



What is Mentoring?

I have had the privilege of leading a number of programs that promote the benefits of a mentor relationship. Often the participants have had little experience of working with a mentor and so I thought I might share some initial thoughts....

What is a mentor? It is a term that is widely used and often misunderstood. There are a variety of definitions out there. My description of a mentor is someone who employs their relevant wisdom and experience for the benefit of another person through a trusted one-on-one relationship. My favourite definition is provided by Ann Rolfe*, an expert on mentoring, who says:

"Mentoring is an alliance, that creates a space for dialogue, that results in reflection, action and learning."

In any event, if the mentor relationship is to be successful the communication process must be very effective. In this column I would like to focus on the communication characteristics of mentoring. (The questions of where to find mentors, what is a good mentoring process and how to design a mentoring program can be left for another forum.)

The most important communication skills for the mentor are listening, listening and listening. Sounds obvious but good quality listening is not easy to deliver. Why?

1. Judgment can get in the way. It is not easy to suspend judgment when listening to an account of someone else's behaviour but that is exactly what is required. As Jim Stackpool says, "trust cannot be built when judgment is present." If you, as a mentor, are thinking "what a silly thing to do" - that's judgment! And that will impede your relationship.
2. Ego can get in the way. There is a big difference between empathy and what Matt Donnan calls "autobiographical listening". Let's say that the mentee is outlining a situation and you, as the mentor, respond with "that sounds like the time that I..." - that's autobiographical listening! Remember, it's supposed to be about them not you.
3. Solutions can get in the way. I know that mentors are meant to be helpful but you are not really listening if you are thinking about a solution while the mentee is still speaking. If you, as a mentor, respond with anything that includes the words "should", "must" or "have to" - that's a solution! Most mentees are looking for you to guide them not dictate to them.



For the mentee, the most important things that you can bring to the communication table are openness, honesty and a willingness to change. If you, as a mentee, want a different outcome in some aspect of your life then I suggest that you will need to do something different. That is not easy, particularly if you have been doing something the same way for a long time. It's easy to get new ideas into your head – it's really hard to get the old ideas out of your head. It requires:

- honesty to admit that the old way is not working
- openness to listen (without judgment) to a new way of doing it
- courage to implement the new way
- trust in the mentor to be able to report back on the experience

The latter point leads to my final reminder of the importance of feedback for mentors and mentees. There is value in a quick, open debrief of each meeting. What worked well? What could be done differently next time to improve the meeting? It is also critical that the feedback from the mentee on the actions that he or she has undertaken is accurate and complete. If you, as the mentee, are not reporting the full story then who is fooling who?

The communication skills involved for both parties may be challenging but the relationship has the potential to be life-changing.

* Please visit Ann's site for more insights: www.mentoring-works.com