



The partnership is transforming knowledge

Columnist: Mandy Lamkin, Enrich Australia director

I first came across the word mentor when my membership certificate arrived for the Argonauts Club, an icon of fun for the generations of Australian kids that can remember when wireless meant radio. Every club member was known not by their actual name, but by a ship and number, and mine, I discovered that happy day, was Mentor 49. I remember it well because ever since the word has represented a concept that essentially turns the world.

Mentoring epitomises the giving-to-receive-to-give ideal, which, contrary to the view of pessimists, still remains strong in our communities. Human nature compels us to connect with each other and satisfaction is greatest when sharing produces change for the better. Perhaps it has even more meaning at the moment with so many people requiring more support than usual.

Professional or informal mentoring happens every day in many offices and cafes on every continent. Local organised programs for finding or becoming a mentor are not hard to unearth via the Internet; some are attached to charities and community programs or, in the case of professional-to-professional mentoring, may come at a cost equivalent to fees for a series of coaching sessions.

What you charge for mentoring depends on the motivation for being involved: many mentors give their time for free because they believe the currency of wisdom has unassailable value. They have reached a level in their field where they believe what they have learned is more valuable if shared, with the added potential of it forming part of their legacy. Instead of seeking remuneration, a mentor may instead choose a mentee whose aims resonate with their own interests or whose potential they can augment in specific ways. Author of the soon-to-be-published guide to effective mentoring, *Espresso Mentoring*, Marie Farrugia says: "In my research the mentors, for the most part, talk about an opportunity to 'pay it forward'; to assist the next generation and return some of the guidance they have received and learned

through their own experiences on their journey to success."

But what of the tangible benefits to someone who chooses to take on the role? Farrugia says the mentor can benefit in a number of ways: they learn from experiencing the journey again through fresh eyes, and even witness new approaches and twists to an existing methodology that they can apply in their own work. She adds: "By mixing with new input via the mentee's situation, they create a new paradigm. And while they may not be as experienced or successful, the mentee potentially has a network of their own that may expand that of the mentor."

In terms of the gains in more personal areas, professionals who have moved from client-facing roles can use mentoring to reconnect with some 'idle' interpersonal skills, such as active listening, storytelling and proactive empathy. In addition, mentors may find they need means of developing stronger leadership proficiencies in both themselves and their mentee. They can gain insights into the challenges of generations and genders other than their own, and discover how to discuss accountability and responsibility in ways other than those they are perhaps used to employing.

The process of mentoring involves guiding and advising a mentee, who, unlike in the coaching process, can expect suggestions for specific steps on how to achieve certain results from their mentor. The two may meet regularly for scheduled periods of consultation over a period of weeks or months. In some cases, a mentee focused on a single outcome may only require one or two meetings with an expert mentor, but this takes appropriate preparation to ensure the time is spent in the most productive way possible for both. In any case, a mentor has an external, direct input into the success of the mentee.

While the fine line between giving advice and suggesting specific actions will have particular sensitivity for mentors from financial services, Farrugia says that essentially a mentor is expected to give

advice. While this will not necessarily be financial advice, both parties must be aware that, while having similar boundaries of confidentiality and professional ethics as normal client relationships, mentoring does not have the same overall dynamic. So it is important at the outset of a mentoring partnership that all the various considerations and boundaries are set in place for how it will work. Both mentee and mentor need to understand and maintain appropriate protocols in all areas likely to impact on the engagement. On this score, Farrugia adds: "The mentor must have enough interest and empathy to guide the person along, but sufficient distance to not get personally or emotionally involved in the outcomes of the mentee. Why? Because not all mentees will follow through and the mentor may feel they are being taken advantage of."

But the onus is not all on the mentor to maintain balance: among the mentee's obligations are listening, questioning and taking on or trying the mentor's advice. They have to be prepared to follow through, provide feedback to their mentor on their progress and take responsibility for outcomes. If these and other expectations of the relationship are not met, it is unlikely there will be further meetings – no-one wants their time wasted.

In summing up, Farrugia says: "Essentially for me a mentor is someone who can fast-track you to where you wish to be. Why reinvent the wheel? By approaching a mentor with specific questions around a situation you can cut through months, even years, of work. However, the mentee must be prepared to take action and follow through."

So depending on which end of the scale of wisdom you sit, you may find a lot of value in mentoring. Like Jason, you might even find that your Golden Fleece is not the only valuable achievement of your voyage.

For more information on mentoring visit www.dsf.org.au/mentor/links.htm for the Mentoring Australia website. For industry-specific mentoring visit www.finsia.com, www.fpa.asn.au and www.wifnsw.com.au. «

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