

How to be a mentor: TalkWise worksheet

Mentoring is a relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable one. But of course, there are good mentors and bad, and judging what help is needed, and when and how it should be offered, is a significant part of what makes the difference between the mediocre and the marvellous.

Thinking about mentoring as a conversational relationship, rather than as an individual activity or personal responsibility helps to keep the person being mentored very much in the centre of your attention. And with a conversational relationship in mind, it can help to consider what voices this conversation needs, from both the mentor and the mentee.

Before reading on, answer the following reflection questions.

Think first about the mentor. Which of the nine voices are essential to mentor effectively?

What contribution does each of these voices make to the conversational relationship?

Now think about the mentee's role. Which of the nine voices are most important for the mentee to use during mentoring conversations?

What contribution does each of these voices make?

What then does a mentoring conversation sound like? What voices does the conversation need from the mentor and the learner respectively?

For the mentor the Advise voice is central. To use it, the mentor needs to have a source of knowledge or know-how to draw on. It might come from formal education and training in a particular domain, but it can also come from experience, and in the case of mentoring that is the more important element. It's the added awareness, nuancing and finesse, that can't be obtained from a book or a course but can only be acquired through lived, first-hand experience, which is required to be a mentor rather than simply an instructor.

And here's the conundrum. Having great breadth and depth of know-how is one thing; being able to retrieve the relevant bit and make it available when needed is another. Much of an expert advisor's know-how is tacit, held but not available unless elicited by a particular question, occasion, problem or opportunity. It's a further reminder that mentoring is a conversational process. The mentee needs to provide the question, occasion, problem or opportunity to tap into the deep reservoirs of the mentor's knowledge. Which is not to say that the mentor won't be learning from the conversation too. Ideally they will.

It's a great mistake to underestimate the importance of the mentee's contribution. The mentee needs to have a reason for seeking mentoring, to help them acquire perspective and know-how for a new role, perhaps, or while they complete a qualification or carry out a project.

The mentee therefore needs to be an active rather than a passive participant in the process. Which voice or voices they actually use is less important than their active involvement. The mentee could:

- Advocate: 'I don't feel as if I'm being stretched in the job I'm in.'
- Articulate: 'The situation is that I've been given the feedback that I...'
- Probe: 'What would you think, if someone said that to you?'
- Challenge: 'Surely it's not right to disregard people's ambitions like that?'

The voice the mentee uses will give the mentor an insight into how the mentee is thinking, and how the mentor might usefully respond.

It's not the mentor's role merely to offer generalised pieces of advice, far less to reminisce about their own career. That is anecdotage, not mentoring. The advice should respond specifically to the challenge or situation identified, providing options for the mentee based on the mentor's experience.

What then is the difference between mentoring and coaching? They revolve around different voices. Coaching operates primarily from Inquiry, because it seeks to cultivate coachees' ability to think for themselves, to manage their own process of noticing, exploring, reviewing and deciding. Mentoring operates primarily from Advice, because it seeks to provide inputs to the mentee's thinking, drawn from the mentor's close familiarity with a particular area. If coaching is designed to equip learners to develop their own capacity to work with uncertainty, mentoring is designed, more directly, to help to reduce uncertainty for them.

Around its hub of the advising voice, the mentor may have occasion to use any or all of the other voices. The mentor might:

- Advocate: 'My personal view on the matter is..'
- Challenge: 'The big problem with that approach is...'

- Direct: 'You simply can't do that. Let me tell you why.'
- Diagnose: 'If what you're saying is right, what other implications could we anticipate?'

Again, any of the voices might have a useful part to play in a mentoring conversation.

Review the following table which provides examples of how each voice might sound within a mentoring conversation. Then, use the space to add your own, additional example(s) for each voice.

What the different voices sound like in a mentoring conversation

The Mentor		The Mentee	
Essential voices	sound like	Essential voices	sound like
INQUIRE	How do you think I might be able to help you?	INQUIRE	What would you do, if you were in my place?
PROBE	What do you think that means in practice?	PROBE	What exactly do you mean, when you say...?
ADVISE	May I suggest that you...	ARTICULATE	Speaking objectively, here's the position that I find myself in...
		ADVOCATE	Speaking personally, I do/don't feel comfortable about that, because...
Useful voices	sound like	Useful voices	sound like
DIAGNOSE	How do you think that relates to what you've already seen?	DIAGNOSE	Let me talk you through the problem/opportunity as I see it and the questions it raises.

The Mentor		The Mentee	
ARTICULATE	Let me see if I understand. What you seem to be finding is...	CHALLENGE	I don't see why you're so sure that would be helpful.
ADVOCATE	My personal view, and I can tell you what it's based on, is....	EVALUATE	Let me go through the advantages and disadvantages of what you're suggesting...
CHALLENGE	But don't you think there might be other ways of thinking about that?	DIRECT	I can tell you what's a 'must-have' or a 'no-go' for me personally.
DIRECT	You can't do what you're proposing. Let me tell you why not.	ADVISE	If I could suggest what I'd find most helpful for this conversation, it would be...
EVALUATE	Let's weigh up what you're proposing. Tell me what you see as the pros and cons and I'll add any other considerations that occur to me.		