



## **MENTORING AS AN EMPOWERMENT TOOL**

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*'Mentoring is the most effective leadership development tool'* (Unn Solle from the Oslo Business School in Norway, speaking about a programme for women leaders at the European Mentoring and Coaching Centre conference, October 2002).

Mentoring has been shown to make major contributions to retention and recruitment of talent, to succession planning, knowledge management, stress reduction and productivity. But research shows that its benefits are maximised when it is driven by the mentee, when expectations between mentor and mentee are clear, and when both parties approach it as an important learning opportunity.

Why should this be so? And does this still hold true in modern South Africa where the most urgent organisational issue is Black Economic Empowerment? And does this hold for all mentoring, whether formal or informal?

A considerable amount of recent research on the topic of mentoring is available through the European Mentoring Centre ([www.emccouncil.org](http://www.emccouncil.org)) now renamed the European Mentoring and Coaching Centre. Research in South Africa is limited, but a structured programme of research is about to begin at the Department of Industrial Psychology at UNISA.

From these EMCC sources we know that the model of mentoring better suited to organisations which seek to reduce internal power differences, which have a belief in the development of a wide base of talent and which seek to share knowledge across the organisation is the European model of 'developmental mentoring' rather than the older US model of 'sponsorship mentoring'.

### **Effective Leadership Development**

Effective leaders consciously understand which aspects of their own behaviour are effective and build on these, whilst working to mitigate weaker aspects of their leadership style.

Developmental processes which build this self-awareness as well as those processes which are practical and solidly grounded in the realities of life on the job are likely to be effective processes.

Developmental mentoring creates the space for reflection on the individual's own effectiveness - what it is that he or she does which works well, what it is that does not work so well and why. Space is also created for reflection on what the mentee's values and goals are so that development is guided in a direction which will provide meaning and satisfaction. The agenda for development is entirely mentee driven and is thus entirely unique to each mentoring pair.

Training for the mentor in this relationship is essential in order to help the mentor avoid the pitfalls of mentoring, which include giving in to the temptation to teach the mentee to emulate the "success" of the mentor. Carefully designed, such training can increase the probability of

success of a mentoring relationship by as much as 40%. It would seem that much of this success comes from the phenomenon that in developmental mentoring the relationship is positioned as one of equals, not of sponsor and protégé, not of "old wise man" and "young acolyte".

Programme co-ordinators of formal mentoring programmes often refer to the mutuality of the learning that takes place from dialogue on developmental themes – mentors often learn as much if not more from the relationship. In a recent questionnaire distributed to 32 co-ordinators of formal mentoring programmes<sup>1</sup>, 84% reported significant learning by mentors as an outcome. Other benefits to mentors included satisfaction in helping others to grow (88% of respondents), mentors' own career enhancement (28%), improved relationships between mentor and his/her own direct reports (20%) and increased peer recognition/status (12%).

### **Black Economic Empowerment**

It is this characteristic of an equal relationship which makes developmental mentoring such an attractive option for South Africa. One of the issues in Black Economic Empowerment in this country is how to transfer entrepreneurial and managerial skills whilst allowing the new entrepreneurs and managers space to create a new and appropriate style or model of business.

It will not be sufficient to set up processes where people who have succeeded under the old paradigms and in the old world of business pass on their skills to people who will have to succeed in a completely new world order and a new South African business framework.

Success is more likely to come from mentoring pairs which can challenge the mentee's thinking, increase the mentee's self awareness, improve the mentee's ability to create relationships which sustain business, and nurture an independent and confident spirit.

Is it possible to create such pairs from the material we have available in South African organisations? We believe it is, because the techniques taught in developmental mentoring training build onto natural human drives to gain satisfaction from the success of others. People might not think they are natural mentors, but a willingness to try and an open-mindedness to learn something new can open the door to an immensely satisfying relationship.

It is equally important to train the mentees. This training helps to manage their expectations and to position the mentoring relationship as a properly contracted, goal oriented relationship to which the mentee is an equal partner with equal responsibilities.

### **Formal and Informal Mentoring**

Society is full of extremely successful informal mentoring relationships. Many organisations also promote informal mentoring. It is a valid question, therefore, to ask whether a formal mentoring programme is desirable.

Research on informal mentoring shows a high degree of satisfaction from the parties to the relationship. Being satisfied with a relationship, however, is not the same as achieving development benefit from it – a distinction that calls into question some of the data in favour of informal mentoring.

In informal and also in badly designed formal mentoring programmes (with little support for the mentee in his/her choice of mentor), mentees will often, as a first choice, choose a high flyer as mentor. This may present some career benefits, but high flyers may not have the time or the interest in to invest in reflective dialogue. In both cases, it can be argued; the opportunity to learn may be limited.

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<sup>1</sup> Clutterbuck, D *Survey in preparation for a PhD project on the dynamics of mentoring relationships*, Annual Organisational Psychology post-graduate conference, Birkbeck College, University of London 1999

Formal mentoring, by contrast, is claimed to allow for matching that introduces “more grit to the oyster”. The extent to which this really happens has not yet been formally researched, but there is much anecdotal evidence from company mentoring programmes that a relationship which is built on differences rather than similarities results in more learning.

The US sponsorship model fits both formal and informal mentoring. However, protection and sponsorship are exactly what organisations (and mentees) often do *not* want. The exercise of mentors’ power on behalf of the mentee has many negative as well as positive outcomes. It may create dependency, especially in cross-gender relationships; it may inhibit self-reliance; and it is likely to reduce challenge by the mentee towards the mentor.

### **Community Mentoring**

There is a proliferation of mentoring programmes in a huge variety of community settings, both in the UK and in South Africa. Programmes range from school pupils, to released prisoners, to new mothers returning to work, to small businesses, to cross-business, to business school students and many others. South African newspapers frequently mention mentoring as a process to support a new business development or community development programme.

It would seem then that mentoring is generally considered to be a useful way to accelerate learning and to support development. Consideration of concepts and techniques which improve the success rate of mentoring could therefore prove to be a valuable contribution to Black Economic Empowerment.

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