

## A New Way of Seeing Mentoring - benefits for mentors

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### Purpose

*This article presents the opportunities for mentors' learning in the mentoring relationship linking this learning to the Mentor+Model for evaluating mentoring programmes.*

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## Introduction

Mentoring is the new buzzword in organizations. Mentoring programmes are implemented to improve learning on the job, to support the development of female executives, to integrate ethnic groups, to support newly appointed leaders, to develop project managers, to introduce new employees to the job and the company culture, etc. However, in most programmes the focus is on developing the mentee! Certainly, that is the original meaning of the word: that an old wise man (usually) supports, guides and sponsors a younger and less experienced person.

But is that really the best definition of mentoring today, and is it really true that only the mentee achieves development through the mentoring relationship?



I would like to argue that mentoring is a two-way street: the mentee benefits from a more experienced person's attention, experience, feedback, opinions, coaching etc. and the mentor benefits from seeing problems and challenges from another person's perspective, from having to communicate own experiences and opinions in a specific but not authoritative way, from giving feedback in an atmosphere where the mentor has no formal/hierarchical power over the person, and also from listening to the other person's perceptions of the world, the company culture, and his/her ambitions and wishes for the future and for his/her life.

**Illustration: The Results of Mentoring – from the Mentor+Model<sup>1</sup>**

## Results of Mentoring Relationships and Mentoring Programmes

When organizations design and implement mentoring programmes they look for results in these six areas for the mentee:

- Personal skills
- Professional competencies
- Career development
- Networking
- Cultural understanding
- Knowledge sharing

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<sup>1</sup> The area "Active Listening" was added in 2007 when we did a statistical analysis of the database and this area came up as a factor area for both mentors and mentees.

Through the mentoring process, through the choice of subjects in the conversations between the mentor and mentee, they have the opportunity to create a learning space for the mentee to develop him-/herself in these areas. However, the opportunity also exists for the mentor – if they are aware of it!

**Personal Skills** – the mentee has the opportunity to bring up situations where he/she is insecure or uncertain about how to handle a specific people situation. Together with the mentor they can analyze the situation, look for alternative behaviors and solutions, build up scenarios, evaluate what has happened before, evaluate the style and intentions of the other players in the situation, and end up with an action plan for the mentee, and when the mentee comes back they can evaluate the results, adjust and make new action plans. In this process the mentor will develop his/her ability to coach, to listen, and to make suggestions in a way that does not overwhelm the mentee.

However, in this process the mentor also learns about what goes on in other parts of the organization and sees these situations through the eyes and perception of the mentee, who is likely to have a very different background and age than the mentor. So the mentor will learn about the perceptions of the mentee, see the organization in new ways, and the mentor will have to rethink his/her assumptions about how things work – because the mentee is a person in his/her own right and is not supposed to become a copy of the mentor, so the mentee will have to find his/her own way to handle these situations.

**Professional Competencies** – whether the mentee works in project management, engineering, marketing, research, accounting, or any other profession, the mentee has the opportunity to learn more professionally through the mentoring relationship. Maybe the mentor comes from the same profession because this is the focus of their mentoring program – then it is quite clear that the conversations can have a professional focus.

However, even when they come from different professions, the mentee can improve his/her professional skills through the mentoring relationship: if the mentor uses coaching techniques, the mentee can get new perspectives on his/her own professional knowledge and understanding of a problem; if the mentee presents a professional problem, the mentor can tell how he/she perceives it – often people outside a profession can come up with such “crazy” ideas that they actually ignite new creativity and new points of view of those with factual competence in the area. And since mentors are experienced persons, they will have quite a lot of cross-professional experience to share.

So how can the mentor improve his/her professional skills through the mentoring process? Simply listening to the professional challenges of the mentee, the mentor can learn a lot – however, in a mutually beneficial relationship it is also ok for the mentor to ask for his own sake when interesting professional information and learning is on the table. Often I hear that mentors are inspired to start reading new books to add to their professional knowledge, books that their mentees have been talking about and recommended to them.

This is also a way for the mentee to feel valuable in the relationship; to establish a two-way and equal relationship; and to eliminate the “awe” factor that dominates many mentoring relationships. And the mentee will also learn from explaining his/her professional knowledge to the mentor. This is part of making tacit knowledge into conscious and tangible knowledge and learning.

**Cultural Understanding** – mentees often has a need for better understanding of the culture and values of the organization, the unwritten rules, and how to assert themselves in a positive way in

the organization. They will seek information from the mentor on the political ways around the system, about who has formal and informal power, how to create alliances and with whom, how to present their ideas to achieve better support from the right people, how to read the signs and signals of the communication, information and power distribution processes etc. To analyze and understand each situation that the mentee presents to the mentor, the mentor needs to enter the discussion with an open mind. Of course, the mentor has his/her experiences in the organization, which has led to specific assumptions about the culture, the values and the power system.

However, the mentee is not the mentor – they are two very different persons. So the mentor's own experience cannot give the whole answers. And the culture may have subcultures that the mentor is not fully familiar with; new subculture may have developed since the mentor was in a similar position, so even the mentor will learn new things about the culture and values of the organization through the mentoring relationship. Likewise, the mentor will gain new understanding and new perspectives into the culture while listening to the mentee's perception of what is going on. In this way the mentor will also gain new knowledge and understanding that can have value in the mentor's own job.

**Networking** – mentee and mentor creates at least one new network-relation, their own mentoring relation. This can be a very valuable network-relation because of all the other results they can achieve from working together, and it can be valuable if they support each other by sharing their other network-relations with each other. The mentor can refer the mentee to knowledgeable people inside or outside the organization who can help mentee with specific knowledge that the mentor cannot supply. The mentor can give information about people inside and outside the organization and let the mentee seek out and create new relationships on his own. The mentor can sponsor mentee and introduce him/her to people that can help them in their career development. And the mentor can from the mentee receive the same kind of information and introduction that will let the mentor create new relationships and expand his/her network.

In many organizations the mentoring program also includes events/seminars for all mentors for them to learn about mentoring and to get to know each other, as well as it includes event/seminars for mentees – and sometimes there are also events/seminars where all mentors and mentees meet at the same time. This creates the environment for establishing new relationships and expanding your internal networks. This can be very valuable for both mentor and mentee as well as for the mentoring program since the participants all learn from each other about how to be good mentors and mentees and thus achieve even more learning from the mentoring program. Also the relationship among the participants can grow very strong and the networks will often live for a long time after the mentoring program is officially finished.

**Knowledge Sharing** – mentees are often very keen on getting knowledge from the mentor. They want to draw out and get as much as possible in the time they share with the mentor. They view the mentor as the wise person that can transfer all different kinds of knowledge to them through their conversations. But what does knowledge sharing mean? Looking into the literature there are many interesting definitions of knowledge sharing – building on that, knowledge sharing can be seen as “people sharing knowledge with each other across an organization, learning from each other and creating new knowledge in the process”. So knowledge sharing in its definition is a two-way street, and has only successfully taken place when new knowledge is created – the synergy effect of knowledge sharing.

Logically knowledge transfer happens both ways when mentor and mentee are working together. However, in most mentoring relationships the participants are mainly aware of the

one-way flow of knowledge. I believe that the mentoring relationship as such can be defined as a knowledge sharing relationship and that new knowledge is created in the process where mentor and mentee discuss their different subjects, analyze situations, brainstorm alternative solutions and evaluate results. Nobody – not mentor, nor mentee – can predict the results of the actions of the mentee; so whenever they are analyzing and evaluating, they are both learning and achieving new insights – so new knowledge, new common knowledge, is created.

**Career Development** – all mentoring programmes have explicitly or implicitly an influence on the career development of the participants. In some programmes this is very clear, e.g. when talking about developing new leaders – male or female – and supporting newly appointed leaders. Simply choosing the participants also makes a statement to them and to the rest of the organization that they are chosen for something special. With this focus, the mentees are expected to use the mentoring relationship for exploring their own ambitions, talents and skills for developing into specific positions in the company; and the mentors partly become career counselors and are also expected to tell about their own career paths, the obstacles they have met, and the advantages and disadvantages of actually holding these positions.

How can the mentor learn from working with the mentee in the area? Well, first of all the mentor will need to understand the official and unofficial career paths of the organization to guide the mentee. And the mentor will very likely hear about obstacles and opportunities in the organization that he/she did not know exists, since they have moved on in the organization. Also, the mentor will need to understand the goals and strategies of the company to guide the mentee. The mentee has a need to clarify his/her own ambitions and to see whether there is a fit with the organizational goals – do they have a overlapping mission that can create a win-win situation.

However, the mentor will also gain new understanding the career paths from talking with the mentee; and the mentor can examine his/her own career motivations in relation to the opportunities in the company. The mentor will get a chance to see how motivated and qualified the younger employees/managers are, and hopefully the mentors will see that they also need to make space – to step aside – for the younger generation to move up and around in the organization. This means that the mentor has the opportunity to reflect on his/her own further career and which way it should take.

If mentors are old and wise – meaning that some of them are getting close to retirement – they probably need to think about how to spend their remaining years at work. Should they continue in the same job to the final day before retirement? Should they keep working long and stressful hours? Or should they look for and create new, exiting positions on the side where they can support, coach, and develop the younger generation into successful positions in the organization. I would like to argue that mentoring can be an alternative career to just continue doing the same job until retirement. Placing yourself in a position as an advisor, mentor, coach and discussion partner to the new leaders and executives in the organization does not diminish your influence; it just makes it more subtle and it requires continuous development of the mentor's active listening skills. Skills which are important in mentoring, in leadership and in all relationships, professional as well as personal relationships.

## **Why this lack of focus on the mentor's learning opportunities?**

Most often the organizations focus on how to achieve results for the mentee and do not even think of the mentor. Why is that? Do they think that mentors have finished learning?? Or do they believe that mentors are simply repositories of knowledge that can be easily transferred to the mentees? I believe that it is neither of the above – I believe that it is not a conscious decision

or assumption, but that we have found a “blind spot” – since we do not know it exists, we do not know how to ask the question!

I would like to propose a new way of seeing mentoring and the roles of mentor and mentee:

***Mentoring is a learning partnership between two people with different backgrounds and experiences – it is a mutually beneficial partnership where both achieve new learning, new insights and grow as human beings – it is synergy in action and can affect positive change in both mentor and mentee.***

I have found in my work with mentoring that the more the mentor becomes aware of his/her own potential benefits and learning points from the mentoring relationship, the more mentor can consciously take this learning away and bring it into action. And the more the organizations take the aspect of the mentor’s learning into account when designing and implementing mentoring programmes, the more effect the program will have for the mentors, for the mentees and for the organization.

## **About the author - Kirsten M. Poulsen**

Kirsten M. Poulsen is founder and owner of the consulting company KMP+ and business partner of the International Cross-Mentoring Program. Her consulting focuses on leadership, talent and organizational development - with special emphasis on mentoring. Kirsten is a recognized expert in mentoring, speaks at conferences internationally and has developed several concepts and tools as well as a survey – the Mentor+Survey - to evaluate and benchmark mentoring programmes.

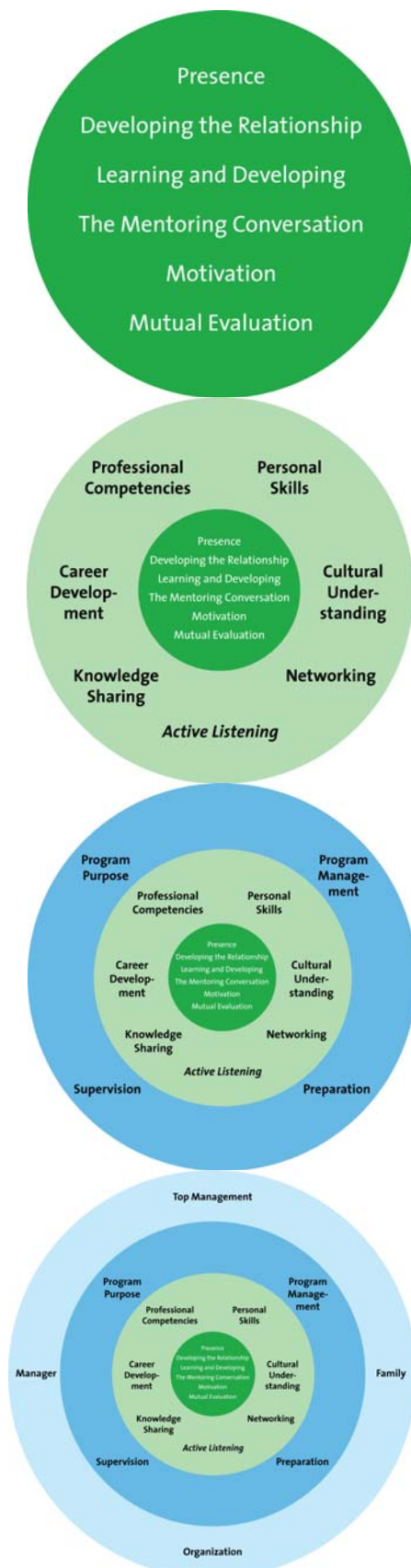
Kirsten is an author and co-author of several books on mentoring and co-founder and first president of EMCC Denmark (2007-09) (European Mentoring and Coaching Council) as well as a board member of ISMPE, International Standards of Mentoring Programmes in Employment). Kirsten is an associate professor at Copenhagen Business School teaching a class on “Mentoring and coaching in an organizational context”. She has a Bachelor of International Business from Copenhagen Business School and an MBA from IESE Business School and speaks English, Spanish and Scandinavian (Danish, Norwegian, Swedish) fluently. [www.kmpplus.com](http://www.kmpplus.com).

## **Literature**

“The Mentor+Guide to Mentoring Programmes” by Kirsten M. Poulsen, 2012 (70 pages), KMP+ Forlag, Denmark.

”Developing Successful Diversity Mentoring Programmes, by David Clutterbuck, Kirsten M. Poulsen & Frances Kochan, 2012 (240 pages), McGraw Hill Open University, UK.

## The Mentor+Model



### The Core

This is the confidential learning arena of the mentor and the mentee. The factors express the areas of importance in creating a trustful relationship as a basis for learning and development.

The mentoring relationship is influenced by the expectations and motivations of the mentor and the mentee, their commitment to the relationship, and their behaviour and communication in the relationship. And it is influenced by how the mentor and mentee perceive each other in their roles.

### Goals and Results

The results of implementing mentoring programmes can be categorized into these 6+1 factors. When designing mentoring programmes, this area is the basis for discussing and defining the specific goals of the program.

Research shows that all programmes will result in some measure of personal development. However, to achieve valuable results for both the participants and the organization, the goals must be clarified and the designed planned accordingly. The deciding factors for achieving results are found in how the program is structured and implemented in the organization.

Active listening has been included in the second generation of the model as it emerged from our statistical validation as a strong individual factor among the result factors.

### Structure

These factors comprise the foundation for creating a successful mentoring program. No two mentoring programmes are completely the same – but all mentoring programmes need structure and a framework adapted to the specific goals of the program, as well as to the culture and values of the organisation. Thus this area serves as a checklist for designing mentoring programmes.

### Stakeholders

This area represents the fact that mentoring programmes always take place in a context that includes a number of stakeholders.

When designing the mentoring program, you need consider how the participants of the mentoring program and the stakeholders influence and affect each other.