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Coaching & Mentoring
International

Global Best Practice, Local Expertise

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO RECIPROCAL MENTORING

A brief guide from Coaching and Mentoring International





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01 What is reciprocal mentoring?

Formal mentoring . . .

Formal mentoring programmes have been around since the early 1980s and have made a massive impact upon the careers of millions. Applications of mentoring have bloomed. For example, return to work mentoring has radically changed the experience of working mothers and ethical mentoring has supported hundreds of would-be whistleblowers in the UK National Health Service to resolve complex situations without harm to themselves or their employer organisation.

In traditional mentoring, the mentor is a more senior or more experienced person, who supports a less experienced person on part of their career journey. The essence of mentoring here is that one person uses their wisdom to help another person become



wiser. In the US, mentoring is sometimes confused with sponsorship, but the two roles are largely incompatible and it's increasingly common for companies to provide employees with both at different points in their development. In the US sponsorship construct, the social exchange in a mentoring relationship was seen as one of using influence on the mentee's (or protégé's) behalf in return for loyalty. In mainstream "pure" mentoring there was always an element of co-learning – to the extent that a measure of the success of a mentoring relationship was how much the mentor learned.

Reverse mentoring started as a means of enabling older executives to tap into the technical know-how of younger, more junior employees. The social exchange was then that the younger person would access the older person's insights into the politics of the organisation and learn how to navigate a career within them. Reverse mentoring rapidly morphed into relationships aimed at educating privileged senior people about the world as viewed by people from less privileged groups. The first applications of this type were gender based, then by culture/ racial identity and more recently in the context of cognitive diversity (for example, Asperger's).



Although there have been no large-scale studies of the impact of reverse mentoring, it does seem to have had a significant impact. The senior person in the learning dyad typically gains insights they can use in working with their direct reports and colleagues from similar backgrounds; the junior person typically learns how to work within the system that might previously have constrained them.

And there's the rub. Helping one executive become more diversity aware and or one junior employee learn how to 'fit in' to the culture has a limited effect. It doesn't change the system that created the problems in the first place. That's where **reciprocal mentoring** comes in. It's a partnership of **co-learning equals**, in spite of the difference in status outside the relationship. The impact of the mentoring conversations on each other is only part of the picture. Equally, if not more important is their capacity to change the system.

They do this firstly by exploring what they can do together as a pair, through their networks. One of the reasons that change is so difficult to achieve is that different networks and interest groups don't talk to each other. So, the reciprocal mentoring pair aim to foster those connections.

The key here is that systemic change isn't going to happen just because it is mandated from above; nor will it happen solely as a result of pressure from below. Change one part of the system and it will find ways to revert to where it was before. But when the top and the bottom work together, anything is possible!

The benefits of reciprocal mentoring

- Organisation-wide impact
- Identifies hidden and less obvious barriers to inclusion
- Enables top and bottom of the organisation to work together to bring about change
- Supports senior employees in becoming visible champions for diversity
- Supports junior employees in understanding and working with the organisational systems
- Empowers people to bring about significant change
- Enhances the organisation's reputation as an exemplary employer



Essential components of set up and design. . .

The starting point for planning mentoring programmes generally is the standards framework from **EMCC Global (the ISMCP)** at the website emccglobal.org. Developed over two decades, these set out the key provisions for a successful mentoring initiative. Many organisations have had their programmes assessed against the standards. This not only gives an external benchmark, but also provides an opportunity to evaluate each aspect of your programme in detail and compare it with international good practice.

For reciprocal mentoring, all the same standards apply, but there are multiple additional issues to consider. This section takes each of the core elements of the standards and expands on them from a reciprocal mentoring perspective.

Standard 1: Clarity of purpose



Mentoring programmes work best when everyone – direct participants and indirect stakeholders – understands what they are intended to achieve, on behalf of whom, and how this will be measured. In reciprocal mentoring, a purpose statement might look something like this:

We aim to create powerful learning partnerships that will exert a significant influence on how both individuals and the organisation as a whole bring about positive and lasting change in the context of diversity and inclusion. The success of the programme will be seen in:



Increased and demonstrable commitment at all levels in the organisation to recognising and addressing barriers to diversity and inclusion



Increased sense of belonging amongst less privileged colleagues



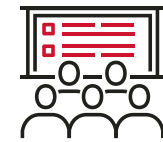
Retention of diverse talent



Releasing the creativity that comes from valuing difference

To ensure that the statement of purpose resonates widely, it is good practice to establish a steering group, representing various stakeholders. It's important to get the right balance – too small and it may not be sufficiently representative; too big and it may become bureaucratic.

Standard 2: Training and briefing

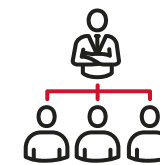


Training mentors and mentees, along with educating key stakeholders, such as line managers, has a massive positive impact on the value that both participants and the organisation derive from a mentoring programme. In a typical, well-designed mentoring programme, both mentors and mentees receive training in the basics of mentoring and how to support each other in managing the relationship effectively. Mentors tend to receive additional skills training in tools and techniques, comparable to foundation level skills in coaching. This applies equally in reverse mentoring, where the mentor is more junior in the organisation.

If participants in reciprocal mentoring already have experience as mentors in other contexts, then a simple refresher event will usually be enough to remind them of their roles and responsibilities. However, there are additional educational needs. In particular:



The skills of managing relative hierarchical power, to create a learning relationship of true equals.



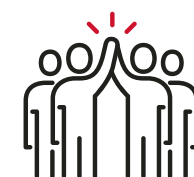
An understanding of organisational systems and how they constrain or liberate talent.



"Cultural intelligence" – knowing how to explore the world of someone from a different background and how to develop insights into one's own culture ("If you only know one culture, you don't know any!")



How to achieve the level of psychological safety and emotional disclosure to support each other in sometimes uncomfortable self-learning.



How to work together with other mentoring pairs to bring about positive systemic change.

This is a long way away from standard diversity training. It needs to be concrete, experiential and include tools and techniques that will most likely be very new to participants. So, it's important to allow sufficient time. This can be, for example, concentrated into an initial intensive day, followed by supported co-learning groups; or split into a number of two-hour webinars. If it is possible to bring people together physically, it becomes easier to practice tools and techniques.

A key question is whether to train all participants together, or to separate the junior and senior employees into separate training sessions. Factors to take into account include previous mentoring training, and the level of openness in the organisational culture. A pragmatic option may be to have some sessions all together and some apart.



In reciprocal mentoring, the key question is “What partnerships have most potential for achieving organisational change?”

Good practice includes creating a profile of the ideal participants from higher and lower hierarchical levels in the organisation. These should include both positive characteristics and “red flags”. Examples of the latter might be:

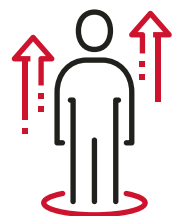
Reluctant participants, especially at senior levels, who will just “go through the motions” without truly engaging. An indicator here is to ask everyone considered to write a one-pager about the learning they hope to achieve and their aspirations for the relationship.

“Blame-shifters” – one reverse mentoring programme selected the loudest complainers amongst its black and minority ethnic employees, without taking into account other factors, such as their work performance. The programme fell into disrepute when other employees questioned why poor performers were being rewarded in this way and few of the junior mentors advanced in their careers. It’s important to distinguish between two psychological mindsets. In one, the person avoids taking responsibility for their own failings and seeks to blame external circumstances, such as their relationship with their boss. In the other, the person recognises their own contribution to what happens to them and has a realistic perspective on external influences. They take responsibility for developing their ability and demonstrating what they are capable of. On the criterion of creating change-inducing partnerships, the latter (inner directed) will be much more effective than the former (externally directed). Externally directed people may benefit from coaching targeted at helping them develop greater personal responsibility.

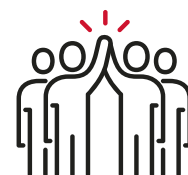
Standard 3: Selection and matching

In typical mentoring programmes, a common matching criterion is similarity of learning journey and experience between the mentor (looking back) and the mentee (looking forward). In reciprocal mentoring, it’s much more important to look at the differences in participants’ experience and the perspectives that arise from those differences.

Equally, in typical mentoring programmes, a starting point in selection and matching are the two questions:



Who will benefit most in their career or personal development from a mentoring relationship at this time?



How will this benefit the organisation?
(For example, in talent mobility, retention, or meeting diversity targets.)

Positive characteristics amongst both senior and junior employees might include:



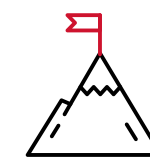
Openness and willingness to learn and be challenged



A level of clarity about the value of diversity in achieving both organisational goals and their team goals



Curiosity



Willingness to challenge the status quo



Ability to listen



Standard 4: Measurement and review

We deal with this in more detail in Section 6 of this Guide. Asking participants for feedback on their relationship is useful in prompting them to reflect upon and review how they are working together. In all mentoring programmes, it's important to check in with each pair to ensure they are making progress and have built a relationship of mutual trust and creative exploration. With reciprocal mentoring, it is especially important as the challenge of building a relationship of deep honesty and enquiry is so much greater. Both parties need to develop a high level of personal vulnerability and may need support in doing so.

Supervision has become more common in mentoring programmes in recent years, to support mentors in developing their skills, bring difficult issues for review and to ensure the safety and well-being of participants. In reciprocal mentoring, where the stakes are higher, the safeguarding issues give supervision an extra importance.

Here's an example:

The junior employee in the relationship pointed her executive colleague towards videos and articles that castigated “well-meaning, educated, white people” for not accepting responsibility for what previous generations had done, which had led to current inequities. The executive found this very stressful and resented being made to feel guilty. Bringing the issue to supervision enabled both to explore the relationship with intention and impact. A key question posed by the supervisor was “How helpful is guilt in bringing about the changes you both desire?” Replacing guilt with regret allowed both to move on and deepen their collaboration.

Supervision can be individual, in relationship pairs, or in larger groups. For practical reasons, including cost, issues should be raised first with the programme co-ordinator, who will then if needed refer the issue on to one or other form of supervision. Group supervision has the benefit that everyone learns for each other's experience – and it's cheapest. However, some issues may not be suitable to raise in a group environment.

Standard 5: High standard of ethics

It can be helpful to have a Statement of Ethics that defines the values underpinning both the initiative and the programme. This may be linked to the organisation's vision and values and to any diversity and inclusion policy. A key component is informing participants how to recognise when an espoused organisational value is not being demonstrated in practice and clarifying the steps required to bring such conflicts into the open for discussion. Once again, this is over and above what would happen in normal mentoring programmes,



Standard 6: Administration and support

Everyone involved in the programme should be clear about their roles and those of the programme manager and steering group. A project plan outlines what needs to be done, by whom and when – from preparation to final evaluation.

The steering group can be useful in many ways. In particular:

- Informal check-ins with every mentoring pair across the lifetime of the programme
- Identifying potential mentors and mentees
- Giving informal support to relationships that aren't working out
- General support for the programme co-ordinator

Having an easily accessible library of background materials participants can turn to for guidance reduces the burden on the programme coordinator and makes it more likely that participants will seek to enhance their knowledge and skill. An extensive library of practical briefings on mentoring generally is available from Coaching and Mentoring International (free for an introductory period). You may also be able to acquire resources from organisations participating in the 100 Companies Challenge – a network for sharing experience in reciprocal mentoring.

Other issues

There are many small factors that influence the quality of these co-learning relationships. Among the most common:

Where to meet?

This is always an issue, in terms of expression of relative power, but in reciprocal mentoring it is especially important to choose a neutral venue. Even on virtual media, the backgrounds chosen can have a positive or negative influence! One option is to choose together a virtual background (say, a woods) that encourages reflection; or to alternate between scenes that reflect each other's worlds.

Programme duration?

There are no norms for this but the practical reality is that most organisations want to see some practical outcomes within six months. During this period the level of support will be relatively intense, but thereafter the relationships can become much less formal.

Progamme Flow . . .

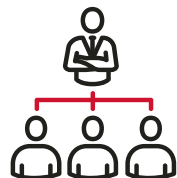


Stage 1: Commissioning

Description:

- Making the case to and getting sign off from the top team.
- Gaining the support in principle from stakeholders.

Typical Duration: 2 Months

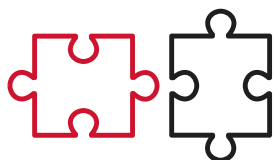


Stage 2: Set-up and planning

Description:

- Define programme purpose and scope
- Clarify links with other D&I and leadership initiatives
- Establish steering group
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Define criteria for selection and matching
- Design training in outline
- Agree broad measurements
- Engage external consultancy support, if needed

Typical Duration: 3 Weeks

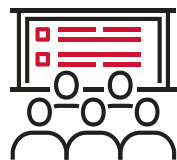


Stage 3: Selection and matching

Description:

- Market the initiative
- Identify and / or recruit participants
- Create pairings and amend, if necessary

Typical Duration: 3 Weeks



Stage 4: Initial training

Description:

- For all participants
- In person or virtual
- One intensive day or several smaller blocks

Typical Duration: 3 Weeks

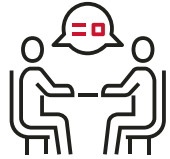


Stage 5: Start of relationships

Description:

- On-line resources

Typical Duration: Within 3 weeks of training



Stage 6: Ongoing support & trouble shooting

Description:

- Steering group check-ins with each pair
- Individual or pairs supervision, if needed

Typical Duration: After 4-6 weeks



Stage 7: Initial survey

Description:

- Relationship development
- Key themes

Typical Duration: After 8 to 12 weeks



Stage 8: Initial combined group supervision and identification of systemic issues to address

Description:

- First opportunity for pairs to come together formally to identify where to focus collective action

Typical Duration: After 8 to 12 weeks



Stage 9: Subsequent combined group supervision and identification of systemic issues to address

Description:

- Progressing action on the systemic issues identifiedo identify where to focus collective action

Typical Duration:

Monthly for at least two months



Stage 10: Programme evaluation

Description:

- Measurement of impact at both individual and corporate levels

Typical Duration:

Six months after relationships begin



03 Changing the systems...

To have a wider systemic impact, each mentoring pair captures and shares themes they have derived from their discussions. Both parties also engage with their own peers to identify topics to explore within the relationship. They bring both of these sources of data to a series of all-pairs sessions, which explore ways to influence the system collectively.

Among issues to consider are:

- What are the experiences we share that illustrate systemic issues?
- What data do we not yet have, which would help define inequalities and bias in the system?
- What are the quick wins we should focus on?
- How can we make effective use of the different “lived experiences” of working here?
- How can we identify and give “voice” to those who need it but don’t have it?
- How can we create enough positive role models to make change stick?
- What needs to change in the language we use?
- Who is not included but should be and how will we make them part of the solution?

These sessions should be at least two hours in duration, to achieve sufficient depth. They need to be professionally facilitated or supervised, not least to ensure an appropriate level of psychological safety.

Key dos and don’ts include:

- Do establish clear groundrules of confidentiality
- Do provide an analysis of the themes well in advance of the session, so people have a chance to prepare
- Do appoint volunteers to lead discussions on each key topic
- Don’t over-structure the discussions but do ensure they feel purposeful

The passion that people feel about some issues is a powerful engine for change. It can also detract from the quality of listening by all parties. As preparation for these collective sessions, the co-learners can beneficially explore together how to channel passion into rational, outcomes-focused dialogue when the pairs come together.



04 Measurement and review...

In standard mentoring arrangements, the impact of the individual relationships and the programme as a whole are relatively easy to measure. Outcomes for mentors and mentees fall into four categories:

- **Learning** – What do they now know that they didn't before? What do they see differently?
What can they do that they couldn't do before?
- **Career** – What progress have they made?
- **Enabling** – Do they, for example, have a clearer sense of career and personal direction?
A better personal development plan?
- **Emotional** – What has changed in their self-esteem, sense of self efficacy, self-confidence?

Outcomes for the organisation are typically built around programme objectives – for example, increased retention or reduction in re-offending rates.

In the context of reciprocal mentoring, measurement is much more complex. At a personal level, key measures will typically relate to:

- Specific and general learning relating to awareness of diversity, culture, power dynamics and how political systems in organisations work
- How participants have been able to apply those learnings to their own behaviour and work practices.

At an organisational level, we are measuring impact on the system. This might be evidenced by, for example:



A combination of hard and soft measures can be particularly powerful. So, for example, an issue identified in a large corporate was that many talented staff were reluctant to put themselves forward for promotion interviews, because they felt they were just there as a token presence. Co-mentoring pairs suggested a range of educational measures to ensure that this did not happen and designed several measures to assess panel interviews. Among the post-panel questions were;

- To what extent did you feel you belonged in the room?
- To what extent did the environment enable you to present yourself at your best?



05 The 100 Company Challenge ...

The 100 Company Challenge is a community specifically for organisations with existing or planned reciprocal mentoring programmes. Companies in the community commit to sharing experience and good practice within a closed Linked In Group. Opportunities to share and learn include quarterly Zoom discussion forums and themed discussions.

Membership of the Challenge is open to any organisation that commits to reciprocal mentoring and to contributing to the community. A grace period of 12 months is extended to organisations with reciprocal mentoring programmes in planning.

TO FIND OUT MORE, CONTACT
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