

Mentoring and the role of the mentor

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The role of the mentor in the learning and development of the mentee is one of an experienced person using all his/her knowledge, experience, skills and competencies to contribute to the mentee's learning and development.

The mentor works with the mentee in offering his/her experience and expertise in helping the mentee make new and better analysis, conclusions, decisions and action that will achieve better results. The mentor will challenge and inspire the mentee to move outside of their 'comfort zone' - thus creating an accelerated learning process.

Many new mentors believe that mentoring is mostly about sharing knowledge and giving advice. Mentoring, however, is a process where the mentees are supported in their own learning, where they can reflect and explore in a safe environment, and experiment without fearing the consequences. If the mentor only focuses on sharing knowledge and giving advice, this may take the initiative away from the mentee, and prevent the mentee in taking responsibility for his/her own learning and development.

From the perspective of the participants

Mentoring is a learning partnership between two people with different levels of experience, where both can achieve new learning, new insights and personal growth. Mentoring creates synergy between two people.



Focus on mentee **and on mentor!**

Mentors today are chosen on the basis of their knowledge and experiences, their emotional intelligence, their communications skills, and their abilities to create a dialogue and be empathic listeners. The best expert is not necessarily the best mentor! Therefore, the ability to listen, to put aside your own personal needs and to concentrate on understanding the mentee's reality are probably the most important skills for being a good mentor – and more important than the professional knowledge and skills.

Another typical assumption that new mentors may have is that the mentee has to take the initiative to ask for help. To a certain extent this is correct. However, since the mentor often is a person with a higher status, the mentee might find it difficult to disturb the mentor and prevail upon his/her time. The mentee might perceive his/her own problems and issues as minor in relation to the - perhaps very powerful -

position of the mentor. So the mentee may decide not to take the initiative and wait for the mentor to be available. The result of this is often, that nothing happens at all!

From the perspective of the organisation

Mentoring is a strategic development activity that supports the organisation's vision, goals and values and the participant's own development needs and wishes.



Mentoring develops the organisation through the mentor/mentee collaboration!

Both parties must take a pro-active approach in sustaining the relationship and ensuring the mentoring meetings. For the mentor this means showing commitment and interest, making time for establishing and developing the relationship, spending the time needed in the mentoring meetings, and positively pushing the mentee forward.

Mentor's role in the learning process

The role of the mentor is many-faceted and may have different focus depending on the type of mentoring programme and on the individual mentor/mentee-relationship. Mentoring is situational just like situational leadership, and the mentor adjusts his/her behaviour to the mentee's situation, task, goal and readiness for the learning. Generally, the mentor's role is about supporting the learning and development process of the mentee which can be illustrated through the Zone Model.

Most people prefer to be in the comfort zone. Here we feel competent, and we are in control. We feel certain that we can perform well and create results. In new situations and in development processes e.g. the mentoring process both mentor and mentee will experience situations where they are uncertain,



insecure and feel that they lack competencies. These situations are filled with opportunities for learning, and new learning naturally requires a certain frustration and insecurity.

Depending on our personality, maturity and experience we have different tolerance for how

much insecurity and challenge we can handle before entering the panic zone. In this zone the learning becomes blocked because we panic, lose sight of what is important and let our emotions take control.

The mentor's role is to help create a productive and safe learning process, while helping the mentee accept that learning and development can be hard work and will be uncomfortable at times.

The many roles of the mentor

In the following, we will describe the two basic tasks of the mentor and 10 situational roles that a mentor can use to support the learning process of the mentee.

The 2 basic mentor tasks

- **Facilitator – makes learning easier**
 - Mentor helps the mentee go through the learning process easier, faster and better than if mentee were going through the learning process on their own.
- **Role model – demonstrates personal and professional skills and values.**
 - Mentor's assumptions, values, skills, knowledge and experience influences mentee's understanding of the situation and mentee's decision making process.

...and 10 situational mentor roles

Facilitator - Makes learning easier

Facilitation is a keyword in understanding mentoring. Facilitate means to make something easy for somebody else. This is what the mentor does: making learning and development easier for the mentee than it would have been doing it on his/her own. For the mentor this means being aware of the mentee’s present situation, skills and needs for learning. It also means being able to navigate among the many roles of the mentor to adapt to the mentee’s needs.

Role model - Demonstrates personal and professional skills and values

Being a role model is often considered to be the classical definition of a mentor. In formal mentoring programmes, where the mentor has been chosen for the role, this gives the mentor a certain position of power and authority as a role model. Where the mentor has been selected by the organisation, it is obviously because the mentor is considered to be a good example for the values, skills and competencies that the organisation wishes to develop and promote. Therefore, the mentor has a responsibility to demonstrate that he/she is actually a good role model as the mentee will be influenced by the mentor’s views and behaviours.

The 10 situational mentor roles

Mentor’s Many Roles - Situational Mentoring	
Storyteller	Tells stories for inspiration.
Discussion partner	Enters into discussions and challenges mentee.
Advisor	Gives expert advice.
Knowledge sharer	Shares professional knowledge when needed.
Coach	Asks questions that leads to new insights.
Critic	Gives constructive feedback.
Networker	Supports mentee in developing and using networking.
Door opener	Opens doors and gives references.
Sponsor	Guides mentee in relation to his/her career.
Friend	Encourages and supports mentee.

Storyteller - Tells own stories to inspire mentee

The mentor as a storyteller can tell the stories that create new perspectives on the mentee’s situation and can inspire mentee to handle the situation differently. Stories can help the mentee observe his/her own situation and experiences, analyse the events and create new meaning. Storytelling also facilitates creating alternative scenarios from other “worlds”, thus indirectly giving feedback to mentee on his/her behaviour and helping mentee observe him-/herself from a more objective position.

Discussion partner – Challenges mentee in discussions

As a discussion partner, the mentor challenges the mentee’s assumptions, perceptions, experiences and opinions. Since the mentor is neutral in regard to the issues and situations presented by the mentee, the mentor can take any standpoint that will challenge the mentee and thus enable the mentee to see different ways of understanding and reacting to the issue or situation. As a discussion partner, the mentor can also

help the mentee to brainstorm new ideas and discuss the pros and cons of different solutions to the issue at hand.

Advisor - Shares expert advice

If a mentor has expert knowledge and expertise, it is only natural for him/her to use these in the mentoring relationship. However, it is important to remember that the mentoring role is not that of a professional advisor, professional consultant, professional lawyer or whatever it is the mentee needs. Whilst the mentor should take a responsible approach in relation to giving specific advice, ultimately the mentee will have to take full responsibility for implementing this advice, without any recourse to the mentor. A clear understanding, within the mentoring contract, of where overall responsibility lies is very important in sustaining the relationship and ensuring that the mentor is not too prescriptive in his/her approach.

Knowledge sharer - Share professional knowledge

The mentor will share his/her knowledge and information about people, work processes, organisations etc. Perhaps the mentor knows who is best at handling a certain task in the production department, or which legal firm the organisation prefers in certain legal matters. Knowledge sharing is also about helping the mentee to identify which knowledge is relevant and, if this knowledge is lacking, where to source and obtain this information.

Coach - Asks questions that lead to new insights and new solutions

The mentor as a coach uses techniques and asks open-ended questions which lead the mentee to explore new insights rather than giving advice and presenting ready-made solutions. Good questions will inspire the mentee to new thoughts, new insights, different perspectives, and will help the mentee understand problems in a new light as well as challenge their existing assumptions and perspectives.

Critic - Gives constructive feedback

The mentoring role also provides an opportunity to give positive and constructive feedback which focuses on the best interests of the mentee. The feedback can be direct or indirect, e.g. for indirect feedback the mentor could phrase the feedback like this: “Well, I can see how your actions could be perceived as aggressive by the other people in the situation...and now I will tell you how this might appear so.” In this way, the mentor is actually giving feedback to the mentee, while at the same time helping the mentee identify possible viewpoints and perceptions of other people.



Networker – Supports mentee in developing and using networking

The mentor can help the mentee understand the benefits of networking and develop the mentee's networking skills and behaviour. Networking and relationship building can be important inside and outside the mentee's organisation for ensuring good working relationships internally, for achieving business results externally and for furthering the mentee's career ambitions. The mentor can help the mentee map his/her contacts, analyse which contacts are beneficial to the mentee now, which contacts could be developed to become more beneficial, and to identify how the mentee can invest in building and extending their own network of potentially useful contacts. When relevant the mentor may also invite the mentee to join in his/her networks, however this is not something the mentee can expect will happen. This is purely the decision of the mentor, no obligation for the mentor, and an opportunity for the mentee when the mentor finds it is relevant and valuable for both.

Door opener - Opens doors and gives references

This aspect of mentoring includes a similar challenge as above and gives rise to a number of questions: "Do I have to share my contacts with my mentee? Can the mentee really be expecting that I will share all my contacts with him/her just like that?"

The answer is no! The mentor is certainly not automatically required to do this as part of their mentoring role. However, in specific mentoring programmes it can be very relevant and hoped for that the mentors will open doors, help the mentees meet the right people and gain entrance to the right networks – which will also be beneficial to the organisation and to the mentor. Still, the mentor must be comfortable with this and it must find it appropriate, relevant and right to do.

Sponsor - Guides mentee in relation to his/her career

The traditional meaning of the mentor's role as sponsor is one where there is a perception that the mentor instinctively knows the best "career moves" for the mentee, who will become the mentor's protégé and receive advice, protection and guidance from the mentor.

However, today the sponsor role is more about guiding, supporting and discussing with the mentee on matters related to career development. The mentor can guide the mentee to tasks that will make the mentee more visible to the "right" people in the organisation and coach the mentee in how to assert him-/herself in the right situations. The mentor can also be more directly involved in the mentee's career development, recommend actions for the mentee to take, and invite him/her to events where the mentee can meet people relevant to his/her career ambitions.

Friend – Encourages and supports mentee

Within the professional mentoring relationship, it is not a requirement that the mentor and mentee should become friends. It is also important that both mentor and mentee can conclude the relationship as set out in the mentoring contract and feel ok about walking away from each other. However, the mentoring relationship itself may lead to friendship that survives the duration of the formal programme.

The role of "friend", though, is about being understanding and supportive when the mentee is frustrated or angry or simply is in a tough situation and provide space for the mentee to let out steam and to do his/her reality checks. This role is important to create a close, confidential and trustful relationship in which the mentee can talk about really important issues. Therefore, the mentor should remember that it is appropriate, at times, to empathise with the mentee; to acknowledge and commend the efforts of the mentee, and sometimes just to offer a sympathetic ear or an arm to lean on.

Qualifications of the good mentor

- Genuine interest in the development of others.
- High level of self understanding and interest for own personal development.
- Ability to listen and observe.
- Ability to ask exploring, clarifying and challenging questions in a constructive manner.
- Openness and interest in the differences between the mentor and the mentee.
- Ability to communicate own knowledge and experience without dominating.
- Ability to set aside own needs and focus on mentee.
- Ability to combine and structure information and see new connections.
- High level of empathy.
- Courage to experiment and reveal own weaknesses and failures.

About KMP+ House of Mentoring

We are a consulting house focusing on designing and delivering state of the art mentoring programmes for enhancing the effect of leadership and talent development. Since 2000 we have worked with a large number of private and public organisations as well as universities e.g. PwC, Novo Nordisk, Danfoss, Airbus, NATO, Hewlett Packard, Ikea, Copenhagen City, University of Oslo, University of Brighton, Copenhagen Business School, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions and many more.

Kirsten M. Poulsen is the founder and director of KMP+ House of Mentoring, external professor at Copenhagen Business School, former president (2007-2009) of EMCC Denmark (European Mentoring and Coaching Council), and author of a number of books and many articles on leadership and talent development, careers, organisational strategy and change and of course mentoring.



The Mentor+Game is based on the 10 situational roles of the mentor and is used to train mentors and mentees to gain insight into what the roles are, the value of all the roles, and the qualifications needed to ensure quality in the mentoring conversations.

With the Mentor+Game, participants learn about mentoring, the Mentor's Many Roles, and the dynamics of the mentoring collaboration; they develop strategies to manage the complexity of the mentor/mentee relationship and they increase their communication and collaboration skills.

Using the Mentor+Game for training mentors and mentees develops their mentoring skills and helps the participants transfer those skills into their daily jobs thus increasing their capacity to perform and achieve results.

Since 2009 and until 2016, we have trained more than 7.000 mentors and mentees with the Mentor+Game.

Learn more at our website: www.house-of-mentoring.com

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