



# Taking mentoring to the next level in organisations

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*“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor is it the most intelligent, It is the one most adaptable to change” ~Charles Darwin*

Mentoring has changed. The term originated from Homer’s story of a king, who entrusted his son’s development to Mentor, before he left for war. According to the myth, Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom, disguised herself as Mentor to guide the boy. So traditionally, mentoring has described an older (and presumed wiser) person who assisted a younger one to grow, often as part of succession planning. Today mentoring is not limited to the “older = wiser” assumption, nor is it purely a succession strategy.

Contemporary mentoring takes many forms and has many purposes. Mentoring may be informal and perhaps unrecognised, even when individuals deliberately seek out people to mentor or be mentored by. Structured programs also take place. Some are part of an organisational strategy and some organisations have mentoring embedded in their culture.

The model below represents the four levels on which mentoring operates to add value to an organisation. Mentoring can evolve from informal relationships that may go unrecognised, to structured programs, that grow more strategic and eventually become part of the organisational culture.

Figure 1:  
The Mentoring  
Value Model



## Informal Mentoring

Some form of mentoring happens informally and without deliberate intent in every organisation, just as it does in any group. Where people join an established group they are shown or observe acceptable behaviours. They absorb attitudes and assumptions, acquire knowledge and learn skills, taking their cues from informal influencers and/or leaders. They acclimate, adapting to expectations and norms. Occasionally, individuals or small groups create a new dynamic that influences others and changes the status quo.

Informal mentoring... happens... when a person seeks assistance or information from a more experienced person, or uses role-models to adapt their own behavior.

Informal mentoring in organisations also happens more deliberately, when someone takes another “under their wing” or chooses a protégé to groom for the future. It happens too, when a person seeks assistance or information from a more experienced person, or uses role-models to adapt their own behavior. Informal mentoring favours the chosen few and those most proactive about their development. Others may miss out entirely. This means that mentoring, so often assumed to be a good thing, can actually create or continue disadvantage for some groups.

Informal mentoring is left to chance by the organisation. There is no direction or resourcing and because the intention and skills of participants are unknown, the quality is variable. Some informal mentoring is highly satisfactory producing positive outcomes but other relationships achieve nothing, or can even be harmful.

## Mentoring Programs

While informal mentoring may still be the most common form, the first level of evolution has been the development of mentoring programs. These have become more popular in organisations. A mentoring program has aims and objectives. It is a deliberate attempt to improve employees’ ability, engagement and outcomes. In a well-designed program, structure and resources are provided, participants are monitored and supported and results are measured.

Mentoring programs typically run for a finite period ranging from three months to two years and are for selected participants. The downside of mentoring programs is that some people may feel excluded and there may be some blowback on participants. When the program ends, there may be a sense of loss and if the program is under-resourced or not maintained people become disenchanted.

## Strategic Mentoring

A more highly evolved mentoring program becomes strategic. It addresses organisational needs and because it has high-level value, mentoring has status in the most senior ranks of the organisation. It is a longer-term endeavour and as such, it requires long-term commitment. Yet, in these days of short-term focus, mentoring may merely be flavour of the month and

fade as senior executives turn to the next big thing. This is likely especially where return on investment is not measured or cannot be separated from other variables.

Sometimes, the strategic value is not well communicated and mentoring is met with resistance at mid or lower levels. Sometimes, it is introduced without a proper needs analysis and seen as a silver bullet that will fix a problem.

### Mentoring Culture

The most highly evolved form of mentoring is where it is embedded in the culture of the organisation. Mentoring is an embodiment of its vision, values and operational principles. It is integral to leadership and internalised by people as the norm.

An environment where mentoring is the cultural norm has a mix of informal mentoring, mentoring programs and

strategies incorporating mentoring. Leaders routinely, obviously and subtly mentor subordinates. Colleagues and peers mentor each other. Individuals are proactive about their development and seek role models, mentors and to be mentors for others.

Because mentoring is seen as natural and organic less attention may be paid to it. Yet, organisational culture is dynamic and cannot be taken for granted. Turnover, particularly at the top, economic challenges and changing priorities will influence the organisational environment. A mentoring culture must be nurtured if it is to survive and thrive.

All types of mentoring can add value to an organisation but each type does have limitations. These are summarised in Table 1. With the exception of informal mentoring, all levels of mentoring require resources, planning and support to be successful. ■

Table 1: Features and limitations of mentoring at each level of evolution

	Features	Limitations
<b>Informal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ad-hoc, happens by chance</li> <li>• Not resourced</li> <li>• Chosen few or proactive people</li> <li>• Variable quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrecognised</li> <li>• No responsibility</li> <li>• Some people miss-out</li> <li>• Impact unknown</li> </ul>
<b>Program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Resourced</li> <li>• Skills training</li> <li>• Monitored</li> <li>• Outcomes measured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finite, short-term</li> <li>• Targets individuals, excludes some people</li> <li>• Staff disenchantment if not resourced and maintained</li> <li>• Sense of loss when it is over</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses organisational needs</li> <li>• Mentoring has status</li> <li>• High-level value</li> <li>• Longer-term</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mistakenly seen as a silver bullet</li> <li>• Requires sustained commitment</li> <li>• Mid or lower-level resistance</li> <li>• Measuring ROI may be confounded by other variables</li> </ul>
<b>Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embedded</li> <li>• Embodied by vision, values and operating principles</li> <li>• Integral, internalised</li> <li>• Organic, natural</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Walking-the-walk" not just "talking the talk"?</li> <li>• Culture is dynamic, cannot be taken for granted</li> <li>• Mentoring must still be nurtured</li> </ul>

**Ann Rolfe**, Australia's most published author on mentoring, has thirty years experience in learning and development and a background in career counselling. For two decades, she has specialised in mentoring, setting up programs and training people in fields as diverse as health, construction, energy, communications, education, law and government. Internationally respected as a consultant and presenter, her training programs and resources are used in many countries to develop and support mentoring. Ann has spoken at conferences in Australia, Canada, China, Singapore, and USA.

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