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Mentoring Programmes
Learning opportunities for mentees, mentors, organisations, and society

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Purpose

The purpose of this article is to communicate a definition of mentoring that will better fulfill the learning opportunities of mentees, mentors, organisations and society. The article presents an approach to the design and implementation of mentoring programmes which is very practical while at the same time manages to take into account the complexity of facilitating effective learning processes. Included is information on selection and matching of mentors and mentees, the phases of the mentoring process and models for learning.

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Introduction

Mentoring programmes have become popular in companies, organisations, trade unions, professional associations and many other contexts. Just today, I was contacted about a mentoring programme for entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. The Danish government has decided to finance this programme, which is supposed to attract entrepreneurs from other countries to come to Denmark to establish their new companies and part of the programme is providing these entrepreneurs with Danish mentors to support them in developing their business and adapting well to Denmark. So, mentoring programmes are established for many different purposes not just for talent and leadership development. I have come across a multitude of purposes and target groups for mentoring, and mentoring programmes can be very valuable in many different contexts. I am surprised though, that the mentoring programmes still mostly focus on the learning of the mentee, when mentoring programmes also have such huge learning potential for the mentors – and for the organisations as well as for society.

Motivation of mentors and mentees

When I first started looking into mentoring programmes more than 10 years ago, the programme managers were not very conscious of the learning opportunities for the mentors. Their focus were on finding mentors who could transfer knowledge, give advice and share their experiences thus ensuring the mentee's learning and the mentee's fit into the organisation. Moreover, through the surveys that we implemented evaluating many of the programmes we learned that mentors felt the mentoring to be just another job on top of all the their other tasks. All in all, this approach did not enhance the motivation of the mentors. In my experience, however, the more focus there is on the mentor's opportunities for learning, the easier it is to motivate them to take on the role of mentor and the greater the effect the mentoring programme will have on mentees and on the organisation. Today, I do see more and more programmes where learning goals are also defined for the mentors and where taking on the role of the mentor – and participating in mentor training – is formally acknowledged as competence development, thus recognising the efforts and the learning of the mentors with more motivated mentors as a result.

How do we then ensure the motivation of the mentee? Actually, having the possibility to decide for him/herself whether mentoring is relevant is the first step in ensuring the mentee's motivation. Secondly, the more a mentee feels the need to change, learn and develop, the more that mentee will be motivated and the more benefit the mentee will achieve from joining the mentoring programme. Thirdly, the more the mentee perceive their mentor as a great match, the more they will engage in the mentoring conversations and put their best efforts into the learning process.

Mentoring – from the organisation's perspective

From the perspective of the organisation, mentoring is a strategic development activity that supports the vision, goals and values of the organisation while at the same time providing learning opportunities in accordance with the participants' own career ambitions and learning needs.
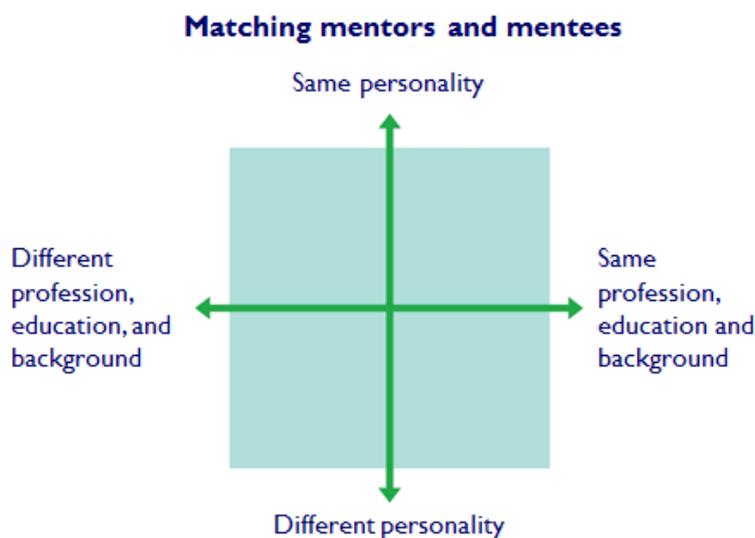
Selection of mentors and mentees

The selection of both mentors and mentees and their motivation for entering the mentoring relationship is vital for ensuring results for themselves as well as for the organisation. Often mentees are selected very meticulously with assessment centres, personality tests, performance reviews etc. However, the selection of mentors and the training and preparation of mentors are seldom as thorough. As long as the mentor is reasonably high up in the management hierarchy, it is presumed that he (it is still most often a man) is qualified to be a mentor.

Mentors actually have a major influence on the success of the mentoring programme and on whether the programme will have the intended organisational learning effect. Mentors become role models for both mentees and for other employees in the organisation. They become role models for the right behaviour, the right values and important competencies in the company purely because of being selected as mentors. Mentors are therefore responsible both in relation to the mentee and to the rest of the organisation, and it is vital that the right mentors are selected with the values, behaviours and skills the organisation wish to develop. In addition, it is vital that the mentors understand their role, are genuinely interested in the role and are well prepared for their role.

Matching mentors and mentees

Formal mentoring programmes include a formal process for matching mentors and mentees. This can involve both potential mentors and mentees filling in profile forms that the programme manager – possibly collaborating with an external consultant – use to match participants in mentor/mentee pairs.

Matching mentors and mentees

Same personality

Different profession, education, and background

Same profession, education and background

Different personality

The purpose of matching is to create the best possible basis for learning for both parties. The above model illustrates that the more mentors and mentees resemble each other, the easier it is for them to connect and confirm each other in the prejudices they share concerning the outside world. The more different the mentors and mentees are, the more effort is required to build up a trustful relationship, but the opportunity for learning is far greater.

Several criteria in the matching process must be taken into account: mentors' and mentees' personal profiles, what they want to learn and how they want to develop, their experience,

educational backgrounds and professions, maturity, and more pragmatic aspects such as geography and transport options – and finally, their mutual relationships, especially if they work for the same organisation. To ensure maximum confidentiality and to minimise the risk of dilemmas concerning conflicting interests, it is important that mentors and mentees come from different parts of the organisation and are not involved with each other in formal hierarchical lines (also called "off-line" matching vs. "in-line" matching). In terms of open mentoring programmes, it is vital that they do not come from competing companies or otherwise experience dilemmas inherent in the match. This is an absolutely vital foundation for creating confidentiality.

Trusting the quality of the matching process is one of the success criteria for ensuring the match will work. This trust is based on:

- Their perception of having an influence on the matching process.
- It is clear that both mentor and mentee have the opportunity to learn.
- There are clear criteria for selecting and matching participants so there can be no doubt about why they have been selected and matched.
- The match fits the organisational purpose of the programme.

Interestingly, it is difficult to find research confirming personality traits as important matching criteria. Personality tests and emotional intelligence profiles and the like can be valuable input to the matching process and great tools for giving mentors and mentees more insight into themselves as a preparation for the mentoring process but they are not miracle tools for ensuring the best match between mentors and mentees. There are, however, some elements that can become major barriers to a good mentoring process if they are not taken into account in the matching process (Clutterbuck, 2009; Hale, 2000; Law et al, 2007):

Basic assumptions and values – it is easier for mentor and mentee to achieve an open an trustful communication if they have a basic common perception of what is right and wrong and what are important values in life e.g. in relation to career, family, children, power and status. If you wish to match for diversity, both mentors and mentees need more preparation.

Experience – when there is an appropriate difference in experience (and hierarchical position) between mentor and mentee the potential for learning is obvious. But there should not be too much difference, no more than mentee can imagine him/herself in mentor's position.

Readiness – and maturity to be open for learning and development in both mentor and mentee.

Geography – when talking about face-to-face physical meetings geographical location of mentor and mentee when they live too far apart can become a barrier to their mentoring meetings.

The job of the programme manager in selecting and matching mentors and mentees is to take into account all the success criteria and potential barriers and create the best possible matches – and be able to argue and clarify why these matches have been made.

However, that does not mean that all mentoring matches work optimally. There is no miracle tool for matching, and programme managers can make the wrong decision, due to a lack of important information or simply by misunderstanding the participants' wishes and needs. In such cases, the problem must be addressed and the programme manager, together with the mentor and mentee, must decide whether the pair wishes to continue or whether a new match should be made.

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The phases of mentoring

The mentoring process progresses through four phases, each with its own focus. We call these phases Preparation, Establishing the relationship, Learning and developing and Ending. This is the natural progression of the mentoring relationship.

Phase 1 - Preparation

This phase involves the potential mentors' and mentees' final decisions to enter the mentoring programme. The mentees must consider whether this fits into their career plans in terms of what they need to learn and taking into account the purpose of the mentoring programme as presented by the organisation.

Mentors must consider whether they feel they have the competences, the time and the motivation. Are they willing and able to prioritise the time and will their organisation support them. And how can they benefit from taking on the role of the mentor. So, both potential mentors and mentees must consider whether the benefits and potential learning outcome of the mentoring programme will match the investment in regards to time and effort. If these questions are not adequately clarified in the preparation phase, problems may arise in the mentoring relationship.

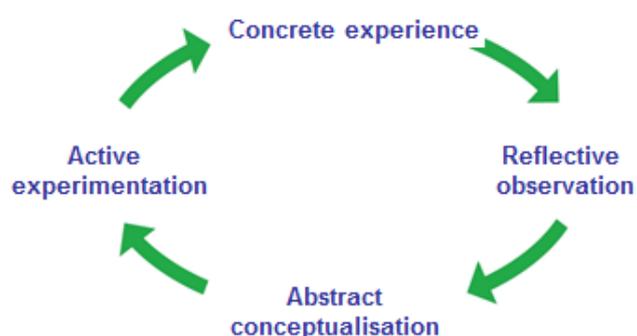### Phase 2 - Establishing the relationship

This phase starts when individual mentors and mentees meet each other for the first time. Now the pair must get to know each other well to establish a good relationship with openness and trust. Trust is not achieved automatically. We describe it as "building up a trust account", which is the core of this phase: talking about and clarifying the elements that create a trust account which can accumulate during the relationship, instead of creating obstacles that may block valuable dialogue and development. In this phase mentor and mentee clarify mutual expectations of each other and of the mentoring process. They explore their motivation for entering the programme and set the ground rules for their collaboration which includes:

- goals – the benefits you want from participating in the mentoring programme
- expectations – what you expect from each other
- cooperation – when, how often, and where you want to meet, contact between meetings, documentation and the use of a log book if required, etc.
- ground rules and ethics – confidentiality, preparation, limits, feedback, etc.
- evaluation and follow up – regular evaluation of the learning process and results
- ending – when, how and what does the ending mean

Phase 3 - Learning and developing

This is the phase where the real learning takes place; and for real learning to take place the mentoring meetings alone are not enough. Mentoring can accelerate the learning process because of the support from the mentor and needs to take action, new action and experi and not just theorize together with the men make a difference for the mentee – and for mentor will gain new understanding and insi developing new competencies.

The Experiential Learning Process

Concrete experience

Reflective observation

Abstract conceptualisation

Active experimentation

![KMP+ logo]

For this to happen there must be a proper balance between the number of mentoring meetings and the time to experiment between the meetings. The meetings should be sufficiently close for the pair to maintain the relationship and not continually go back to square one. The meetings must also be sufficiently far apart for the mentees to carry out the actions agreed on between the meetings. Best practice suggests one meeting every 3-6 weeks or so. During a 12-month programme, that will be about ten meetings, taking holidays into account.

The learning process in mentoring builds on the experiential learning process as described by Kolb (1976; 1981; 1984) and his associate Roger Fry (Kolb and Fry, 1975) and has been expanded on by many others since. The experiential learning process is seen as a circular four step process that in principle can start at any of the four steps described below (Clutterbuck, Poulsen & Kochan, 2012):

Concrete experience – specific experiences have shaped the mentee's understanding of the world and colours the mentee's expectation and

> Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it.
> - Kolb (1984, 41)

perception of future events. In the mentoring dialogue, the mentor helps the mentee identify all the factual aspects of the concrete experiences they have had – thus helping the mentee overcome their selective focus on specific aspects of the experienced events.

Reflective observation – after experiencing a specific situation or a number of similar situations, the individual needs to explore the lessons learned. When doing this alone, the mentee may focus entirely too much on the aspects that confirm their former perception of the situation, thus enhancing their existing understanding and preconceived notions of the world. Through the mentoring dialogue the mentee is challenged and supported in looking at themselves, at others and their experiences from many perspectives adding depth and quality to the process of reflection.

Abstract conceptualization – based on the learning from the reflective observation, abstract conceptualization transforms new understanding of self and the relationship to others into meaningful concepts. The mentee is building new mental models of "how the world works" and their own role and conclude how this learning can be applied to similar or new situations in the future.

Active experimentation – next step is putting the new learning into action, about creating an action plan for what to do or not to do and finding the courage to actually do it. Through the mentoring dialogue the mentor and mentee discuss how to put the learning into action in different ways and the mentor supports the mentee in exploring the potential value and risk of each alternative decision and action – and encourages to action and developing action plans.

Phase 4 - Ending

This phase is about ensuing a good and constructive ending of the formal mentoring relationship. Mentors and mentees are not required to continue seeing each other once the programme ends. Relationships change during the mentoring programme and some of the mentoring pairs may wish to continue the mentoring relationship, others will continue to see each other less often, some have become real friends and will move into a different kind of relationship, and others again will simply say thank you and move on. All endings are equally good, however, the importance of formally evaluating individual outcome, giving feedback to each other and openly

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talk about the next step is a healthy exercise in itself and ensures that both mentor and mentee are clear and aligned in their expectations for the next step.

For the programme manager a formal evaluation of the process and the outcome at both an individual level as well as on a programme level is important to gain new learning for future mentoring programmes in the organisation.

A good mentoring programme includes

- Matching the mentee with a neutral (off-line) and experienced discussion partner to support the mentee's development.
- Creating a confidential learning environment where individual mentees in cooperation with their mentors can explore their own skills, opportunities and ambitions.
- Challenging the participants – both mentors and mentees – to get to know themselves better by seeing themselves through another person's eyes.
- Giving mentors the opportunity to develop their leadership skills and competencies by practising the role of the mentor.

Poulsen, 2012

Diversity Mentoring

In this article I have been focusing on mentoring programmes in an organisational context mainly for developing talents and leadership competencies. However, diversity mentoring is becoming a hot topic these days and not just for women in leadership. In our recent book on diversity mentoring (Clutterbuck, Poulsen & Kochan, 2012) we looked at gender, culture and disability, and we defined diversity mentoring as:

"…a developmental process of open dialogue that aims to achieve both individual and organisational change through shared understanding and suspending judgement within a relationship of mutual learning in which differences that exists are perceived integral to learning, growth and development."

In diversity mentoring the difference between mentor and mentee will always be more pronounced that in traditional mentoring programmes and this difference is an opportunity for more learning - and more transformational learning - to take place. Transformational learning can be defined as "learning that significantly changes your perception of yourself - of your identity - and leads to new behaviour" (Illeris, 2013).

However, diversity mentoring also requires much more consideration and work on selecting, matching and preparing both mentors and mentees for the challenges presented by their specific diversity issue. When these design elements have been taken well care of, the diversity mentoring programmes have the opportunity to impact the mentors and mentees, the organisation(s) and society through the double learning process – the process where both mentors and mentees are learning.

The double learning process of diversity mentoring

Mentee's real life experiences
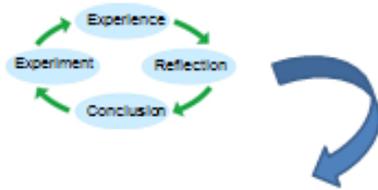
Mentee brings his/her real life experiences into the mentoring conversation for a deeper exploration of the meaning and to develop a new perception of self in relation to others - thus creating the foundation for new insights and new patterns of behaviour.

The learning process taking place in the mentoring relationship

Is influenced by how mentor and mentee interact, relate and communicate, by the tools and structure they use, by how and where they meet, by the media they use to meet and interact etc – and by who they are and which experiences and skills they bring to the relationship

Mentor's real life experiences

Mentors enter the relationship with the preconceived notions about the diversity issue – and listen to the mentee's real life experiences. This way the mentors have the opportunity to look at the world through the eyes of the mentee and develop new insights into their own bias – and gaining the opportunity to change their own attitudes and patterns of behaviour.
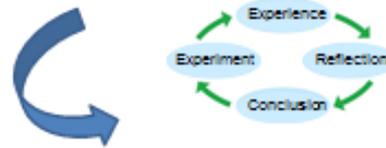
The point is, diversity mentoring only works, when both mentor and mentee are learning. So to design and implement a successful diversity mentoring programme, you need to position, communicate and design it around the double learning process. If you wish to have more women in higher leadership positions, it is not enough for the women to learn and change, the managers higher up which are usually selected to become the mentors must also learn and change.

Mentoring – from the participants' perspective

This brings us back to the definition of mentoring – this time from the perspective of the participants: Mentoring is a learning partnership between two people with different levels of experience and with the potential to achieve new learning, new insight and personal growth. Mentoring is about creating synergy between two people in a learning alliance.

When mentors and mentees cooperate, it is entirely natural that the learning is reciprocal to some extent. Mentees attempt to learn from mentors and also want to give something back to the mentors. Mentors enjoy contributing to mentees' learning and development, and also experience that it gives them time to reflect on aspects that they would otherwise not have taken the time to consider. It is therefore very clear that mentoring can be a mutual learning alliance that creates new knowledge, new insight and synergy between two people. And the more people are impacted through the mentoring programme, the more impact the programme will have on the organisation and on society at large.

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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

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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.

This article is specifically inspired by three books by this author:

"The Mentor+Guide to Mentoring Programmes" by Kirsten M. Poulsen, 2012 (70 pages), KMP+ Forlag, Denmark.
"Mentorprogrammer i virksomheder og organisationer" (Mentoring Programmes in Organisation" by Kirsten M. Poulsen & Christian Wittrock, 2012 (480 pages), Jurist- og Økonomforbundets Forlag, Denmark.
"Developing Successful Diversity Mentoring Programmes, by David Clutterbuck, Kirsten M. Poulsen & Frances Kochan, 2012 (240 pages), McGraw Hill Open University, UK.

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