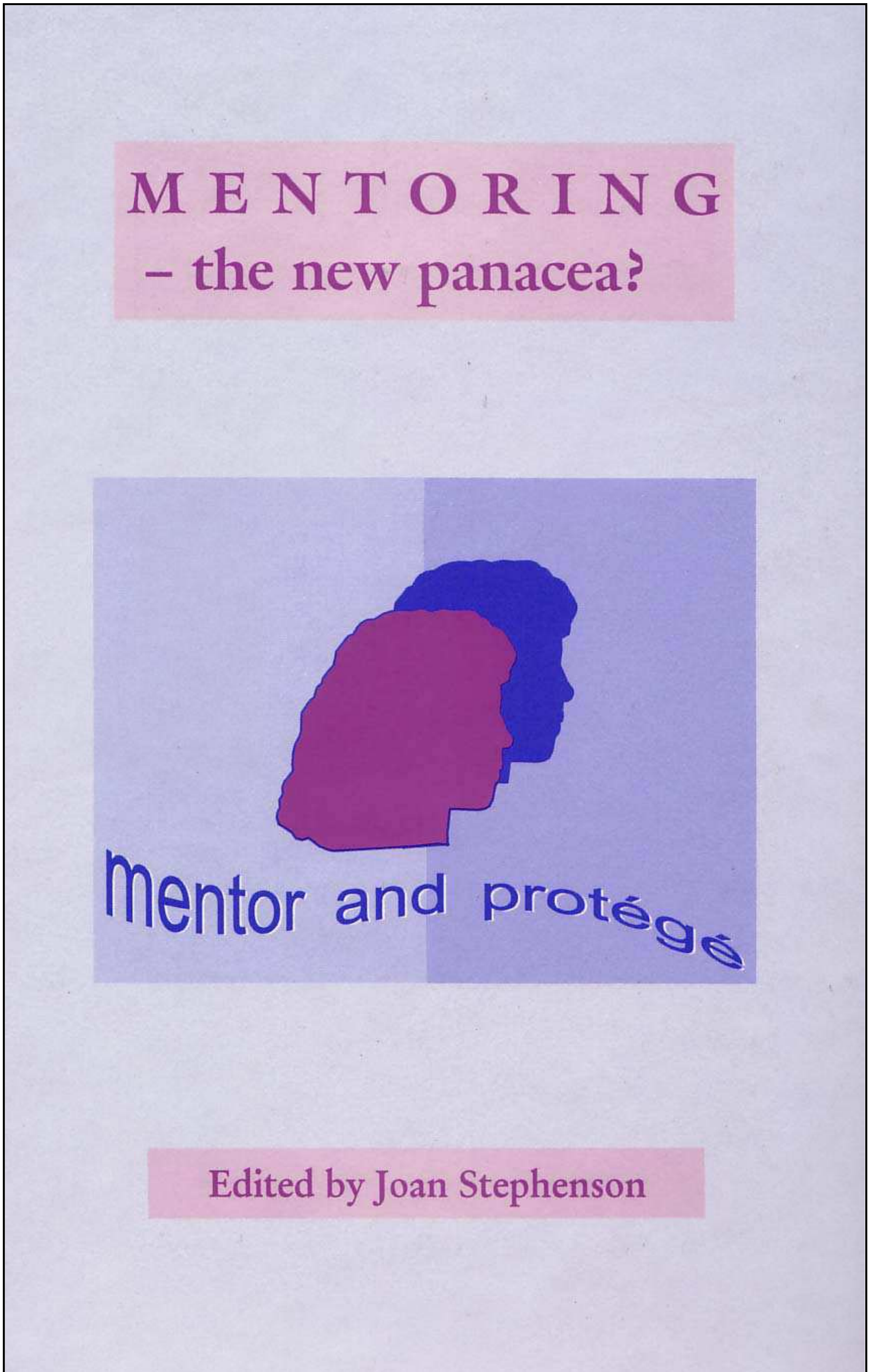

MENTORING
– the new panacea?

mentor and protégé

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Mentoring - clarifying goals in context

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The aim of this chapter is to clarify some issues relating to the term mentoring and to offer some methods for developing further clarifications. The main focus is the goals of the various stakeholders involved in schemes of mentoring in a range of organisations. The term context will be used at a number of levels: first to distinguish between the different host organisations which provide context for particular schemes, second to illuminate some of the decisions made in particular schemes, third to highlight the immediate context of mentor and mentee. The training context where mentors come together will also be considered at times.

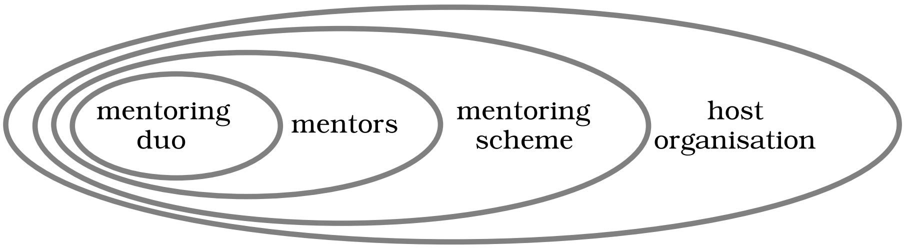

Figure 1: Contexts influencing mentoring

The overall argument is that the more effectively goals have been clarified in each of the respective contexts, the more mentoring is likely to become realistic and effective.

This chapter is written from recent experience in three contexts:
- a scheme for ethnic minority staff in a major commercial organisation
- a range of schemes for experienced, newly qualified and beginner teachers
- some projects for mentoring school pupils

Terminology in mentoring regularly raises difficulty. For some the term “mentor” carries connotations of an import from the USA, for others it has connotations of authority-based guidance. Finding a word to describe the other person in a mentoring duo is even more difficult. The term “protégé” has a ring of paternalistic sponsorship. In this chapter I will occasionally use the term “mentee”, fully recognising its clumsy construction, and the comment made to me recently; “I wouldn’t put the fact that I’ve been a mentee on my curriculum vitae, whereas I would state if I’d been a mentor”. Despite this, the term has some use in keeping a focus on the core process: mentoring.

A need to focus on goals

A recurring concept and theme throughout this chapter will be that of goals and goal clarification. The aim is to highlight the proactive aspects in mentoring, as well as to portray by contrast the possible inactive situations which mentoring can become.

Before focusing on the content of particular goals, there are benefits for each stakeholder of adopting this form of analysis:

- for the mentee:
  Assuming that they are in the mentoring scheme voluntarily, and have their own wish to progress, then the development of goals is a core process in development (Ford and Lerner, 1992): it forms the roots of social competence (Ford, 1982). and is a core element in optimal experiences, making feedback and learning enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).
- for the mentor:
  Most mentors wish to achieve something through their work, and experience a sense of contribution. Clear goals will support their sense of professional satisfaction and help them clarify important boundaries in their work.
- for the managers of the mentoring scheme:
  A clarified notion of the goals of a mentoring scheme will offer its managers clearer ways of providing guidance and training to all parties involved, as well as the possibility of demonstrating effectiveness to others (a factor which should not be forgotten in a tough climate for careers in human resource development)
- and for the organisation which has sponsored a mentoring scheme:
  A clear view of purpose will increase the likelihood of achieving some of the possible goals which are outlined below, and make possible a reasonable evaluation.

The alternative scenario is one which I regularly meet:

- for the mentee:
  Mentoring without agreed goals can become a tiresome imposed activity which is just as likely to raise anxiety and frustration (since the routes to progress are mystified) and to add demand in what is already a busy life.
- for the mentor:
  Mentoring of the non-proactive sort has been described to me as a sort of “ritual dance” with little real engagement. This scenario usually continues unless and until some difficulty arises, such as a risk of failure in a forthcoming task or assessment, or of conflict between others in the organisation who relate to the mentee.
- for the managers of the scheme:
  The interpersonal complexity which mentoring utilises and aims to promote can generate a pot pourri of issues to handle. Without some goals to act as the principle for leadership, these can overtake the manager’s time and efforts.
- for the organisation sponsoring the scheme:
  Mentoring of the nebulous variety can be a questionable investment of time and money. It may be useful to consider what other organisational provision could meet the goals. For example, in organisational attempts to tackle stress at work, it may be less effective to make interpersonal provision for sufferers than to reduce the workplace elements which engender stress.

Also in any scheme which explicitly uses interpersonal relationships as its vehicle, the possibility is that it may regress or degenerate into the unfocused - what one schools inspector characterised as the worst case scenario for tutoring - all “cuddle and muddle”, or what I sometimes characterise as “interpersonal soup”.

The range of goals for which mentoring is advocated

The title of this volume suggests that some are taking mentoring as a panacea. There are occasions when mentoring seems to be offered as a solution to diverse and complex problems: the under-representation of women and black employees in organisations, the theory-practice tension in professional education, and the disaffiliation of older pupils from school.

On its own, mentoring is unlikely be the solution to major difficulties, although as part of a wider intervention it may play an important part (Jackson, 1993).

Much depends on whether appropriate and realistic goals have been developed in a contextual way. This is by no means the general case in my experience. It is possible to hear any (or even more than one) of the following views, phrased here in a general form, in people's conversations about mentoring:

Omnipotent goals	it'll solve our problems
Romantic goals	it'll make the place friendlier
Conversion goals	it'll get them settled in, seeing things our way
Amorphous goals	it's a good thing to have a mentoring scheme
Insular goals	it'll help people become more self aware
Antidote goals	the rest of the place is an interpersonal minefield

Rather than topple into one of these pitfalls, it seems appropriate to clarify what sorts of goals are realistically achievable. This process needs to start at the largest level or context, where the greatest distortion can occur - the organisation itself. A view of mentoring, often unstated and unanalysed, can be found widespread among members of an organisation, and influenced the setting up of a scheme. In this sense, without taking an organisation to be a reified body distinct from its personnel, the largest level does have an observable and important reality.

In the different activities which are nowadays described under the term mentoring, there are different goals which may be being pursued

Three types of mentoring, defined by organisational goal

Organisations which set up and resource mentoring schemes seem to have one of the following three purposes:

"Mentoring for organisational entry"

This involves a focus on new-comers to the organisation, and linking them to experienced members. The goal is that the new-comers may learn the organisation and how to get the most from it. Examples include linking student peers at induction to school/college, the mentoring of newly qualified teachers, mentoring of newly-arrived members to an organisation be it school, higher grades of the civil service, or others.

"Mentoring for organisational advancement"

Here selected members of the organisation are linked to people in other locations, usually in the same organisation but with other experience. The goal is that the selected participants learn about the way of advancing in the organisation, its career paths, modes of success, and so on. Examples include various 'Fast Track' schemes in commercial and service organisations for selected employees bound for management roles, positive action schemes for under-represented groups, and perhaps mentoring of selected school pupils who are bound for higher exam grades.

Interesting hybrids can occur, for example the mentoring of headteachers. By linking a headteacher to another more experienced head teacher in the same local area (but clearly not in the same school), the goal may be organisational advancement for the leading professional but with the necessity to chose a mentor outside the organisation. But it is also mentoring for organisational entry evidenced by the fact that "old" heads do not receive such provision.

"Mentoring for organisational exit/transition"

In this type, members of an organisation are linked to other relevant people outside, with the goal that they may learn how best to handle the transition to that next stage. Examples include the mentoring of older school students by people in business/ professions/ community, mentoring for career development in the shrinking organisation perhaps linked to “out-placement”, and the newly increasing possibility of retirement mentoring.

Two points are worth making about the way the above three types have been described. The first is that they are defined by a mentee’s position in an organisation. This is deliberate in order to promote some clarifications. However it does perhaps leave out of the picture the very informal mentoring which may occur outside an organisation (but which nevertheless may be serving one of the above functions). The second point is that the core goal for each type is some sort of learning. Which sort of learning, whose learning, whose agenda and whose control then become key issues in developing good practice.

A common question about different types of mentoring is “are there skills common to all, or are there particular skills in the different types?” As an interpersonal activity, skills in developing appropriate communication and climate are fundamental. These include skills in responding, paraphrasing, summarising and in clarifying boundaries in communication. However, this is only the basis on which other skills need to be developed, and it is important to clarify from the outset that mentoring is not counselling: in counselling the task is to follow the person’s agenda, including their personal agenda, whereas in mentoring there is another agreed agenda linked to the organisational goals (Watkins and Whalley, 1993). It is common to portray skills as a hierarchy (Hargie, et al., 1987), with each level built on and making use of the previous levels. Thus in figure 2 level two involves developing the agenda and supporting progress. This may include mapping out issues and connections, supporting someone in active learning, discussing goals and experiments. When this process progresses effectively, ripples and repercussions often develop in the context. Skills of utilising this are described at the next level, and include two-way or multi-way learning, where feedback and challenge play a part, and wider communication is required for organisational learning and for handling any conflicts which arise. The fourth level is critical for developing progression and for handling difficulty: it is having an integrated view of mentoring, which supports sequencing and structuring, and the changing of plans. This is also the level at which an integrated view of mentor and context occurs, with explicit tuning to the culture and self-monitoring and review. Finally the skill of clarifying and communicating an overall vision of mentoring, which also serves as a basis for making value decisions, completes this view.

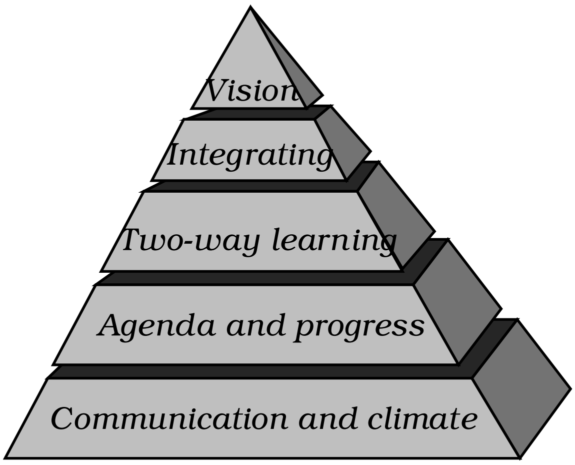

Figure 2: a hierarchy of skills in mentoring

This analysis of skills supports the finding that mentoring is complex (McIntyre and Haggar, 1994) and contrasts with the common assumption that anyone can do it (Phillips-Jones, 1989).

Issues arising from these three types, using an organisational analysis:

Given the view of mentoring located in its organisational context, the next step is to develop issues from an organisational analysis. Owens (Owens, 1987) suggested that headings of the following sorts could be useful:

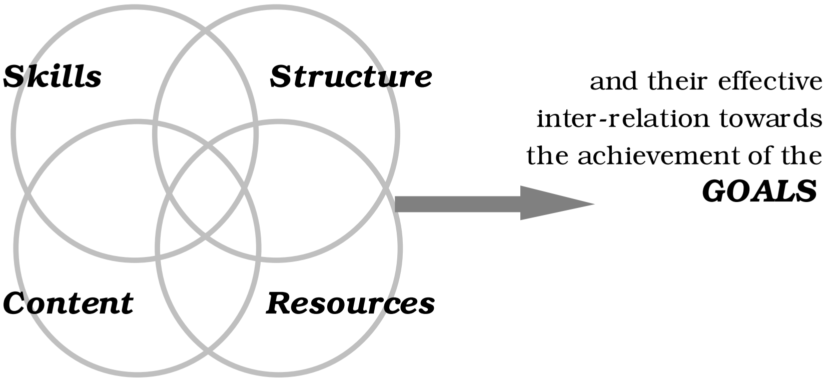
Skills
Structure
Content
Resources
and their effective inter-relation towards the achievement of the
GOALS

Figure 3: Headings for an organisational analysis

The skills to be employed, the content of the mentoring, structure of people within the organisation and resources of time money and communication devoted to a scheme all inter-relate, and may support each other toward as effective an achievement of the goals as is possible.

These headings will now be used to highlight various issues for each of the three mentoring types defined above.

Mentoring for organisational entry

Goals. A key issue is whether the newcomer is seen as an active learner of the context into which they have just arrived. Different positions on this will make the hallmark difference between mentoring which “tells” the newcomer about the organisation and how it supposedly works, and mentoring which encourages them to actively seek out solutions to problems and reflect on them with their mentor. The former position is adopted by those who believe in the “socialisation” of an individual into an organisation, and may be associated with passive induction programmes. However there is little evidence that socialisation in any form is usefully seen as a passive process.

Content. The content for organisational entry raises a core consideration: the degree to which present members of the organisation (from whom the mentors will be selected) have the conceptualisation and language to describe the organisation, and the flexibility to allow that an organisation is necessarily composed of a range of perspectives. The more the organisation is one which reviews itself and develops such language, the more this form of mentoring will be successful.

Skills. The skills of relationship-building are probably highlighted for mentoring with newcomers. A pitfall is to over-emphasise these skills to the point that the goal seems to be one of making friendships rather than utilising a relationship for learning on an agreed agenda. The skill of keeping a balance among the range of perspectives on an organisation will support the novice in becoming their own person in this new context.

Structure. Mentors are often selected and allocated before the mentee arrives. In this case the criteria for selection of mentors will probably again fall back to the people who are effective at building relationships, and the possibilities for matching mentors with some important aspects of the mentee as a learner are not utilised. Given the importance of matching, it may be worth considering a somewhat later start for the formal scheme, until the managers have some starting knowledge of the newcomers and they have made first steps.

Technology. Many schemes for entry are volunteer-based: the time allocations are therefore sometimes hidden. Communication channels and support networks for mentors can be under-developed, so that the degree to which the organisation learns from the mentoring may be limited.

Mentoring for organisational advancement

Goals. For one person to help another learn the progression routes through an organisation, they must incorporate into their approach a recognition of diversity and change in these routes. Whether it is how to gain promotion or how to pass an exam, the evidence is that different learners can be successful in different ways. Also, the ways of achieving progress are undergoing change: paternalistic organisations are increasingly rare so that portfolio jobs and the contract culture are more prevalent. These require different skills. And in educational organisations which still show their roots in the industrial age, the message “work hard for success” has to give way to the “work smart” message of the information age. As organisations change and hierarchies flatten, mentoring may grow more popular.

Content. The content of mentoring for advancement has to include the points above, and focus on the learning and skill development they demand. In so doing it engages many core aspects of mentee and mentor as persons - their beliefs, ambitions and styles. It seems that the agenda of mentoring may start without an explicit recognition of these aspects but will not continue effectively without them being thought through as part of the process. Someone’s learning style repertoire and their interpersonal style repertoire have significant impact on their approach to learning in an organisation, and the mentoring needs to be tuned to these in depth.

Skills. The fundamental relationship skills have to be used to create and develop an appropriate learning agenda. This needs to be explicit and agreed, covering the new areas for learning as well as the style which will be most effective. Progress can sometimes be hampered by interpersonal and motivational dynamics: “blocks”, self-defeating processes or avoidance. On these occasions the skills of supportive challenging need to be part of the mentor’s repertoire. As the content develops, the agenda becomes more complex , and the skill of continuing to work in a structured and developmental way is needed. This often takes mentors in to areas which they may not have imagined at the outset.

Structure. Mentoring for organisational advancement raises many issues surrounding selection - of both mentees and mentors. Almost by definition such schemes make their provision for a chosen minority, and this sets off a range of dynamics in the remainder of personnel. For example positive action schemes can trigger jealousies among other staff, mentoring for beginner teachers can lead to the destructive view that it’s not needed for the experienced, mentoring for selected school students can provoke “why me?” reactions. On the occasions when these reactions occur it can be beneficial to hold on to the clarified organisational purpose of the scheme, so that for example a scheme for black and ethnic minority staff is not instituted in order to favour some individuals but for the organisation to achieve major goals of representation and equity.

Selection of mentors is sometimes not handled in an explicit manner: this seems a lost opportunity for the organisation to indicate some of the skills and orientations it values. From the position adopted here it follows that mentors need a range of experience in the organisation, the ability to detach themselves from their own experience and to learn from it, and the skills of facilitating action learning in another.

Perhaps as important as effective selection is effective matching of mentor and mentee. A recent experience identified the following dimensions in a conversation between scheme managers discussing matches:

organisational role
organisational sector
cultural and racial identity
career background
learning style
view of mentoring
educational background
interpersonal style

(see Ashton, et al., forthcoming)

When organisational advancement is the goal, role relations between mentor and mentee are regularly a focus of attention. In general people come to the view that mentors cannot also be line managers of the same person. This is in line with what Conway (this volume) identifies as the reporting barrier. Certainly my experience in busy under-managed organisations such as secondary schools is that the structure of role relations in general is so unclear that many mentors' concerns centre on clarifying their relative position, or at worst dealing with managerial conflict.

Technology. The extent to which time is formally allocated for mentoring meetings seems to have great impact on whether any meetings take place, which is of course key to the mentoring taking off. Availability of communication channels and their ease of use has significant impact, especially in the large organisation.

Mentoring for organisational exit/transition

Goals. Transition and exit can provoke various anxieties as well as feelings of rejection or loss. The task of mentoring in this context is to help someone make a positive transition without denying any possible difficulties: it is to make leaving more manageable. For examples of older pupils leaving school this may not be as problematic as for examples of employees retiring, when core aspects of identity may be at risk. Again the acceptance of diversity is important: different people handle transitions in markedly different ways. In examples where the mentee is making a transition to the sort of organisation where the mentor is at present, the risk of the mentor "owning" their mentee has to be guarded against.

Content. Moving from one identity to another can stimulate significant learning, not only about the situations but also about oneself and how previous transitions have been handled (Hopson, et al., 1988). A wide ranging focus may well be needed which may include issues of motivation and direction, change of lifestyle at a developmental moment as well as the practicalities of the new situation.

Skills. Mentors' skills particularly need to incorporate a proactive and welcoming approach to change. This is not always easy to find or to identify. An every-day response to someone involved in a difficult transition is to subtly offer sympathy, rather than to accept that change is real and there may be many useful things to learn from experiencing it.

Structure. Selection of mentors is a key factor in success, and this needs to be clearly linked to the goals. In examples where goals have been confused or conflicted, such as school pupils being mentored by local businesses, by more distant professionals and by members of the local community, all in the same scheme, the gains have been considerably reduced. Selecting mentors from organisations other than that of the scheme managers raises extra complexities.

Technology. A key issue is whether the organisation which mentees are leaving will invest in their transition. The wish to engage the resources of the organisation they are moving to is understandable, even though in some circumstances the result is a confusion with the selection process.

Clarifying the above with scheme managers

Perhaps it is in the way of things that scheme managers tend to over-state the goals and possible outcomes of mentoring schemes. Sometimes personal careers are invested. But it is all too simple to over-sell a good idea and thereby to start the process of disappointing the participants. For anyone advising on the setting up of a scheme it can be beneficial to press for a realistic statement of the goals to be achieved, alongside a recognition of the other organisational aspects which will have impact on their achievement.

Mentoring for organisational entry is highly dependent on the presence of a positive climate in the organisation. Mentoring for organisational advancement is dependent on the health of the general support and procedures for succeeding in the organisation. Mentoring for organisational transition depends on the quality of the organisation's relations across its boundaries.

Clearly a scheme manager will not additionally take on responsibility for these additional broad matters, but it can be important to identify these areas at an early stage. They are likely to recur at a later stage if mentors' skills of two-way learning are operative, and it can be useful for scheme managers to anticipate how and to whom they will feed back such learning about the organisation.

Clarifying goals with mentors

Analysis of appropriate goals of a mentoring scheme is an important ingredient in mentor training and support. It is one of the early themes to discuss, and one which needs returning to at various stages, particularly when interpersonal processes take the practice into areas beyond reasonable boundaries.

Simple devices to support such discussion can include a prioritising exercise with nine possible goal statements which a group of mentors are asked to agree a priority ordering to the statements, giving one top priority, two second, ... - these can be laid out in a diamond nine. As an example, a group of experienced teachers who were mainly involved in a mentoring scheme for newcomers to their school, made the following priorities:

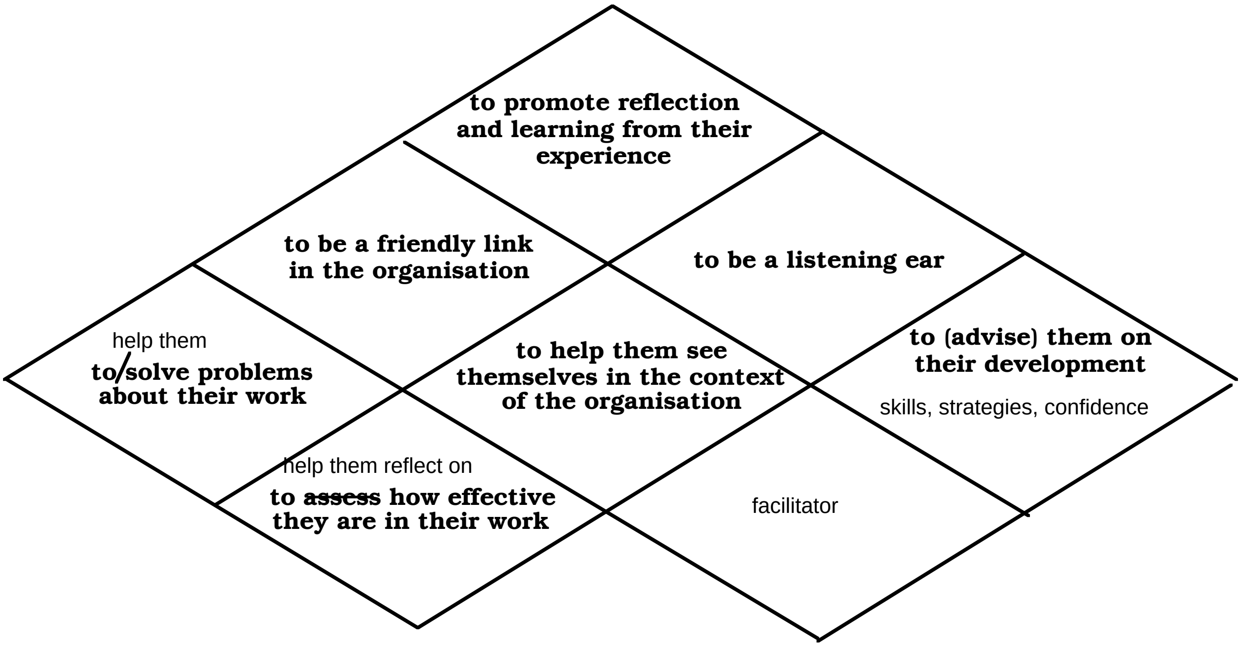
to promote reflection and learning from their experience
to be a friendly link in the organisation
to be a listening ear
help them
to solve problems about their work
to help them see themselves in the context of the organisation
to (advise) them on their development
skills, strategies, confidence
help them reflect on
to ~~assess~~ how effective they are in their work
facilitator

Figure 4: Results from mentors' prioritising of goal statements

Various modifications were made to the provided statements, and two items had been rejected from the diamond: “to help plan career development” and “to be an advocate for them in the organisation”.

The results allowed a wider discussion of the purposes of the scheme, what ways it would have impact, and the proactive aspects of the mentor’s role. Perhaps it would be feasible to ask the same group to do the activity at a later stage, after experience and /or training, to look for any significant differences. It could also be feasible to ask a group of mentees to examine their views

Clarifying goals in the mentoring duo

Mis-perceptions of where the two partners are going and what they expect of each other can be a source of real difficulty, which can be avoided by clarifying goals and expectations in the first place. Asking the partners to discuss with each other what they want to get out of this series of exchanges that have been set up, and to agree some priorities can be effective.

Activities may be useful, for example when mentor and mentee come to a review meeting, or in one of their own meetings

- Sentence completion activities can provide good starters. Partners are each asked to complete each item several times until a series of expectations and goals emerge, and to write down the key points.
  As your mentor I aim to ...
  Over the next year I expect to ...
  I think it’s important that we ...
  My learning needs in this situation are ...

  As a mentee I aim to ...
  Over the next year I expect to ...
  I think it’s important that we ...
  My learning needs in this situation are ...
- From sentence completion or from brain-storming, mentors and mentees could generate a number of possible goals. Together they could write each one on a card and use the cards to discuss and modify the statements, as a step towards creating a jointly prioritised list.

In this process it can be important to recognise that goals may be short-term, long-term, or continuous. These may need to be thought through separately, so the mentor and mentee can divide the statements into:
those that can be met from the start
those that can be achieved later
those that will need to be looked at on some later date

Closing thoughts

Increasingly it makes sense to me that many mentors have very limited views of their goals. In the present state of the art, this is sometimes because training support has not been built in, but it also reflects something of the organisational context of mentoring. To illustrate, teachers inhabit a role with multiple role-partners and often with contrasting expectations from each: this situation of role-strain leads to the following typical coping strategies:
a. isolate performance from view
b. resort to a romantic language describing the job in terms of intuition etc. (Jackson, 1977)

The parallels with how teachers talk about mentoring now strike me:
a. mentoring has low visibility in the organisation
b. mentors resort to describing the process as "support" and the like.

It also makes sense to me that the key context of the mentoring duo can attract a multiplicity of goals from the many stakeholders in the context. A response which therefore turns potential difficulties and conflicts into an amorphous view of goals seems an understandable strategy.

Following the analysis in this chapter, it becomes possible to clarify appropriate goals and recognise important influences in the organisational context. Both these elements will help us past the panacea position so well described by Freedman:

> "Fervour without infrastructure is dangerous at this program level because it leads to disappointed mentors and youth. It is dangerous at the policy level because it plays into the unfortunate tendency to lunge at new and glossy strategies, glorify them over the short term and discard them as they tarnish. More disturbing is the way fervour without infrastructure feeds the recurring appetite for voluntaristic panaceas, idealized in isolation from institutions, proposed as quick, cheap and easy. As such, mentoring serves to distract attention from deep-seated problems that cannot be simply marketed away." (Freedman 1993)

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