



Mentoring *21C*

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Traditionally, mentoring has been an informal, internal relationship between someone older and more experienced, and a more junior person in the organisation.

Often a mentor would take someone “under their wing” and impart their wisdom by telling stories about their experiences, over a cup of coffee or maybe a beer or two. The mentee would ask questions and soak up the wise words of their role model and the mentor would help steer their younger colleague’s career.

Whilst that kind of relationship is still important, the face of Mentoring is changing, and a new model is emerging. There is demand for a more professional, structured approach, and an expectation that the process delivers outcomes that can be measured, so all parties can see the value that has been created.

External mentors are now being called upon to provide access to specific expertise, broader experience and diverse perspectives to people at higher levels within the organisation. As well as a focus on the individual, group mentoring and organisational mentoring services are now being sought by government and commercial organisations across Australia.

The difference between mentoring and coaching

In organisations, the terms

“coaching” and “mentoring” are often used interchangeably without a clear understanding of how they differ. Time and again, people ask for coaching but what they want is mentoring. Kathy McKenzie, CEO of Fire Up Coaching, makes the simple distinction that coaches use a questioning approach and are not required to be a subject matter expert, whilst a mentor is an expert who is acknowledged as being wiser and more experienced with relevant knowledge and skills to share.

A mentor challenges, guides and inspires their mentee through sharing relevant “know-how” that can be applied to identify opportunities, solve current issues faster, and develop expertise for the future. Purist coaches specifically avoid offering advice. Instead, coachees are encouraged to draw on their own resources and competencies to devise strategies and actions to help them achieve their goals, which is why it is not essential for the coach to have more experience or relevant expertise.

A skilled mentor is likely to use coaching techniques and frameworks to guide their conversations and help their mentee come up with solutions to the issues they’re grappling with, and at the right time, add value by sharing their observations, experiences, specific expertise and connections.

What makes a good mentor?

Getting the right fit between mentor and mentee is key. Although people may have different priorities when selecting who to work with, mutual

trust, respect and candour are key to a successful mentoring relationship. A good mentor will openly share their relevant knowledge, experience and contacts in the context of their mentees specific situation, for their benefit. They often demonstrate strategic foresight and can help their mentee see potential pitfalls to avoid and bring to light potential opportunities that may have been overlooked or undervalued

But it is not all about the mentor being the wise one. Sometimes it’s about them being vulnerable. A good mentor is comfortable in their own skin and confident enough to share their successes and their failures, their strengths and weaknesses because its often through adversity, or when things don’t go to plan, that people learn and grow the most.

From mentor to mentee

More and more, top executives are seeking peer mentoring relationships with other executives who know what it is like to do what they do. They want to feel able to let down their guard, share their vulnerabilities, test their thinking, see how they’re perceived, learn from others they respect, and potentially have someone who will tell them what they need to hear.

Jack Noonan, a senior director felt reasonably confident as a leader and wanted a mentor who would challenge him and his biases, provide a different perspective and help him to develop. “My mentor Charles really challenged the way I think, the way I work, and the way I interact with others.

I gained a greater understanding of what motivates me and what I value, how I communicate, and how these things have impacted the decisions I have made in the past. Importantly, the process gave me practical methods that I implemented during an important time of transition in my career, and I have no doubt that these methods will continue to assist me in the future,” said Noonan.

Mentoring improves individual and organisational performance

It can be difficult for senior leaders to know who to turn to for confidential, objective advice and sound guidance, especially when faced with situations they’ve never tackled before.

Research outlined in a recent HBR article “CEO’s Need Mentors Too” found that 71% of CEOs with formal mentoring arrangements were certain that company performance had improved as a result. They reported that they were making better decisions, more capably fulfilling stakeholder expectations, avoiding costly mistakes and becoming more proficient in their roles, faster.

Joe Arena, CEO of Procurement Australia recently engaged mentoring consultancy, The Leaders Mentor, because he felt that a few of his executives had some skill gaps and their recent merger made it an opportune time to get them some mentoring help.

“I saw it as an opportunity for them to develop both professionally and

personally, and a way for them to get some different perspectives from mentors who have experience in other organisations and experience in actually doing what we’re asking them to do.”

He commented that the benefits to the individuals and the organisation have been immense. “Those going through the mentoring program have been able to learn from mentors who have been in their shoes, they’ve been able to avoid making some mistakes, and improve their approach to managing people. I have noticed that what the mentors have been able to impart is being retained and my people are applying what they have learned. Instead of taking things for granted or doing what they’ve always done, they’re reflecting and questioning their own modus operandi, and sometimes coming up with different answers and approaches. Staff have also offered feedback that they have seen a notable change in attitude. The results are happier staff who are more engaged, and more productive, which positively impacts the bottom line.”

Mentoring for the next generation

Whether the mentee chooses mentoring themselves, they get offered it as part of their professional development, or they’re told they need to do it as a remedial action, there is no doubt that mentoring is required to have both a strategic and development focus that benefits the organisation and the individual.

“My experience training thousands of leaders over the past 20 years has shown that when we exercise a high level of skill in both mentoring and coaching, we set up the next generation of leaders to prosper beyond our tenure,” said Kathy McKenzie.

Both approaches can speed up learning, aid in decision making, and help current and future leaders avoid common pitfalls, so ultimately they can perform at a higher level and achieve better results for themselves, their team, and the organisation.

About the author

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