The Role Of The Mentor

by Ann Rolfe
Introduction

In our recent survey, it was clear that the role of the mentor is a topic people want to know more about. Mentors, mentorees and mentoring program organisers are seeking clarification about what mentoring is, what mentors do and most importantly, how they do it.

Mentors assist those they mentor to achieve better outcomes but the benefits are not confined to the two individuals. The impact of a single conversation can change the course of one life and therefore of many. Furthermore, learning and practicing mentoring skills makes mentors better leaders, communicators and human beings.

Since 1994, I have worked with mentors and those who are mentored in Australia and overseas. I have reviewed many mentoring programs and seen what works and what doesn’t. In this ebook, I’m going to share with you the ideas, models and practical information that I have used in training people for the mentoring role.

This ebook complements The Mentoring Essentials book set that details the mentoring process, skills and techniques. Together, they provide vital education for anyone who wants to know how mentoring works.

Ann Rolfe
People - Our Greatest Asset

You know, while priorities often shift in this climate, one thing never changes: for organizations, people really are their greatest asset. And, while most just say that, if you offer mentoring you show you really mean it.

Mentoring is an organizational strategy for attracting, retaining and developing people. It’s used for employee engagement, knowledge management and career development. For individuals, mentoring enables personal and professional development and in communities, mentoring gives hope, inspiration and practical support.

Mentoring affirms our best qualities as human beings. It contributes life-enhancing knowledge and skills.

At one level, mentors lead a conversation that enables another person to achieve important goals; at another level, they contribute to the organizational strategy for retaining and developing those they mentor. But there is something else, that not many people know, that takes mentoring to a whole new level and exponentially increases the value of mentoring. It’s an ability that some mentors have and others do not. It is the difference that makes the difference.

If you want to know more, this book is for you.
What Is Mentoring?

You know, people often ask me about the differences between mentoring and coaching. My short answer to that is: “It depends who you ask”. There are many kinds of mentoring, many types of coaching and many different opinions.

There is a growing prevalence of mentoring and coaching both within the workplace and outside of it. Typically, within an organization, coaching and mentoring are voluntary roles. Mentoring is often informal, though there is increasing recognition of the value of mentoring programs and both mentors and coaches should receive training for the role.

There’s been a rise too in professional mentoring and coaching. There are business coaches and mentors, who usually take you through a systematic process of business development.

There are also experts in their field who offer a kind of “I’ll show you how to do what I do” program that they call mentoring; And, there are accredited coaches trained in various techniques for goal achievement.

The similarities and differences, in my opinion, are best understood by looking at the purpose of conversations and the processes used to have those conversations. You need to keep in mind that we are talking about dynamic relationships that sometimes don’t neatly fit in one box.
Purpose & Process

Non-directive
- Trained professional (e.g., executive coach or paid mentor)
- Tactics & techniques
- Personal professional goals

Task-specific
- Expertise in a particular field
- Coach/manager/supervisor/preceptor

Immediate
- Personal professional goals

Personal Development

Tactics & techniques
- Strategies
- Personal work-life aims

Future Focus
- Advancement
- Expertise in a particular field
- Coach/sponsor/paid mentor

Career

Directive
- Trained professional (e.g., executive coach or paid mentor)
- Professional or volunteer (e.g., personal coach or mentor)

Performance

Mentoring Works!
Purpose and Process

Where the purpose is immediate improvement of performance and the process is directive, the conversation it is likely to be task-specific. Therefore it will most probably be led by a manager/supervisor, coach or preceptor who has expertise in the relevant field.

A directive approach may also be useful in future focussed conversations aimed at career advancement. A coach, sponsor or paid mentor with expertise in the field would be appropriate.

A non-directive process could aim to improve performance. In this case it would focus on the tactics and techniques needed to achieve personal professional goals. Such a process would most likely be facilitated by a trained professional such as an executive coach or paid mentor.

For the purpose of career development, a conversation using non-directive process would help the person identify and implement strategies to achieve their personal work-life aims. They might use a professional, or a volunteer, as a personal coach or mentor.

Developmental relationships are rich and complex and not static and usually encompass more than one approach. Personally, I believe that it is more important that both parties in a developmental relationship understand and agree about the purpose and process of their conversations, rather than get hung up whether it is labelled “mentoring” or “coaching”.

Mentoring Works!
Mentoring In The Workplace

Mentoring in the workplace is a confidential conversation about career-related issues. Mentoring is voluntary and may be informal or part of a planned program. Usually, the mentor is “off-line” which means not in a direct line of authority, someone who does not supervise or manage the day-to-day performance of the person being mentored.

Most of the time, the process is toward the less directive end of the scale so that mentorees take self-responsibility for decisions and actions. This produces personal growth for both parties, specific, beneficial, individual results and strategic outcomes that add value to the bottom line of organizations.

Mentoring enables people to set and achieve their own goals, explore issues or problems and make informed decisions about how to handle situations or manage their career.

Where mentoring is part of a structured program, pairs are matched and resources such as materials, time and funds are allocated. A coordinator manages the program and maintains communication with all involved. Various forms of ongoing support is given to participants. This might include online and/or live training, books, tips, forums and review sessions. The aim is to achieve strategic organizational outcomes as well as produce benefits for individuals. An evaluation process measure the degree to which objectives are achieved.
A Mentor’s Role

- Elicit
- Challenge
- Support
- Impart
Now I want to start to share with you the secret that transforms mentoring. This thing that not many people know about mentoring; the ability that some mentors have and others do not; the difference that makes the difference.

A Mentor’s Role can be illustrated in a two dimensional model that again hinges of purpose and process. Mentors **elicit** information, so they first build rapport, ask questions, listen and ask more questions. They listen with their ears, eyes, both sides of their brain, mind and body - they listen with their heart as well as their head before they **impart** information. Mentors share their knowledge, experience, ideas and opinions when invited and when it is appropriate to do so.

Often people need **support** from the mentor; validation, affirmation but sometimes it is **challenge** that brings out our best. So a mentor is an empathetic ally. Yet, on occasion they need to be able to give the mentoree a nudge by disagreeing, giving a different point of view or suggesting a course of action.

However, in my experience, mentors can be too quick to give solutions, opinions or advice. Here’s why it is important NOT to be too quick with answers.
Conversations That Create Insight

The crew of the Titanic found out the hard way, that nine-tenths of an iceberg is below the surface and in a way, people are like icebergs. Nine-tenths of a person is not immediately visible.

Take a moment to draw an iceberg with the tip above the water and the bulk below. Now label what’s above the surface “conscious” and what is below “subconscious”.

You can observe what people do and say but why they do it, their real needs, wants and motivation are frequently not obvious even to themselves! They may not be aware of thoughts, emotions, values and beliefs in their subconscious but these can be brought to the surface through conversations.

When you ask questions and listen, you not only elicit information you don’t know, but your questions often allow the other person to articulate information they didn’t know! You enable them to bring to conscious awareness that which had been below the surface dwelling in their unconscious. The conversation creates insight.
Mentoring Roles

Mentoring conversations are confidential so the mentor becomes a confidante, someone who is trusted enough to share dreams, aspirations and issues. Sometimes, all people need is quiet listening. Simply speaking their thoughts out loud generates insight, solutions or actions that become obvious. So the mentor, just by being supportive is a catalyst for change. A mentor is often a sounding board so that the mentoree can “bounce ideas off them”. Mentors often link their mentoree to other resources or people that can provide information. The mentor doesn’t have to have all the answers! The mentor is a role model, their behavior and approach provides an example. Coaching may be a subset of mentoring. If asked, a mentor may help the mentoree develop specific skills and abilities. People who want mentoring sometimes want an adviser. They value the knowledge, ideas and opinions that come from your experience but as mentioned before, don’t be too quick to assume this role. A mentor is also a guide. I believe that a mentor has what I’d call a “duty of care”. That is, if the mentoree intends action you know is dangerous, share your concerns with them. A mentor imparts information. However, it is always the mentoree that decides, acts and produces the outcome.
How They Do It

Now we are getting to the heart of the secret. The skill-set, that if used in mentoring, benefits mentors as much as those mentored, and increases value to the organization, because it creates insight, creativity and critical thinking, which is an awesome combination. It’s not something you can easily teach but it is something you can help people learn. You need to know it and, guess what? The full awareness of this secret and its significance became apparent, as my mentor, Gordon Crawford, and I talked about the nature of mentoring!

Gordon says, “The principle objective of mentoring for me is to help people achieve their life goals. Note, their life goals, not mine, and we are all different. To do that we have to ask them to explain those goals; and, ask how they see them being fulfilled.

Mentoring and coaching some thirty plus CEO’s, I can tell you they get distracted and lose their way, managing busy, successful businesses. As their mentor, I have to keep their lives on track. I need to know their values and ensure that their actions are aligned to them. As they describe what is going on in their lives, I am looking for gaps between life goals, values and what they are focussing on consciously versus subconsciously. This means I am often listening for what they are not saying and not talking about. That process is hard and needs the mentor to be fully present and totally focussed on the mentoree - I’m not sure how mentors can do that without top-class training. Nowhere in this process am I telling them what to do. Where I have relevant experience however, I will share what I do and why that works or doesn’t work for me.

My mentoring sessions always end with them writing an action plan with target dates which I will review with them at the next meeting.”
A Mentor Is Someone Who

Asks questions - to draw people out;

Listens without judgement - does not impose their own value-judgements on another;

Probes without prying - is able to ask hard questions, questions that go deep and probe the subconscious, without crossing the line and being too personal;

Expands ideas without instructing - can suggest alternatives, explore possibilities without telling people what to do; and

Develops rapport and trust - so that confidential conversations are possible

The objectives of mentoring are to increased self-awareness and personal development to enhance critical and creative thinking. To help people focus on outcomes. They will develop independent decision-making and use a reflection - decision - planning - action cycle.
There are two main types of mentoring. There are those who mentor from competence; and then there's those who mentor for challenge. The majority of people mentor from competence. They share their expertise.

My colleague, Leonie Stanfield of Careertalk, is completing her masters in career development, and believes that mentoring from competence reinforces the mentor's self-image as a good listener and someone who gives. Mentoring reinforces their identity and reaffirms their confidence. Mentoring from competence allows one to remain in the comfort zone.

A different person values the challenge of learning and self-discovery. It's "a brave and rare person who is willing to experience mentoring from a more vulnerable place." Leonie says.

This kind of mentor steps into the unknown, trusting the process. They understand that in facilitating another's journey to insight they uncover their own. In exploring the needs and goals of another, they reveal their own and, in eliciting the values of another they examine their own. For them, mentoring is not so much an affirmation as mutual growth. They do it because they are committed to joint learning. They are learning about themselves at the same time as they assist someone else.

It is not unusual for volunteer to begin with the mentoring from competence model and move to mentoring for challenge. A shift takes place when mentors are equipped with a process for leading a conversation that does not depend on expertise in their field to produce outcomes.
Courageous Mentoring

A conversation that does not depend on expertise in their field to produce outcomes

Gordon comments: “I’m working with CEOs. I’m not smarter than them, in many cases, they’re smarter and more experienced than me and it’s essential that I avoid limiting their progress by what I know. So I am willing to go into the unknown. It took me a while to learn that and to do it I had to ask tough questions, questions to which I have no idea what the right answer is. When they answer, I follow up with ‘and how does that work for you?’ In explaining their answer, the mentoree will either confirm the validity of their response or realise that they’re on the wrong track.

In this process, as a mentor, we can change people’s lives in extraordinary and exciting ways and way beyond our own ability to advise someone based on our own knowledge or experience. The bonus for the mentor is that they will learn things too and can apply these things to their own lives. I think this raises the level of quality mentoring far above the teacher or the coach where the teacher or coach is the fountain of knowledge whereas the mentor is really the fountain of the process.”
The Mentoring Conversation

Current Reality

“Where am I now?”

Action

“How am I doing?”

Reflection

“Where do I want to be?”

“How do I get there?”

Informed Decisions

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The Mentoring Conversation

The mentoring conversation is a framework that provides the security that the mentoring from competence group need and a springboard that will inspire those who will mentor for challenge.

The Mentoring Conversation is a model based on learning theories such as those developed by David Kolb, Honey and Mumford, and Bernice McCarthy, as well as classic problem solving and strategic planning and decision-making processes.

The mentoring conversation aims at facilitating self-development. It is based on four questions:

1. Where am I now?
2. Where do I want to be?
3. How do I get there? And
4. How am I doing?

The mentor firstly facilitates reflection and the exploration of options. Next, the mentor assists the mentoree to make informed decisions, set goals and formulate practical strategies to achieve them. The mentor then encourages and supports the mentoree as they implement their plan.

When a mentor models and leads the mentoring conversation as described, the mentoree learns a valuable problem solving and decision-making process that can be applied in any situation. Thus, a mentor assists not only with immediate needs but also equips the mentoree to deal with future issues.
Many Ways To Mentor

**Informal** - a casual conversation or an observed role-model

**A Structured Program** - pairs are introduced and supported

**A One-to-one Relationship** - pairing mentor and mentoree

**Reciprocal Mentoring** - two people take turns in mentoring each other as peers

**Reverse Mentoring** - the more junior person as the mentor

**Cascading Mentoring** - a top-down process of mentoring involving people at each level of the organization

**Group Mentoring** - one mentor can be teamed with several mentorees who meet at the same time

**Mentoring Round-Tables** - peers meet as a group to explore a topic, issue or goal

**Mentoring Circles** - a facilitator meets with four, six, eight or ten people, each of whom is both mentor and mentoree

**Mastermind Mentoring and Business Coaching** - a person with significant expertise or guru status in a particular field takes on one who wishes to learn to become like the master or do what they do
In Summary ...

The key points that I hope you'll take away from this ebook are these:

• There’s no need to get too hung up on whether it's called mentoring or coaching as long as the people involved understand and agree the purpose and processes of the relationship;

• Mentoring affirms our best qualities as human beings. It contributes life-enhancing knowledge and skills.

• Mentoring is a strategy that produces organizational outcomes.

• Mentors elicit and impart information, they support and challenge people.

• Mentoring conversations create insight, they create conscious awareness of what otherwise might remain beneath the surface.

• There are many mentoring roles because mentoring is a dynamic relationship.

• You can mentor from competence and stay in the comfort zone and you can develop skills and confidence to mentor for challenge.

• A skilled mentor can lead conversations that do not depend on expertise in their field to produce outcomes.

• It takes courage to ask questions that you don’t know the answer to, yet it empowers both parties.

• The Mentoring Conversation is a framework for any type of mentoring.

• There are many ways to mentor.
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ann@mentoring-works.com
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www.mentoring-works.com

ann@mentoring-works.com

Phone +61 2 4342 2610