

Mentoring



You'll be familiar with the mantra that everyone's a leader – that "leadership is not the province of a chosen few. The success of any organization is based on how well it is able to capture the talents of every individual." (Larry Downes, CEO, New Jersey Resources), writes Malcolm Macpherson.

So what about the companion idea that everyone's a mentor? That wherever you sit in an organisation, whatever your role, there are people who will benefit from your in-work and in-life experience, and your guidance (declaration: I'm a contracted academic mentor for Capable NZ, Otago Polytechnic's national centre for the assessment of prior learning).

6 Ways to be a great mentor

Having just participated in my polytechnic's annual staff development jamboree – three days of meetings, workshops, celebrations and socialising – I've been thinking about what 'great' looks like in a mentor. And while doing so, came across a Fast Company magazine article entitled '6 Ways to be a Kick-ass Mentor', written by Gwen Moran, with the subtitle "If you're going to take on the mantle of giving someone else career guidance, insight, and advice, you might as well aspire to greatness."

So what are Gwen's 6 ways? And do they translate for New Zealand and our workplace and training environments?

(1) Get involved

Deep involvement is a hallmark of great mentors, says Ellen Ensher, professor of management at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and co-author of *Power Mentoring: How Mentors and Protégés Get the Most Out of Their Relationships*. Great mentors take the job seriously, and work to understand the person and his or her career and life situation. Act as if it was your career on the line, Ensher says.

(2) Be accessible

When Peter Scalera, VP of trade marketing and execution at InComm in Atlanta, USA, mentors someone he doesn't limit meetings to once-a-month conference calls or coffee. That's not building a relationship, he says. He

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will phone to talk through a work challenge or review a PowerPoint deck before a big meeting.

(3) Learn to listen actively

Being a great mentor is about listening with intent. Scalera asks questions about current responsibilities and challenges, goals, and aspirations. When he thinks there may be more to the story, he asks more questions, drawing parallels to his own experiences to gain insight and give advice.

(4) Be honest

You are not doing any favours by being too nice or not addressing the tough issues, Ensher says. Be straightforward. When you think your protégé is going wrong, say so. Unlike a therapist or even a life coach, a mentor has more latitude to share personal experiences and insights – and even to say, "This is what I would do if I was you...."

(5) Open up your network

Making introductions is an important part of being an effective mentor. You are higher up the food chain, with a bigger – and different – network. If you know someone who can help, make the connection. And if your protégé is not someone who you would be comfortable referring to a trusted colleague, it may be time to re-think the relationship. "You have to have chemistry. And this person is going to be linked to your name if you act as a mentor. If you're not comfortable with that, this may not be the right relationship for you," Moran says.

(6) Know when to let go

When formally structured relationships run their course, it is time to let go. Great mentors may even help their protégés find their next mentor, understanding when it's time to let someone else step in.

Mentoring in NZ

How does this read to an academic mentor, dealing one-on-one with candidates for degrees and diplomas in a New Zealand polytechnic? The purpose is different – my role is not so much about career and life skills, more about project management, learning, and deep reflection. But our graduates do often make big, organisational and career-changing decisions as a result of their experience. It is a transformative process, sometimes with dramatic outcomes.

Moran's article, together with the people she quotes, does capture the special nature of a mentor relationship, however. Add some comment about the ethical challenges, the roles of significant others in the relationship and New Zealand's unique treaty issues, and this is the beginning of a prescription for great professional mentoring.

For further information please contact malcolm@macpherson.co.nz