FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Mentoring and Professional Development

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Mentor, as old as Ulysses

Mentor is a character from Greek mythology, a friend of Ulysses. When Ulysses had to perform his duties as conqueror and warrior, he entrusted his son Telemachus to Mentor, whose great wisdom made him a sound overseer and trusted adviser.

Today, this character is still at work through mentors who continue to guide learning, promote the passing down of values, knowledge, and life skills. In essence, then, becoming a mentor means serving to reveal a life’s dream to a less experienced protégé who, ideally, has chosen this individual for their experience and charisma and because of a belief that this person has the ability to serve as a model.

Mentoring is now becoming an organized field of practice. In the past few years, structured mentoring has regained favour. It takes various forms, based on the intended objective, the target clientele and the sponsoring organization.

Characteristics of the mentoring relationship

How can this mentoring relationship be described, whether part of a formal program or not? In Coaching and Mentoring by Parslow & Wray (2000), Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995) define it as a reciprocal, meaningful relationship formed between two people in order to support successful knowledge, work or skills transitions. It is characterized by a feeling of mutual trust, with accountability as a core value. Gordon (1983) describes it. Communication, learning and reflection clearly convey the quality of the relationship of support that forms between the mentor and mentee.

Another characteristic often cited by authors involves the idea that the mentor chooses to make the mentee a high personal priority. Houde (1995) notes that [translation] “there is a benefit in reserving the word mentor solely for the person who is concerned primarily with the perspective that his/her protégé is becoming accomplished.” In the same vein, Johnson and Sullivan3 point out that when mentors can set aside their own ambitions, desires and fears, and recognize the ambitions, fears and desires of their mentees, a meaningful and helpful mentoring relationship can develop. The mentor’s role is not to criticize, dictate conduct, rate performance, rescue or create in the mentee a carbon copy of himself. These are mistaken concepts of mentoring and instead illustrate behaviours to be avoided.

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1 Houde, 1995, p. 102.
2 See note 3, page 102.
Keywords:
A mentoring relationship involves volunteering, commitment, reciprocity, free services, and encompasses the concepts of development, communication and apprenticeship.

Functions and roles of the people involved
Many authors discuss the functions of a mentor. Houde (1995) describes 12 functions:
- Welcome the protégé into the environment;
- Guide the protégé through the environment, providing information about the standards, values and taboos of the organizational culture;
- Teach the protégé;
- Train the protégé to acquire specific skills related to the practice of work;
- Speak for the protégé with other members in the environment;
- Promote the advancement of the protégé in that environment;
- Serve as a model for the protégé; note that the protégé needs to be able to identify with his mentor;
- Present the protégé with challenges and provide opportunities to prove him/herself;
- Advise the protégé on various matters;
- Provide direct, useful and constructive feedback;
- Morally support the protégé, especially in periods of stress;
- Provide security for the protégé.  

Cohen cites six distinct functions for a mentor that progressively lead him to play the role of confidant, adviser, facilitator, devil’s advocate, reference model and visionary. These various functions therefore include a focus on knowledge, but also and primarily on expertise and life skills.

Mentoring to support professional development
Many people consider work the main activity of their life. Any person thinking about career feels uncertainty and clearly would like to identify an ideal choice once and for all, even while knowing that most people certainly have not had linear career paths. Each person seeks passion, security, and personal growth. However, this fairly static view of work is now an old paradigm that no longer reflects the realities today of changing career choices and a perpetually changing work world.

Goguelin and Krau (1992) visually present the dynamics of career plans in our life plan as a genuine puzzle consisting of four areas that constantly change and occupy varying amounts of space depending on a person’s age, choices and transitions: family, personal, social and occupational (see Figure 1). Every individual has expectations and aspirations in each area; each area is likely to contribute to clarification of interests and passions; and these various spheres of life influence each other. A career is part of our life plan. At the same time, we cannot expect a career to meet all our needs.

In this model, a career choice cannot be considered a static choice, made at one and remaining stable throughout life. This view reflects the prevailing career model in the 1960s, when demand in the labour market was growing sharply and changing quickly. This is the so-called traditional, linear, secure career model. People who changed work too often were considered unstable or, worse, employees with problems adjusting to work.

![Figure 1. The four areas of a life plan (Goguelin and Krau)](image)

Even today, many people continue to follow fairly linear career paths and many organizations encourage their employees to remain in their job as long as possible. In the past two decades, however, and in future, the so-called flexible career model, which entails frequent changes and lateral movements, is more consistent with the new labour market reality. At the same time, this model requires frequent upgrades of knowledge and skills. It involves longer careers and
more frequent reorientations, and often translates into entrepreneurship and self-employment. These require that a person be flexible and committed, as well as develop skills not listed in job requirements under the old model. These skills include communication skills, leadership and networking. To take these transitions and changes in stride, to acquire the necessary knowledge, expertise and life skills, a person would be wise to find a mentor. Mentoring actually achieves a good fit with new forms of career development.

**A cornerstone:**

Since professional development is a lifelong undertaking, every person is likely to experience various career transitions that affect his life plan. Mentoring is a learning approach highly suited to supporting a person in each stage of his professional development. A mentee may have to find several mentors depending on the objectives to be achieved and the challenges to be overcome.

### Mentoring in organizations

Although the definition of mentoring encompasses the mentee’s life plan, we find that most formal programs focus on professional objectives that target accomplishment in the work world. These objectives cover a broad range and form a continuum that reflects the various stages in a working life. They can be achieved in various places and, at different times, serve the individual and the organization.

Many mentoring programs are being set up in the human resources departments of organizations (education, public service, private enterprise, associations,..); these provide another approach for training employees, promote their integration, develop their skills and facilitate their access to managerial positions. Mentoring programs are recognized as effective ways to develop a sense of belonging, facilitate intergenerational transfer of knowledge and promote staff retention. By focusing on the development of human relations, such programs often have a positive impact on cooperation and the quality of teamwork. In broader terms, the introduction of mentoring programs in organizations encourages greater ownership of organizational culture and its core values.

Mentoring programs can target a host of objectives. Here are some examples:

- **Career planning and development:** this involves defining a career plan, specifying short-, medium- and long-term career objectives, determining the skills to be acquired and identifying the means available to achieve these goals;
- **Entry into the work world:** this entails preparation for, entry into or changing positions in the labour market and includes such aspects as job search support, writing a personal and professional curriculum vitae and assessment of existing knowledge and skills;
- **Support for entrepreneurship:** launching and consolidating a business require many management skills, such as learning skills linked to heading a business, financial consolidation, means of communication, dispute resolution.;
- **Employability development:** enhancing a person’s chances of entering the work world requires a range of skills, such as recognizing one’s strengths and limitations, defining
existing skills and those to be acquired, identifying areas of professional activity to
explore, learning a job search method and its requirements;

- Career transitions: these are many and each pose major challenges (layoff, promotion,
reorientation) that vary depending on the stage in a career (start, middle,);

- Succession management: this affects many organizations and mentoring can be an
effective response. This includes such factors as integrating and building loyalty among
succession staff, using intergenerational links to transfer knowledge, expertise and life
skills;

- Skills development: this entails the acquisition of specific qualifications related to
knowledge, expertise and life skills that may be necessary to achieve new career
objectives;

- Support for young professionals: many professional associations are committed to
integrating young professionals into their ranks, to counteract isolation, contribute to
work satisfaction and enhance the feeling of security;

- Employment maintenance (Limoges, 2001): adjusting to organizational changes now
poses an ongoing challenge for individuals in the workplace. To avoid disillusionment,
obsolescence and burnout, how can ongoing motivation and rewards at work be
supported? What is the key to successful employment maintenance?

_all these movements, stages, transitions and adjustments may be experienced at various times
ages and places throughout a career. The work environment can vary many times in the
course of a working life. Working in a private company will not pose the same challenges as a
job in a public organization. Working in a community organization will not demand the same
skills of the people involved; starting a business (or becoming self-employed) will not entail the
same personal and professional requirements. Entering the labour market as a newly trained
worker involves different requirements than obtaining a promotion at a later point in a career.
Other places bring other challenges, regardless of the stage in a person’s occupational or
personal life. Mentoring programs can be effective in supporting successful transitions.

The finding brings us back to the initial premise, that regardless of the intended objective,
mentoring is [translation] “a relationship that spans the various phases of adult life” (Houde,
1995, p. 29) that results in personal and professional benefits to mentor and mentee.
Organizations dedicated to smooth professional development of the people with whom they
work or whom they hire may find introducing formal mentoring programs to be a highly
beneficial human resource and career development strategy.
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