# Chapter

# 3

**There are many paths but only one journey.**

Naomi Judd, singer-songwriter

# Guiding principles for mentors

In this chapter:

- Learn principles that will help guide your actions as a mentor.
- Learn to balance your commitment to someone's progress with an appropriate sense of detachment.
- Gain points of future reference that you can return to, i.e. as you begin to mentor others.

The following principles are intended to guide and test your thinking, e.g. 'This has happened, what should I do?' Some of the principles will feel logical and like 'common sense' while others ask that you reflect a little, to decide whether or not you agree with the principle and wish to adopt it for yourself. The principles I encourage you to adopt are:

1. Your relationship is one of equality and yet has a natural bias/emphasis.
2. The responsibility for learning, progress and results ultimately rests with your mentee.
3. Mentoring is collaboration between you, your mentee and 'everyday life'.
4. Ultimately, what your mentee chooses to do, learn or ignore from the mentoring is not the mentor's business.
5. Some results of mentoring can be identified or measured, while some results cannot. (This does not mean they are insignificant or less important, it simply means you are less aware of them.)

Let's look at each principle a little more closely.

# 1. The relationship is one of equality and yet has a natural bias/emphasis

## A meeting of equals

From your perspective as a mentor, the relationship is a meeting of equals, even though you might often be judged more 'senior' than the person you are mentoring. In an organisational context especially, it's a natural feature that someone more experienced might have a more senior role, or be considered to have more status in the relationship. It's true that there is a need to acknowledge and focus upon this; for example, what you have learned through experience may have contributed to your situation or success. This creates a natural emphasis or bias towards what you think and believe as a mentor. Where your intention as mentor is to provide support and guidance to assist your mentee's progress, it is natural that you draw upon your experience and learning to do this.

## A need for empowerment

However, it's also necessary for the collaboration to 'work' in relationship terms. This means that the mentee should feel at ease to discuss potentially difficult or awkward topics, ask tough questions and get to grips with the realities of your experience. Where a mentee is overly daunted by the status or demeanour of their mentor, conversations are likely to remain polite and potentially constrained in content. Another pitfall when we wield too much power in the conversation is that we might assume we are 'managing' the mentee, perhaps through making requests of them, giving instructions, 'homework', etc.

> *Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the ability to increase the sense of power among those who are led.*
>
> Mary Parker Follett

The mentor's aim is to support the mentee's growth and progress while increasing their sense of empowerment; if the mentor tries to 'manage' them, this is clearly counterproductive. In Mary Parker Follett's quote, her wisdom translates to the true power of mentoring, not simply of leadership. For example, while a mentee may value the clarity they experience by being given instructions, they may also become dependent on the directive style of their mentor. Ending the relationship may then prove detrimental, perhaps because the mentee's confidence to act is now dependent on the direction of their mentor. Alternatively, they have followed the mentor's requests and maintained their confidence, but have not understood the principles the mentor was using and so cannot continue with the same clarity independently.

## The mentor's aim is to support the mentee's growth and progress while increasing their sense of empowerment

It's like a manager responding to two identical emailed requests from two different team members. Both team members ask for a day's leave at short notice. With the first person the manager may refuse the request and ask them to come and discuss the situation, while with the second person they may send a simple response of 'Yes, of course'. Without understanding the principles the manager operates from to make their decisions, someone else cannot demonstrate the same wisdom.

## 2. Responsibility for learning, progress and results ultimately rests with the mentee

This principle places the responsibility for learning and growth with the mentee. It means that if the mentee is not making progress or meeting their objectives for the sessions, then it is the mentee who has the primary duty to act. When you work on this

principle throughout the mentoring relationship, it enables both parties to retain a healthy perspective on situations. It stems from the following needs:

- to place the ownership of the mentee's results where they belong (with the mentee)
- to encourage the mentee to feel empowered in their circumstances, i.e. 'I can do this'
- to help the mentee build commitment, e.g. 'I'll get out of this what I put into it'
- for the mentor to avoid 'interfering' from a sense of personal agenda or desire to rescue, e.g. 'They aren't getting this, so I need to step in and fix the situation'
- for the mentor to retain a healthy perspective, e.g. 'I'm committed to their growth and progress but not attached to that.'

Where there might be a natural tendency for us to want to 'help' or encourage success for the mentee, the potential to feel some ownership or begin to have a specific agenda for the mentee's progress increases. For example, we may feel that the mentee is more interested in discussing their problems than solving them and that the mentee 'needs to learn to take positive action'. This may be valid and useful feedback for us to offer. However, if we allow ourselves to become frustrated about the apparent inaction, or begin to make offers to get more involved in situations, then the balance of the relationship might shift. This idea of having a 'personal agenda' for a mentee is covered further in Chapter 6.

## What you evaluate ... you emphasise

Where a mentor is evaluated as part of a mentoring scheme, perhaps to understand their approach or spot issues such as mismatched relationships, we can easily start to feel a sense of pressure to create 'results', i.e. for our mentee to be suddenly successful, or to 'change' in some way. While there might be benefit in evaluating a mentor's style of approach, or even behavioural skills, it is less relevant to judge a mentor on what the mentee is doing as a result of the conversations.

**Checklist**

## How do you know you are an effective mentor?

1 Your handling of the process

  ✔ Do you keep your agreements, e.g. arrive for sessions on time, send information as promised, etc.?

  ✔ Do you appear engaged in the process, e.g. appear positive and optimistic in relation to the sessions, or do you appear unenthusiastic, often cancel at the last minute, etc.?

  ✔ Do you appear committed to the mentee's progress, e.g. demonstrate interest in them and their challenges, share personal learning and insight, etc.?

2 Your approach

  ✔ Do you share appropriate personal and professional information in support of the mentee's progress and learning?

  ✔ Do you demonstrate an understanding of the operating principles of mentoring, e.g. encourage the mentee to retain responsibility for their learning?

  ✔ Do you focus on barriers and blocks in order to help the mentee remove them?

3 Your behavioural skill

  ✔ Do you build rapport easily, i.e. do you put the mentee at their ease, promote openness and trust?

  ✔ Do you bring appropriate levels of challenge to conversations, e.g. observations, opinions and constructive feedback?

  ✔ Do you facilitate the mentee's thinking processes, e.g. through effective listening, offering summaries, asking open questions, etc.?

**Start as you intend to continue**

The principle of responsibility for learning and progress resting with the mentee works best when agreed up front as part of orientation: when you and your mentee agree how you want to work together. If the relationship happens within the context of a mentoring scheme, this principle can be explained in set-up information, when the mentee is given an overview of what mentoring is, what it isn't, etc.

## 3. Mentoring is a collaboration between you, your mentee and 'everyday life'

This is a more philosophical principle to help you, the mentor, relax and trust the overall process of which you are a part. The principle is that mentoring is collaboration between you, your mentee and everyday life, with all of its unexpected developments and events. As a mentor, you can make an effort to increase certainty in a relationship, e.g. build on a firm footing of objectives, agreements and expectations, work to stay focused and aligned, etc. Yet ultimately it is not possible to predict what will happen once sessions have begun, e.g. how events might appear to conspire for/against the progress of the assignment.

Did you ever think a situation would turn out a certain way and it didn't? Or have you ever thought you knew someone but then they did something that was unexpected? A mentor relationship may begin in one direction and switch to another: perhaps you thought you were helping someone to gain promotion, then they decide they want to reduce the pressure on themselves by finding a simpler role. Ultimately, your mentee and their on-going circumstances are beyond your ability to know fully or predict with certainty.

A mentor relationship may begin in one direction and switch to another

## Embrace the unexpected and reduce your resistance to it

Where we are unable to control life's twists and turns, it is more logical to accept them and even embrace them. By 'embrace them' I mean that we accept that all events are ideal from a 'big picture' perspective, even if we may never be able to see from that viewpoint. It's like deciding to believe that it was ideal that you were turned down by a potential employer or even a potential life partner because in the overall scenario there was a benefit to that. Sometimes we are fortunate to see the benefit, e.g. you got a job/partner more suited to you, and sometimes we don't see it.

> *And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

Max Ehrmann

The purpose of taking on this belief is not because we can prove it is true but simply because there are benefits to doing so, such as the following:

- By embracing a situation we are able to stay resourceful and constructive as our emotional resistance to a situation is lessened, e.g. 'I can't believe I didn't get the job!' shifts to 'okay, so I didn't get the job – now what?'

- When we accept a situation, we can decide what the most resourceful response is to that situation, e.g. 'If I'm not right for them, maybe they're not right for me' or 'I need to learn from this and begin again.'

- We encourage a sense of being enriched by all situations and events, e.g. 'I'm now much stronger/wiser', etc.

- Over time, we develop a sense of trust that can pervade all our situations. This enables us to feel less concern or doubt about our overall well-being and ability to prevail.

- To believe the opposite may lead us into a spiral of negativity, e.g. 'Life's against me, so what's the point?'

To place the idea in the context of your mentoring, here are some potential 'twists and turns' to illustrate:

- Your mentee arrives late for a session and then explains they need to leave 30 minutes early.
- Your meeting room is double booked and you don't have anywhere to meet.
- The mentee shows up without their notes from the last session and appears totally unprepared for this one.
- Your mentee moves work location and you can no longer meet face to face.
- Your mentee requests more frequent and longer sessions but you know you cannot accommodate the additional investment of time.
- In the last session your mentee complained about their 'impossible' workload and they arrive for this session to explain it just got bigger.
- HR contacts you to explain that your mentee wants to finish the sessions because they don't feel they are getting enough value from them to justify the investment of time.

I'm sure you have your own versions of the above – unexpected developments that you can respond to resourcefully – or not! It might be a minor, unexpected event or a major change of circumstances. Within mentoring, we go one step further, in that we need to see everything that happens as an ideal stage along the journey. Again, as we reduce resistance, we increase acceptance, which helps us stay constructive. We are also embracing the concept of 'the road of trials' (or useful challenges from which the mentee can learn and grow), which shaped our first theme of the relationship in Chapter 2.

> *A gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a man perfected without trials.*
>
> Lucius Annaeus Seneca

**Embrace does not mean 'become victim to'**

This principle of 'embracing' what happens within a mentoring assignment is not to make you passive or 'victim' to it but more to enable you to maintain an objective viewpoint that is resilient in response to life's twists and turns.

> *Resilience is all about being able to overcome the unexpected. The goal of resilience is to thrive.*
>
> Jamais Cascio

Accepting and embracing something does not mean that we don't try to change things, just that we don't waste emotional energy resisting 'what is'. This then frees up our energy to focus on a more resourceful response.

Let's use the example where your mentee moves work location, which requires you to work together differently (have telephone calls, Skype/video-conference sessions, use email, etc.) to see how the principle might impact your thinking.

- My mentee is moving location and that means we can't meet face to face any more.
  - How can I see that as ideal, e.g. something ultimately constructive?
  - What options have now become available? (To do something differently, change approach, etc.)
  - What might the benefits of this be?

Table 3.1 shows how the principle plays out over time, compared with a more resistant approach.

**Table 3.1** The principle of 'embracing'

| Response from frustration and resistance | Response from 'accept and embrace' |
|---|---|
| **Short term:**<br>• You feel disappointed and potentially frustrated.<br>• You consider the risks of not having face-to-face sessions, e.g. reduced personal connection, rapport, etc.<br>• You look for options that reduce the loss of the face-to-face sessions. | **Short term:**<br>• You register the development with interest.<br>• You wonder how this might be perfect, e.g. 'I wonder how this is going to benefit the mentee over time?'<br>• You work creatively to understand options, e.g. 'What different things could we try doing to support their progress?' |
| **Long term:**<br>• You view the new approach to sessions as a compromise, which might impact your attitude or mood during sessions.<br>• You maintain a sense of 'this is not ideal', at least until you gain clear evidence to the contrary.<br>• Your perception of the relationship shifts – you might become a little more detached or 'remote'. | **Long term:**<br>• You continue with the mentoring sessions with complete acceptance of the changed circumstances.<br>• You remain interested to discover how working together in new ways, e.g. via Skype, transpires as beneficial for the situation.<br>• You continue to feel 'freed up' to mentor the individual. |

By embracing what happens during an assignment, we develop a perspective or 'filter' that enables us to view the positives in a situation. Here are just a few of the ways this development might show itself to be a constructive event in the mentee's journey.

• You both agree to Skype and that requires better preparation and organisation to be effective. This quality is something that the mentee has previously lacked and so they are now being presented with the choice to add effort to make the mentoring assignment work, or not.

- It's a useful dilemma that highlights a need for them to decide how committed to the mentoring they actually are.
- They learn how to become effective during remote meetings, i.e. Skype, video conferencing, telephone, etc. That proves a valuable skill for them generally (as it is a more frequent element of their role).

### What about the impact on the mentor?

As a mentor you might be wondering, 'So what about the impact or inconvenience to me?' and of course the answer is: the relationship isn't about you, it's about your mentee. Remember, the primary purpose of the relationship is to benefit the learning and progress of the mentee. This doesn't mean that the mentor should suffer (the relationship is one of equals), but simply that your focus is mainly on the mentee.

## 4. Ultimately, what the mentee chooses to do, learn or ignore from the mentoring is not the mentor's business

This is another philosophical principle to help you remain resourceful and resilient as a mentor. Where an effective mentor is engaged in the opportunity to help their mentee learn, develop and progress, there can be a tendency to become emotionally invested in a certain outcome for them. It might be that you want your mentee to make what you believe are better choices, or to change certain behaviours or tendencies. Perhaps your mentee tells you about an opportunity to go for an internal job interview, which you feel would be a hugely positive experience, but then they decide against it, saying that they 'don't feel ready' either for the interview process or for the change involved if they were offered a new, more senior role. You notice that they have a tendency to avoid situations that make them anxious (such as job interviews) and that appears to be what's holding them back from attaining the career success they say they want. You give them that feedback and their response indicates they accept your view, e.g. 'Maybe you're right, but I just don't feel comfortable at the idea of this.'

Imagine, then, that you convince them to go for the job interview. The experience might turn out in a number of ways:

1. They are successful at the interview and they thank you for encouraging them to go for it. They excel in their new role.

2. Their fear of interviews is embedded – they 'froze' several times, resulting in a 'failure' type of experience for them and a negative impression with the interviewers.

3. They are successful in interview and are offered the job, but then refuse it as they follow their instinct that they 'aren't ready' – again creating a poor impression with the interviewers.

4. They are successful, accept the job but are not able to tackle its challenges and pressure, and so move jobs fairly soon afterwards.

5. They are offered the position, begin the new role and then when a different role that they want much more is advertised shortly afterwards, they are unable to apply for it.

The purpose of this list is simply to acknowledge the many different ways that events can develop, and that on-going consequences are unseen to us in the present moment.

## Remain interested in what your mentee does – and not invested in it

This principle that 'what they do is ultimately not your business' is not intended to dissuade you from being interested in what your mentee does. The principle simply means that the extent of your involvement ('your business') is to offer, to advise, to support, to facilitate, to help, to guide – and that's all. So this principle can provide a helpful boundary for you, which will help you to relax about what happens outside of your mentoring conversations (as something beyond your control). That's why what someone chooses to do or not do is 'not your business'. A little like a bookshop owner's 'business' is to offer then sell books to people, not to make sure they read them from cover to cover.

By adopting this principle, you are remaining impartial to potential outcomes. This doesn't mean you are not interested

in what your mentee does – of course you will be! I encourage you to demonstrate interest – ask them what they've been doing, listen as they tell you, retain key information, etc. This also doesn't mean to say that you don't care about what happens, merely that you will retain a balanced view of it. If you accept that empowering someone else is more valuable than fixing things for them, then this principle is logical and hopefully acceptable to you.

## Notice the influence of your ego

If we are motivated to experience the pleasure of what we see as a successful outcome or the gratification of the mentee 'getting it right', then when their actions fall short of our expectations, we may feel frustrated. This is often because we are being influenced by our ego. Our ego is a function of our mind and creates our sense of 'who we are', such as 'I am a daughter, husband, manager, mentor, etc.'. Some of the functions of the ego are practical, as when it judges and compares in a helpful way the difference between ourselves and the world around us. Other functions are less helpful, perhaps born from a need to sustain our sense of 'who we are'. For example, perhaps some of the following statements might resonate as true for you:

- I need to maintain a sense of control in situations.
- I need to stay in a feeling of the 'known' and avoid a feeling of being in the 'unknown', e.g. 'I'm more comfortable talking about what I know about.'
- I am gratified by receiving approval from others.
- I need to maintain a sense of being 'right' in situations and so avoid being proved wrong.
- I need to feel approved of (liked/loved) and therefore work to please or impress others.

Our ego is a function of our mind and creates our sense of 'who we are'

Among the fixations of the ego is a compulsion to 'know' or 'be certain'. Depending on the individual, this can express itself in a range of ways: from constant study (seeking to know), to refusing to learn, e.g. 'I know all I need to know!' As a mentor, it is important to consider your ego's (mind's) influence upon you as it may shape your behaviours and responses to some situations. For example, if the mentee asks you to explain how to understand a company's financial report and you don't know exactly how to do that, your responses may vary:

- You say that you don't know (and refer them to another source of information).
- You might use the little understanding you have to exaggerate your knowledge, e.g. ignore/skim over the elements you don't know and focus on those that you do.
- You might dismiss the question, e.g. 'You don't need to know that stuff, plus it's probably invented anyway.'

When you understand how your ego is affecting you, then you are more able to acknowledge and ignore the effect. This may incur some discomfort, as you also acknowledge and ignore a feeling of exposure in a situation. Using the previous example: as you realise 'I'm going to have to admit I don't actually know this', you might feel awkward because you imagine you look less impressive or even stupid. However, by ignoring your ego, you choose to be open about not knowing in order to maintain your sense of integrity, by telling the truth in the situation.

Let's try a quick test. When you first read the principle 'What the mentee does is not your business', did that bother you or perhaps even offend you in some way? If you did feel some level of discomfort with that, then your discomfort is probably your ego showing itself. If it didn't, try to think of another situation where you might have felt offended, e.g. perhaps someone criticised or ignored you and that made you feel affronted in some way. Again, your discomfort is caused as your ego (or your sense of self/who you are) feels vulnerable or exposed. Our ego likes to retain a perception of being superior in situations, because when we are superior, we are more 'safe'. The statement 'it's not your

business' suggests that you are not superior (and so beyond reproach), which may make our ego squirm a little.*

To gain more awareness of your ego's influence upon you, try the following exercise.

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### Exercise

## Approval or control?

Think of three situations you are currently frustrated or disappointed about – perhaps situations you view as problems, or events that made you unhappy in some way. Write those three items in a quick list. For example:

1 I presented for the senior team recently and didn't make a good impression. I'm disappointed at my performance and keep replaying it in my mind.

2 We thought we'd sold our property, but the buyers have just withdrawn their offer, which means we can't move after all.

3 My boss is really annoying me (he doesn't respond to my emails, cancels one-to-one meetings, etc.) and he's really blocking my progress in several areas.

Next, consider each issue in combination with the following question:

● In this situation, what are you making important: approval or control?

For each situation, it's most likely that you will be drawn by the idea that you need to maintain or gain approval in some way (most obvious in issue 1), or else you seek control of a situation and don't have that (most obvious in issue 2). In some situations, it may be a need for both approval and control, which is possibly present in issue 3.

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* If you are interested to learn more about the ego and its impact upon your behaviours, you'll find further discussion in my book *Brilliant Coaching*. For fuller immersion in the subject, I recommend that you read *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle.

> Next, reflect upon each of your three issues using the following question:
>
> - What would giving up the need for control or approval do to this situation?
>
> As you consider your situations and then relax a need for approval and/or control, you also lessen the influence of your ego upon your perspective. This can free up your mind to consider different responses or viewpoints. Again with the same situations, use the following questions to help you do this:
>
> - When you give up a need for approval and/or control:
>   - ◆ What fresh perspective or choices are now available?
>   - ◆ How might you act differently?
>   - ◆ What else would change?
>
> The 'giving up' questions can help you relax the unconscious drivers of approval and control, and help you stay more impartial to a situation. As you mentor others, use these questions whenever you think they might help you move to a more objective position, e.g. if you are perhaps ever disappointed or frustrated with your mentee, the process or even yourself.

We'll cover the topic of the ego further in Chapter 6 as we explore the pitfalls of putting yourself under pressure and trying to maintain status in the relationship. For now, simply consider that some of what shapes your thinking and behaviour in situations is born from a basic need to maintain a positive appearance and retain a sense of control, or 'be in charge'. Those are natural human tendencies and not a problem in themselves; the potential issue occurs when the tendencies overrule what we know to be the 'right' or truthful or authentic response in a situation – such as sometimes admitting we are wrong, or don't know, or even that we need help. Remember, a mentor is made more accessible by their imperfections rather than any false façade of perfection.

# A mentor is made more accessible by their imperfections

## 5. Some results of mentoring can be known or measured, and some results cannot

With any type of one-to-one intervention, there is a tendency to want impressive improvements, outcomes and results. Where the assignment forms part of a company-wide scheme, the organisation may especially want to evaluate results from the mentoring activity along criteria such as increased promotion rate of mentees, less talent lost to competitors, etc. In addition, the mentor might want to 'feel good' about the work that they are doing and seek confirmation through the mentee's achievements.

> *Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.*

> William Bruce Cameron, author

While William Bruce Cameron's principle may appear philosophical, it is actually based in reality: what is ultimately beneficial to the learning and progress of a mentee may not reveal itself, whether within the timeframe of an assignment, in the conscious mind of a mentee, or as something directly linked to the mentoring sessions. Just because an impact or outcome of a mentoring assignment is less obvious or delayed does not mean that it is insignificant or less important; it simply means you are less aware of them. Here are some examples of that:

- The mentee grew to appreciate the mentor's calm demeanour over time as they experienced their mentor's tendency to reflect more objectively and deeply in order to arrive at considered conclusions and insights. As a result, they unconsciously picked up a tendency to emulate this style of response with colleagues, which in turn had a positive impact on the quality and outcomes of those conversations.

- The mentee was impressed by the mentor's refusal to accept challenges as 'problems' and they were particularly inspired by the mentor's response to an unexpected career setback. Years later, when the mentee experienced something similar, they were able to draw upon the principles they had watched their mentor use, e.g. 'accept and embrace every development as a perfect part of an unseen plan'.

- The mentee realised that the mentor had a much more professional appearance than they did, e.g. their manner of dress, the way they spoke succinctly and yet with impact, etc. As a result of this, the mentee smartened up their work clothes, reduced their tendency to ramble in conversations and generally polished their professional manner. Even though this had a significant positive effect, this was not something they were comfortable sharing with others, e.g. they would not disclose the benefit on an evaluation form.

The principle that some results can be measured and some can't is intended to strengthen your approach rather than dilute it. It means that you can stay committed to supporting your mentee to make progress and trust that you are doing that, even when you are sometimes unable to identify exactly how that progress is happening. Rather than becoming attached to 'quick results' or specific sequences of events, I encourage that you:

- use the principles of an effective mentor to help guide your decisions and behaviours
- maintain a focus on the key attributes and function of a mentor (these are covered in Chapter 4)
- adopt a little supporting structure from the basic process in Chapter 5.

When you develop consistency with the above, all that is left to do is trust that you will make a positive difference to whomever you support as a mentor. Sometimes the results you help to create stay unseen to you; sometimes they will show up unexpectedly to surprise and delight you. However, seeking to make certain results happen, or becoming overly concerned that you are not making a difference, does not help your confidence or your enjoyment as a mentor.

*One cannot plan for the unexpected.*

Aaron Klug, chemist and biophysicist

## Chapter summary

Where the on-going activity of mentoring someone incorporates uncertainty and challenge, we need effective principles to help guide and sustain us along the way. Some principles are obvious and don't need discussing, e.g. an effective mentor is committed to the success of the mentee. However, some principles are less obvious as they are derived from more subtle dilemmas caused by our unconscious preferences. The principles that effective mentors adopt include:

1. Your relationship is one of equality and yet has a natural bias/emphasis.
2. The responsibility for learning, progress and results ultimately rests with your mentee.
3. Mentoring is collaboration between you, your mentee and 'everyday life'.
4. Ultimately, what your mentee chooses to do, learn or ignore from the mentoring is not the mentor's business.
5. Some results of mentoring can be identified or measured, while some results cannot. (This does not mean they are insignificant or less important, it simply means you are less aware of them.)

Staying aware of the above principles and reviewing them occasionally can help us maintain constructive views of situations and make resourceful choices in relation to them.