Mentoring: why a targeted approach delivers better outcomes

Briefings

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Amanda Brown explores the benefits of different kinds of mentoring relationships.

Mentoring is widely recognised as a valuable tool for professional development. However, it is often treated as a formal, long-term commitment without sufficient clarity around purpose or expected outcomes. In practice, mentoring is most effective when it is focused, time-bound and aligned to a specific development need, objective or career transition.

A common misconception is that individuals should have a single mentor who provides broad guidance over an extended period. In reality, a portfolio approach is often more effective. Different mentors can offer expertise in distinct areas, recognising that no one individual is likely to meet every development need. It is also important to distinguish mentoring from coaching. While coaching typically

focuses on facilitating self-reflection, mentoring draws on the mentor’s experience and subject matter expertise.

Effective mentoring relationships are usually established to address a clearly defined gap. For example, a senior leader stepping into a new role may seek guidance from someone with direct experience of that position. In one case, a newly appointed CEO who lacked access to relevant role models within her organisation approached an established business leader for short-term mentoring support. The relationship was focused and time-limited, but delivered significant value during a critical stage of her transition.

Similarly, mentoring can be used to develop specific skills. A professional looking to improve their writing, for example, may benefit from targeted input from an experienced author or communicator over a defined period. In both scenarios, clarity of purpose helps to ensure that discussions remain structured and progress can be measured.

Without this clarity, mentoring relationships risk becoming unfocused and less impactful. Establishing the rationale for the relationship at the outset – why this mentor, why now and with what objective – helps to maintain direction and maximise value.

That said, there remains a role for less structured mentoring. Individuals at an earlier stage in their careers, or those considering a change in direction, may not yet have a clearly defined objective. In such cases, mentoring can support exploration and help to shape future goals, rather than addressing a specific gap.

Another key consideration is duration. While some mentoring relationships evolve over time, many of the most effective arrangements are relatively short and concentrated. Impact is more closely linked to relevance and timing than to length of engagement.

Within organisations, mentoring can also play a broader role beyond individual development. It can increase visibility, strengthen professional networks and support career progression by connecting individuals with more experienced colleagues. These benefits can be particularly valuable in larger or more complex organisations.

For those considering mentoring, a practical starting point is self-assessment. Identifying areas for development, whether through feedback or personal reflection,

can help to determine the type of support required. The next step is to identify individuals with relevant expertise and approach them with a clear and specific request.

A final barrier is often reluctance to initiate the relationship. Concerns about rejection can discourage individuals from seeking support. However, many experienced professionals are willing to share their knowledge if they are able to. Even where an approach is declined, there is no disadvantage in having asked.

In summary, mentoring is most effective when it is intentional, targeted and aligned to a defined objective. A focused approach enables individuals to accelerate their development, build relevant skills and navigate key career transitions more effectively.

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