CHAPTER 1

The What and Why of Mentoring

I've been lucky enough to have had a number of mentors over the years, although it is only in recent decades that I have fully recognised and appreciated the role that some of these people played. I have also been fortunate to have been mentor to a wide range of people from different backgrounds and age groups. I'm grateful for the learning I have received from them and for the feeling of privilege in helping them achieve goals very different from my own.

Gratitude, learning and privilege are three terms we hear frequently when people talk about their experiences as mentor or mentee. The need to learn and the need to help others to learn are deep-seated emotional drives within most people. These drives were a part of human evolution. It seems that a distinguishing feature between Homo sapiens (us) and other species of great ape is the instinct on the one hand to pass on abstract learning or wisdom, and on the other to receive it. Our liking for story and anecdote – which are closely associated with depth and quality of learning – is no accident. As accumulated wisdom was passed from one generation to another, it expanded the range of human ability and opened up an ever-increasing gulf between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom.

That instinct is a double-edged sword, however. It often occurs that the desire of the more experienced person (especially if they are much older) to pass on their wisdom exceeds greatly the desire of the less experienced person to listen. Most people may have the instinct to be a mentor, but to do the role well requires a capacity to hold back and allow people to learn for themselves.

To read much of the early literature on mentoring, it would be easy to conclude that the mentor is someone who gives wise advice – indeed, that is one of the common dictionary definitions. In practice, mentors provide a spectrum of learning and supporting behaviours; from challenging and being a critical friend, to being a role model; from helping build networks and develop personal resourcefulness, to simply being there to listen; from helping someone work out what they want to achieve and why, to planning how they will bring change about. A mentor may also be a conscience, a friend and – in certain definitions – a godfather or sponsor.

It is the holistic nature of the mentoring role that distinguishes it from other learning or supporting roles, such as coaching or counselling. We will explore the differences in detail in Chapter 2, but suffice for now to say that, while mentoring shares behaviours with some styles of coaching and some styles of counselling, the overlap of roles is only partial. Some sports now provide top athletes with a mentor as well as a coach. While the coach concentrates on technique and motivation, the mentor provides a very different kind of support; one based on reflective learning and something akin to pastoral care.

A key capability of the effective mentor is being able to adapt to a much wider range of behaviours.

There is also a remarkable width to the range of applications for mentoring. The following outline just some examples of mentoring programmes in recent years.

MENTORING IN EMPLOYMENT

- Rank Organisation is one of many companies that use mentoring to support the development and retention of talented employees. One of the unusual aspects of its programme is that all the directors – including the non-executive directors – are actively engaged in the programme.
- A major London solicitor's practice uses mentoring to help people make the transition to partner. What it takes to be considered partner material is so difficult to explain or demonstrate that formal training doesn't really help. Mentoring provides a useful way of passing on this largely intuitive understanding.
- For many multinational companies, a major challenge is how to speed up the development of local nationals to take over from the expatriate engineers and managers. Mentoring provides a practical and culturally acceptable route to making this happen.
- Mentoring has been a major factor in the success of Norway's legislation to equalise male and female representation on company boards.
- The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales has a programme of 'ethical mentoring'. Mentors are experienced financial services people who help mentees tackle acknowledged ethical dilemmas and also help them develop their ability to recognise and work through ethical dilemmas and become agents for change in their organisations.
- The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising created a programme in which relatively young (under 40) entrepreneurs in the field were mentored by successful peers, mostly 15–20 years older, on issues such as how to sustain their businesses or build greater value in the business.

MENTORING FOR ENTREPRENEURS

- BOOST is an innovative project in Zimbabwe to help the brightest, most entrepreneurial graduates set up their own businesses, which will in turn hire other graduates. Against a background of political turmoil and very high unemployment among graduates, the scheme has received considerable backing at home and abroad. The mentors are all successful business people from the local economy.
- Mowgli and the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women are just two of a growing number of mentoring programmes targeted at supporting entrepreneurs in developing economies, by linking them with mentors in developed countries.
- A division of British Telecom selected a number of small businesses with high growth potential to take part in a programme with a dual purpose. On the one hand, the small businesses, which were selected through a competition process, gained access to the professional expertise of the mentors, who were all in the leadership team or one level below. On the other hand, the BT executives learned a great deal about the issues that small business customers faced.

MENTORING IN EDUCATION

- There are many programmes where volunteers from local companies or from the community in general spend time helping children with poor literacy and numeracy skills catch up. (There is some debate about whether this is really mentoring, even where there is an additional role of helping the young person think about life goals, but we'll avoid that for now.)
- Black students at risk of dropping out of university may have a mentor for the first year to help them settle in.
- Some schools now provide each newcomer with a peer mentor from two years above to help them settle in. The arrangement also helps build the self-respect and maturity of the young mentor. Another group increasingly targeted within schools as potential mentees is children at risk from bullying.

MENTORING IN THE COMMUNITY

- 100 Black Men is an international movement, started in the United States, which focuses on the mentor as role model and advocate for young black people at risk. It records major successes in keeping mentees out of trouble and helping them continue in education.
- Mentors help musically talented young people stick to it through the difficult teenage years when other attractions tug at their attention.
- Soldiers wounded in action and discharged from the armed forces have in some cases a mentor to support them in their journey back into work.

The notion that *everyone needs a mentor* is not so far from the truth. At key times in our lives, having a mentor can make a substantial difference to the choices we make, how confident we feel in making them, and how likely we are to achieve what we want. The concept of *lifelong mentoring* takes the perspective that we can be mentor or mentee (or both at once) at any stage of life, from the earliest ages. Key transitions include:

- starting school
- starting secondary school
- puberty
- leaving school
- going to university
- entering the workplace
- having a baby
- leaving prison, or the armed forces
- first role managing other people
- other transitions in 'the leadership pipeline'
- setting up a business
- moving job roles
- retiring
- dying (yes, there are even mentoring programmes for that, though it's not expected that the mentor will have previous personal experience!).

THE BUSINESS CASE IN BRIEF

We will explore the benefits to employers, mentees, mentors and third parties more fully in Chapter 4, so this is simply a brief summary. Employer organisations have found that having a well-run mentoring scheme has a significant, positive impact upon both recruitment and retention. In some cases, the loss of young graduates in their first year has been cut by two-thirds, simply because they have someone outside the authority structure who has the interest to listen, and the breadth of perspective to help the mentee make wise and confident choices.

Other employer benefits relate to having more effective succession planning, helping employees cope with the stresses of major change and increased productivity.

Mentees report a wide range of benefits, ranging from speed of settling into a new role, to deeper understanding of their own motivations. Recent research has led us to categorise the benefits to mentees in four ways:

- Development outcomes, which may include knowledge, technical competence and behavioural competence.
- Career outcomes, which may include the achievement (in part or whole) of career goals.
- Enabling outcomes, such as having a career plan, a (self-) development plan, a wider network of influencers or learning resources.

- Emotional outcomes – less tangible, but often powerful changes in emotional state, including increased confidence, altruistic satisfaction, reflective space, status and the pleasure of a different kind of intellectual challenge.

These same benefits seem to apply broadly to mentors as well. The principal benefit described by mentors in successful developmental mentoring relationships is the learning they acquire from the experience. This is not necessarily the case in sponsorship mentoring (see Chapter 2). A survey by Sandia Laboratories in the United States did not list 'own learning' as a benefit at all. Second comes the satisfaction from helping someone else – the vicarious pleasure of seeing someone else succeed.

Third parties, such as line managers and work colleagues, benefit because the mentee has someone with whom to discuss how they build and maintain better working relationships. One case reported to me by a colleague concerned a man who explained that his reason for seeking a mentor was to help him get out from under his boss, for whom he had very little respect. After six months, the mentoring pair agreed to change the objective. By reflecting on the relationship with his boss and working to improve it, he had eventually realised that this person had much to teach him and that they could get along together pretty well.

Outside of the work environment, mentoring has had a remarkable influence on the lives of a wide spectrum of disadvantaged or dispossessed people. When I originally wrote this book, I questioned whether *Everyone Needs a Mentor* was truly accurate as a title. After all, perhaps there were people who could live their lives without any recourse to such external help. I have yet to find anyone who is so self-sufficient not to benefit from having a mentor at some point in his or her life. What I have found is many thousands of people who wish they could have had a mentor at formative periods or times of critical personal transition. It is gratifying that most of these people are willing to give others what they did not have. Perhaps another definition of mentoring might be 'Man's humanity to Man' (in the generic sense of 'Man', of course!).

SUMMARY

Mentoring can bring benefits to mentors, mentees, organisations and society at large. In the past 30 years, the range of applications has multiplied.

EXPLORE FURTHER

CLUTTERBUCK, D. (2007a) An international perspective on mentoring. In: RAGINS, B.R. and KRAM, K. (eds). *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work*. California, SA: Sage. pp633–655.