much time do we have?
- What do you want to achieve from this meeting?
- What do you want from me during the meeting?

Clarifying purposes of mentee's learning development plan

- How did you feel about starting this development plan?
- Where is your energy for change coming from?
- What are you trying to achieve?
- If all goes well, what will you be doing differently from what you do now?
- How much confidence do you have in your ability to achieve your plans?
- What will you feel like when you achieve your goals?
- How will you know when you achieve your goals?
- Have you identified all opportunities?
- Is there anything else that you can do?
- Which course of action do you favour?
- What obstacles do you think you'll encounter on the way?

Support required by mentor

- What support do you want from me in this plan?
- What support do you want from others in order to make this plan work?
- Who else should be involved?

Review

- How useful has this meeting been for you?
- Where do we go from here?

TABLE 5

SAMPLE STATEMENT OF AGREEMENT

We are voluntarily entering into a mentoring relationship. We agree on the following:

Purpose of the meetings:

Duration of mentoring agreement:

Frequency and length of meetings:

Type of other contact (eg email, phone):

Approximate time to be invested by mentor:

Mentee responsibilities:

Mentor responsibilities:

Confidentiality agreement:

No-fault conclusion to the relationship:

Both parties are responsible for their own decisions and actions.

We agree to a no-fault conclusion of this relationship if, for any reason, it seems appropriate.

Mentor's signature: _____ Mentee's signature: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____