

A Mind to Mentor?

By Calvin Germain



A MIND TO MENTOR?

Mentoring is a practice that has been commonplace for thousands of years. It is based on the simple notion of one person walking alongside another on their chosen path.

In mentoring, there has always been an inference of imparted wisdom and an understanding that it is the mentee who benefits; although my own mentor, who walked alongside me for many years, made a point of telling me that he gained as much from our meetings as I did. After all those generations of people finding mentors and benefiting from the relationship, a new phenomenon has emerged. Over the last two decades, mentoring has become increasingly popular and institutionalised. We have created associations and institutes for mentors to belong to, councils to promote and control their activity and courses to enable aspiring mentors to meet certain standards.

Admittedly, this has all been done to promote the benefits of mentoring and highlight the positive effect it can have upon our personal growth and development. Unfortunately, one of the side effects is that, instead of the whole idea of mentoring becoming simpler and more clearly understood, exactly the opposite seems to be happening. In a world where our search for understanding uncovers one paradox after another, we seem to be demonstrating that, through definition, control and specialism, we actually understand less of what mentoring is really about, and use the term to describe all kinds of different activities in our organisations. My hope is that, when future generations look back at our time, they see a positive contribution to the notion of mentoring and that mentoring is seen to provide a much needed antidote to the stresses of modern working life. To achieve this, we need to return to the simple notion of one person simply being with another as they grapple with their experiences of life.

This is why at Waverley we are creating a place for mentors to be; a place where, as we design our mentoring schemes or become mentors ourselves, we do so with the kind of help that reminds us of our own gifts and reinforces the natural, human aspects of the mentoring process. I have long regarded mentors as students of

human nature and we want to provide the place and the opportunity for mentors to learn together.

rites of passage

Whenever people talk about becoming a mentor, either in an organisation or as an external resource, I find myself asking the question *“Have you made it yet?”* Many people misinterpret this question and see ‘making it’ in terms of a combination of status and material acquisition. However, my perspective is very different. What I am actually referring to fits more comfortably under the heading of rights of passage. Have you ever noticed how we humans place ourselves in a role and then proceed to collect all the trappings of that role. As specialists, managers and leaders we go through a process of covering ourselves with special knowledge, pre-prepared answers to questions and dilemmas, new ways of behaving, and ever more qualifications. We wear these things like clothes, almost armour, to protect us as we walk our path.



Then slowly, as we become more experienced, it begins to dawn on us that all these things have to be carried around and maintained. Might we perhaps be more effective (and more content) just as ourselves?

At this point the search for a mentor begins quite naturally. We are searching for someone who has gone through this process, perhaps a number of times, and has extracted their own wisdom from the experience. They have, in a sense, *“made it”*.

Of course the phrase *“Just be yourself”* has for many of us been heard from our early days as the best piece of advice offered by caring adults. Nowadays, the word “authentic” is used by experts to describe the most effective way to be in the world.

THE MENTOR’S LOT

“There is no other route to wisdom than the route provided by the simple practice of living.”

Having spent enough time on earth to have had the kind of experiences we need (and all this before we even think about offering help to others), we then have to learn to use quite a limited set of tools in order to be effective. Simply **listening** and **enquiring** in such a way that helps the mentee listen to their own experience and extract their own wisdom from it. This is our lot as mentors and in this relationship “advice is cheap” and often counter-productive. The mentor needs what in Zen is termed ‘*shoshin*’ – the Beginner’s mind. The beginner has no prejudices, just endless possibilities. The task of the mentor is simply to *be* with the mentee in a way which enables him or her to discover their real self. In this, the mentor is striving constantly to see past the masks and armour to the real person beneath. In this sense, perhaps, we should be looking to artists for help as a first step in broadening our search. We need to learn to look and look again; to use our own gifts to the full in perceiving the inner reality of the other.

SPECIAL GIFTS

“We live in a world of gifted people”.

‘Gifted’ is not a word to be reserved for the few. Our starting point is the conviction – tested and proven by all our experience - that we all have ability and gifts that go towards making us the unique beings that we are. Our ability has been with us for a long time and will stay with us. If we use it for the benefit of both ourselves and those around us, it grows with us. If we use it just for our own gain, we simply collect more of the armour, masks and clothes that hide us; the ones we are seeking to remove. Helping people to find their own ability is fundamental to our approach.

THE ROLES OF A MENTOR

As mentors, although we must work within strict codes of practice, yet still we can bring our own unique ability to the relationship. The important thing in developing mentors is to helping them to be more aware of, and use, their own gifts; building on strength. (This is opposite to the apocryphal story of the centipede that trips over, as soon as it is reminded of the need to co-ordinate its one hundred legs).

The kind of roles that mentors commonly take are varied:

- **Expert** (still requires the mentor to listen and enquire)
- **Alternatives Identifier** (offering different ways of seeing the same thing and often identifying alternative sources of help)
- **Joint Problem Solver** (establishing a relationship where both mentor and mentee work on the mentee’s issues together)
- **Learning Process Specialist** (designing learning experiences with the mentee and monitoring progress)
- **Counsellor** (active listening)

This short list indicates a continuum of activities, ranging from directive at the top to non-directive at the bottom. Each of us will have abilities that make us more effective in one or other or a group of roles. Each of us will also have a sense of “positive disquiet” when operating in some of the others. This is why I believe that being a mentor is an aspiration, something we never really attain, because there is always something else to learn. If you think you are coming close to understanding human nature, think again. As a species we are gloriously poor at understanding the nature of most other species and we are, after all, quite complex beings.

HAVE YOU MADE IT YET?

So, have you?

Have you spent time stripping away the “stuff” you collected for yourself and getting a clearer view of what you have to offer others? Here is the paradox we face as mentors. We know that, if we are to be at our most effective, we have to be “authentic” and this means stripping away much of our armour. So, it is essential to have clear boundaries and to avoid the temptation to step over our own mark.

Knowing when to stop and hand over to someone else with different abilities is a clear demonstration that we are managing our own boundaries, and the willingness to do so comes only from a deeper knowledge of ourselves.

At Waverley, we provide a forum for people, who are actively involved in mentoring. Its purpose is to meet and talk about mentoring in an open way, whilst remaining within our code of practice. We believe that mentors can learn a great deal from each-other and, thereby, help to maintain the mentoring tradition.

ONE FINAL QUESTION

Can you believe in someone more than they believe in themselves?

If you can do this, even when they are full of doubt and are tempted to hold back and give up, then you have the makings of a mentor. Indeed, you probably already know that being a mentor is something you really want, and one way in which you will become more of yourself.

