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# What is mentoring?

**Mentor: men' tor, n. a wise counsellor (Greek)**

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# What is mentoring?

The word “mentor” originally comes from Greek mythology. Before setting out on an epic voyage, Odysseus entrusted his son, Telemachus, to the care and direction of his old and trusted friend Mentor (who was, in fact, the Goddess Athene in disguise!).

Modern mentoring originated in the concept of apprenticeship where an older, more experienced, individual passed down knowledge of how a task was done and how to operate in the commercial world.

Today, mentoring can be described as a partnership between two people with different levels of experience. A mentor provides support and development, tackling issues and blockages identified by the mentee. It is a positive, developmental activity in which a mentee can ask apparently naïve questions in an unthreatening atmosphere, and the mentor helps them grasp the wider significance of whatever is happening.

Having a mentor can be one of the most powerful developmental relationships a person will experience. Mentoring taps a basic human instinct most people share – the desire to pass on their learning to help other people develop and fulfil their potential. There are many examples of ‘mentoring’ relationships in different cultures, for example the Guru in India; the Master in China; the Village Elder in Africa or Tribal Elder in North America.

The fundamental principles of mentoring are that it is:

## A confidential partnership

Between two people, based upon trust. The mentor offers a safe environment for the mentee to discuss work-related issues and explore solutions to challenges.

## Off-line

Mentors are typically outside the mentee’s immediate team and not in their reporting line; this facilitates confidentiality, as well as offering a fresh perspective.



## **A positive developmental activity**

The primary focus is on the less tangible skills that enable individuals to operate effectively as achievers and leaders. Mentors also offer insights into the ways the organisation works, how informal networks operate and how they think about the challenges and opportunities which mentees encounter.

Mentees provide the main drive behind the relationship, setting the direction for meeting their development needs.

## **Built on understanding and trust**

Sharing views and ideas builds trust. Both mentors and mentees share a common benefit of developing a strong two-way learning relationship.

## **Develops self-reliance and self-confidence**

These are the overall aims of mentoring. Mentors are not there to give direct advice or to sort out problems for the mentee: their role is to highlight issues and to help plan ways through them. Through skilful questioning, they clarify the mentee's perspective, while bringing an additional view to bear on the issue. In doing this they help the mentee to build self-reliance and self-confidence — thus realising his/her own potential.