

Mentoring for professional growth

Mentoring, as a term and concept, is widely used in education circles, but it has different meanings in different contexts and these can be somewhat fuzzy. Often they are inconsistent with the real intent and concept of mentoring and more aligned with performance monitoring, measuring or supervision.

Mentoring in the workplace is the intentional pairing of a more experienced staff member with a colleague to achieve mutually agreed upon work goals and outcomes. In its truest sense, it is a partnership in which individuals join to share and support each others' professional growth and development.

Four main types of mentoring are recognised in the literature:

- Natural mentoring – a style that evolves from a personal affinity that builds over time. Usually a more experienced colleague helps a less experienced or new staff member and the relationship grows from mutual trust and respect.
- Situational mentoring – typically has a specific purpose and is short term, such as when a staff member is seeking career directions and advice.
- Supervisory mentoring – usually occurs in situations where a staff member is new to a role or otherwise requires support, guidance and assistance and sometimes performance management (some people argue that this is not really mentoring because the two roles – supervision and mentoring – are not compatible).
- Formal facilitated mentoring – structured programs, usually in an organisation or a professional body. Mentors and mentees are matched in a formal sense and they may go through a selection and matching process.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Becoming a mentor or seeking a mentor is not as straightforward as it might first seem. Simply assigning individuals to mentor-mentee roles may not work. There needs to be a good understanding of the roles and a genuine commitment to the task. New staff in an organisation, in particular, require more intentional and formal provision for mentoring – although informal mentoring may happen as well.

In setting up a mentoring situation or program, key questions that need to be explored from both sides include:

- What is the purpose of a mentoring program or process?
- What does it mean to be a mentor?
- What attitudes and skills are needed?
- What types of mentoring best suit the situation and the context?
- What responsibilities does the mentee have?

- What will the mentee gain from the mentoring role?
- What will the mentor gain from the mentoring role?

Mentors need to:

- listen carefully to concerns
- monitor progress
- be sensitive to gender, ethnic and cultural issues
- be respectful of professional needs, interests and work roles
- recognise and respect the significance of the role and its potential power
- provide feedback in a thoughtful and timely fashion.

While mentoring is nearly always viewed in a positive light, there are some potential pitfalls. In particular, there is a danger that mentoring maintains the status quo and constrains professional growth by being too inward-looking. As in all professional learning contexts, caution and wisdom is needed.

REMOTE MENTORING

With the high turnover and extensive shortages of staff in early childhood education and care, good mentoring programs are a vital strategy. In large, dispersed organisations where staff are isolated – such as in rural and remote early childhood settings – mentoring programs are crucial. While mentoring is typically considered a face-to-face activity, there are many mentoring programs that operate remotely, through Skype or other internet protocols. Where on-site person-person contact isn't possible, the internet can provide opportunities unimaginable a decade ago.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING

Supporting practitioners' work and their professional learning through mentoring can improve practice and build capacity to create rich early childhood programs. Mentoring helps to build a culture of support, reciprocity and collaboration and, as most successful professionals – whatever the industry – will say, good mentoring is critical to enhancing leadership skills and career options.

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