

Top Tips for Mentoring

Mentoring involves helping individuals to develop their career, skills and expertise, often drawing upon your own experiences in the process. Mentoring is very different from managing or coaching, and it is important to know what the key skills and behaviours of a good mentor are before getting started. Following these top tips will help you to do this.



Build a relationship with your mentee

For mentoring to be successful, it is vital for there to be trust and rapport between you and your mentee. To establish this from the outset, it is a good idea to hold **an informal introductory meeting** with the mentee you have been matched with. During this meeting, you and your mentee should aim to **share your expectations** for the mentoring relationship. It is important to find out **your mentee's objectives**, as this will help you to identify which aspects of your experience and background might be most relevant.

At the beginning of your first formal mentoring meeting, it is important to spend some time with your mentee explaining how the sessions are going to work, and checking whether the mentee has any questions. This will help to put them at ease and should pave the way for a productive first meeting.

Listen carefully

To formulate pertinent and helpful questions in a mentoring session and to identify which aspects of your own experience (if any) you should draw upon, it is essential to listen carefully to your mentee. You should maintain eye contact with your mentee when they are speaking, focus on what they are telling you and avoid becoming distracted by anything else around you during your conversations. When your mentee has finished

speaking, you should briefly summarise your understanding of their response, and ask questions to clarify relevant points if there is something you're unsure of.

Challenge your mentee with powerful questions

The success of a mentoring conversation depends on the **quality, not the quantity** of the questions you ask. They should prompt your mentee to engage in some **genuine self-reflection** and achieve **greater insight** into the situations and challenges they are facing. If the mentee needs to take some time to answer your question properly, you should allow them to do this and avoid the temptation to fill the silence with yet another question. Silence provides you and the mentee with the space to think and reflect, so it is important to allow it in your mentoring conversations.

Offer constructive feedback

You may need to provide your mentee with feedback from time to time during the mentoring relationship. This might be because you notice a certain type of behaviour that is affecting the mentee's ability to achieve his/her objectives or because you feel your mentee should have approached a situation or challenge in a slightly different way. When you provide feedback to your mentee, it is important that you do so **positively and constructively**. You should restrict your feedback to the behaviours and actions you have seen, and support your comments with examples. Your feedback should also be balanced; as well as highlighting areas for development, spend some time reflecting on the mentee's relevant strengths and abilities.

Draw upon your experience when appropriate

Sharing your knowledge and experience with your mentee is one of the key ways in which mentoring differs from coaching. (Indeed, it is likely that you have been matched with your mentee because of your skills and expertise in a certain field.) However, mentoring is not simply about telling a mentee all about your past experiences and expecting them to repeat what you did. Instead, you should draw upon your own knowledge and experience only when you are confident that it will be **genuinely helpful**.

If you choose to share this information in a mentoring conversation, you should do so in a way that will help to **guide your mentee** towards identifying their **own solutions**. Regardless of how much of your experience you choose to draw upon, the mentee should still do the majority of the talking in your conversations and your discussions should always be driven by the mentee's needs and objectives.

Be prepared to answer questions

During your conversations, your mentee may question you further about your experiences. This might be to understand why you took a certain action, or to learn the outcome of a decision you made. As a mentor, these questions can sometimes be difficult or challenging to answer. However, if the question is **relevant** to the mentoring conversation, it is important to be open with your mentee and provide them with an honest answer. Of course, if you feel the question is not appropriate, you should say so.

Tap into your network

Another way in which mentors can support mentees is by introducing them to others in their network. For example, if a mentee is seeking support in leading a change initiative, perhaps you could put them in touch with someone in your organisation or wider network who has done this successfully. This individual might be able to provide your mentee with more **detailed or technical guidance** than you are able to give within the framework of a mentoring conversation. To help ensure a meeting or conversation between your mentee and a member of your network is as productive as possible, you should encourage your mentee to set some objectives for it, and to share the outcomes of the meeting with you in your next mentoring session.

Use appropriate models and tools

If you are a new mentor, it is important to use resources that can help you develop your **communication skills** and your ability to help your mentee engage in self-reflection. One such resource is the **model of reflective space**, which maps out the stages a mentee must go through to achieve greater insight into the situations they face and the solutions available. [1] (The model of reflective space and some other useful tools have been provided in **Related Links**).

Experienced mentors, on the other hand, might find it helpful to engage with some of the more complex academic work that is being conducted into mentoring. Industry journals and credible websites and blogs can be good sources of this type of information.

Bring the relationship to a proper close

When the mentoring cycle or programme comes to an end, it is important to close down the relationship with your mentee properly. This involves **reviewing the outcomes** of the relationship, **acknowledging successes** and achievements and **thanking the mentee for their contribution to the relationship**. It is also a good idea to ask your mentee for some **feedback**. Bringing the relationship to a formal close in this way will help to ensure it ends on a positive note, and that you and the mentee have tangible outcomes from which you can both learn and develop.

[1] D Clutterbuck and D Megginson, 'A Model of Personal Reflective Space', in *Mentoring Executives and Directors* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999).