Mentoring in learning

Fiona Ellwood explores the role of the mentor

You may have thought that mentoring was predominately there to offer support, advice and guidance when things go wrong. Of course current thoughts are a far cry from this. As part of the BADN team, it has become increasingly evident that the more contemporary approach towards mentoring is key to our agents of change and supporting others in their learning journey.

“Mentoring can be defined as a relationship between two people with learning and development as its’ purpose”¹ Brockbank 63

Historical dimension

Mentoring is far from a new phenomenon, indirect links to mentoring have been associated with Plato and Socrates as far back as 547BC. However, the word mentor first appears in literature in the Homeric narrative “The Odyssey” some 5,000 years ago. The narrative asserts that Odysseus left son in the capable hands of his entrusted friend Mentor asking him to teach him everything he knew, whilst he went to the Trojan Wars². This however, provides a misconception that the mentor is older, wiser and by virtue more experienced. Experience shows that over the last 50 years mentoring has grown in popularity, in Government, industry, education, the medical profession and more recently the dental arena.

With the rapidly changing landscape for dental care professionals (DCPs), there has never been a better time to explore this role and look at how it can be contextualised not only within a given career trajectory, but in a learning setting. DCPs now have the opportunity to undertake additional duties³ and make full use of professional development plans, when planning career pathways. This has come about as an indirect result of statutory registration and a greater public awareness of the sector.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a dyadic professional learning relationship which, enables and facilitates individuals to take charge of their development and realise their potential.¹ The mentoring relationship helps individuals to review the here and now, to explore short term goals, shaping and influencing their future.

There are two approaches to mentoring, the Gestalt approach and the Humanistic approach, which are portrayed through either the traditional mode of mentoring or the contemporary mode of mentoring. The traditional mode of mentoring can often be a mode that has a power imbalance and is based on the mentors’ experience, rather than the need of the individual. The contemporary mode of mentoring does not require the mentor to be older, wiser and more experienced, but can indeed be a fellow work colleague or friend; a peer mentor. This is because the contemporary mode of mentoring is accepting of the humanistic approach, whereby the individual is placed at the centre of the mentoring relationship; this is known as the person-centred approach.¹ This approach asserts that the individual is the resourceful one, not the mentor; the mentor merely enables and facilitates in the professional relationship.

What attributes and traits do you need to become a mentor?

Becoming a mentor requires you to own an understanding and understanding of certain aspects of human behaviour and the reasoning behind it, in order to fulfil your role. The attributes that a mentor should ideally have are coined within the three key concepts of mentoring as: Unconditional positive regard; Congruence and Empathetic understanding.¹ if we unpick these concepts the attributes and traits that would be unveiled are:

- Empathy
- Good communicator
- Good listener
- Congruence
- Good facilitator
- Encourages creativity/flexibility
- Trustworthy
- Honest
- Social/emotional intelligence

Quite often these skills are a natural occurrence and merely need to be developed or enhanced and by working on these skills and embedding them within the relationship, you are able to create the right environment for that agent of change, which is so often missing. What often happen over a period of time is that the dynamics of the relationship shift from the mentor working with the individual, to the individual taking the lead and the mentor playing a much lesser part as the individual grows.

Being an effective mentor

It is imperative that a mentor recognises their own strengths and weaknesses and knows their limitations, not only of self, but from an ethical stance. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council have produced a document, which outlines the code of ethics for those in the mentoring field.⁴ In line with Pokora and Conspiracy have outlined nine key principles that underpin the effective practice of being a mentor at work:

1. The learning relationship is at the heart of change
2. The context is work
3. The individual sets the agenda and is resourceful
4. The _mentor facilitates learning and development
5. The outcome is change
6. The framework...provides movement and direction
7. The skills develop insight, release potential and deliver results
8. The qualities of the _mentor affirm, enable and sustain the individual
9. Ethical Practice safeguards and enhances mentoring

Of course not all mentors work from an ethical stance and can be disabling or toxic either intentionally or unintentionally. They have a tendency to be destructive and limiting to the individuals learning and developmental processes. Toxic mentors are those who are often unavailable or inaccessible, undermine and criticise those whom they are helping and on occasion lead individuals into new situations and then withdraw their support.

Models of mentoring

There are many models of mentoring that can be applied to given situations, individuals and organisations and can be adapted to other approaches:

- Egan Skilled Helper Model⁵
- G.R.O.W Model⁶
- Cyclical Mentoring Model⁷
- Double Matrix Model⁸

This list is far from exhaustive and models can also be used interchangeably to suit the situation, after all, the model is merely a framework, an underlying structure and not something that is central to the mentoring relationship. Indeed Egan 2010 reminds us that we should beware of the man of one book.⁹ This concept is evident in the mentoring course that has been developed at FGDP(UK), which is primarily associated with the person-centred approach, and champions both the Skilled Helper Model⁸ and the G.RO.W Model⁶, which have been integrated and further developed to form the Y.I.G.R.O.W.D.⁹ Model. Through personal expe-
are able to apply it and accept it for what it is, towards double loop learning, which is learning that is challenged and often brings about a transformation in learning. This requires the facilitation of reflective learning and practice, which is again possible through a mentoring relationship.1

There is a need for those engaging in professional mentoring to have an understanding of some of the mentoring concepts, in order to enable and facilitate others in their professional learning journey. This is an exciting and fluid arena for DCps, which will benefit greatly from mentoring schemes, but we must not overlook the need to master these skills in order to do least harm and most good.  

How can mentoring be applied to learning?

As DCps embark on post registration qualifications and additional duty programs, it is crucial we understand how the notion of mentoring can facilitate their learning, whether they are enrolled on external courses or undertaking in-house training most learners will need a mentor, if they are to reach their full potential and reap the rewards of success.

Mentoring and learning are closely aligned and together considered to be a learning process. Often our previous experience influences our future behaviour in learning. Bandura (1977) asserts that “...individuals often avoid situations they believe exceed their capabilities...” 5 by helping to develop self-efficacy in the learner, the learner is more likely to be motivated and want to succeed. If we apply the person-centred approach of mentoring to the learning environment, it may be possible to support learners in moving them from single loop 49 instrumental learning, whereby they learn something new, they...