

Phil Yates of Customised Training Solutions asks . . .
DO YOU HAVE A Mentor?

IF YOUR ANSWER IS YES, then you will have already experienced the tremendous benefits that this approach to learning and development affords. A mentor is someone either within or outside of your company who offers you help, guidance, advice and support, to enhance your personal and professional development. A mentor is someone who has personal experience of performing to a high standard within a role similar to yours and is genuinely interested in helping you to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge you need. A mentor helps you to fulfil your potential!

Perhaps you are a mentor or have acted as a mentor to someone in the past? Perhaps you have played out this role without realising it? Have you ever listened to a colleague and offered advice, have you challenged their ideas, offered feedback, encouraged them to perform. Mentoring is not always formally structured, it may occur as a natural interaction between people.

Mentoring might be perceived as a modern developmental technique; however, the term actually comes from Greek mythology, when Ulysses left his son, Telemachus, in the care of his old friend Mentor. Mentor was described as a 'trusted friend, adviser, teacher and wise person'. Then, as now, mentoring

proved to be an extremely effective means of helping both parties to grow and develop.

The benefits of being mentored

Whatever your role, through being mentored you will:

- Rapidly assimilate the culture and philosophy of your company
- Accelerate the development of your skills and knowledge
- Receive feedback and thereby continually improve your performance
- Improve the clarity and definition of your objectives
- Develop greater confidence to succeed in your role
- Become a better listener and communicator
- Have someone to talk openly and honestly with
- Consider options to a greater extent before acting
- Develop a greater awareness of the implications of your actions.

Having a mentor provides you with a 'sounding board' to bounce ideas off and discuss challenges with. Your mentor will act in confidence and will act as your role-model.

So who could be your mentor?

If you think back over your career, you will

be able to recall certain people who have commanded your respect or whose influence has guided your development. A mentor must have relevant work experience in order to empathise with what you are trying to achieve (though they need not be an expert) and they should ideally have experience or knowledge of the company in which you work. Not surprisingly, mentors need excellent inter-personal skills and must be able to question and listen effectively. A mentor must be genuinely interested in helping you to be the very best you can be.

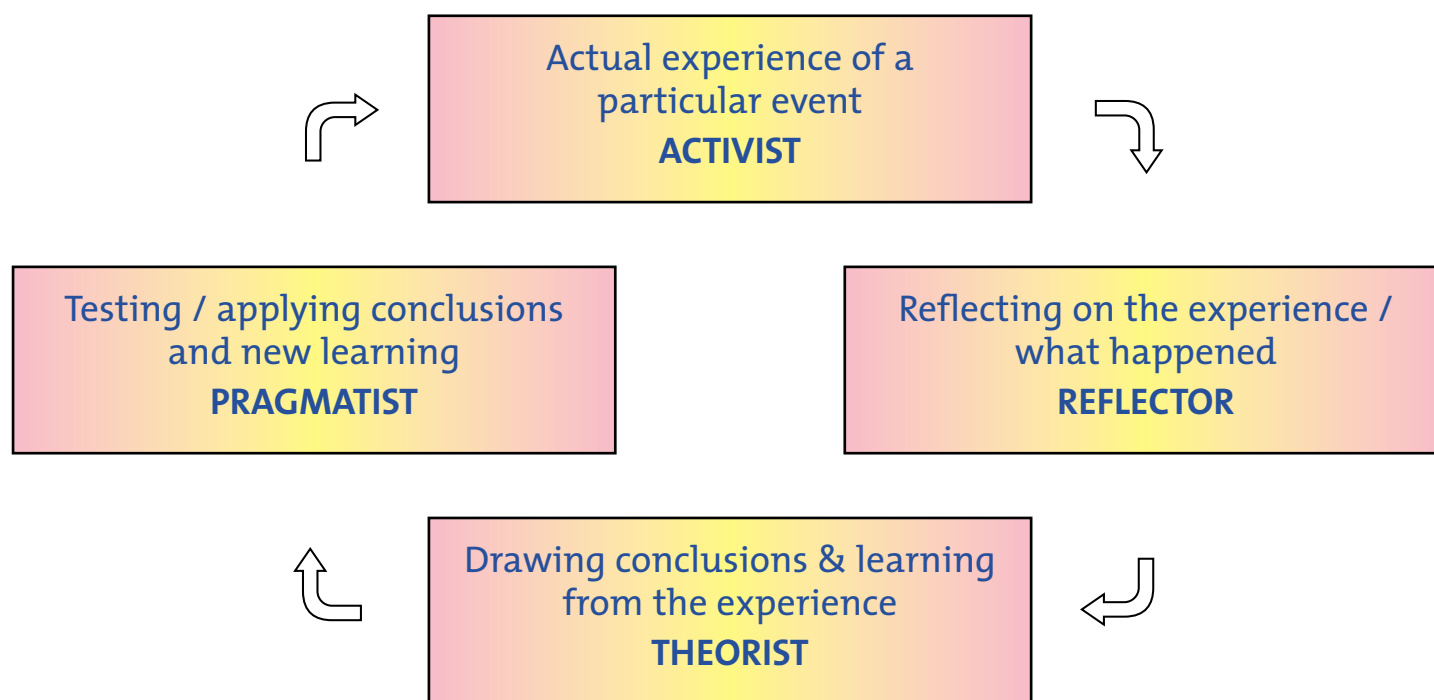
And what will he/she do?

Your mentor will facilitate, support and accelerate your learning. They will help you to identify and clarify what you are trying to achieve and then help you to generate strategies to do this. They will offer you feedback and, when appropriate, advice. They will provide you with personal support to maintain and enhance your motivation to succeed.

A successful mentor must understand how learning occurs and specifically how you in particular learn. They can then tailor their interventions to best suit your needs, thus maintaining the focus on you and your development.

The Learning Cycle

The psychologist, David Kolb, described learning as a cyclical process comprising four stages.





Whether your experiences are random events during the course of a normal working day or are structured, as in training courses, it is really important to take time to reflect upon what went well and what could have been done differently. Only then can you put your experiences into some sort of context and try out alternative behaviours. Learning is therefore really a 'trial and error' process and your mentor can stimulate you to move through these stages by questioning and challenging your habits, behaviour and assumptions.

Your mentor will also tailor learning activities to suit how you personally prefer to learn. Within the above learning cycle, you will notice that you tend to learn most within one of the four stages. For example you may be an Activist who prefers to learn by jumping in and trying things out. In this case, your mentor might offer to role-play scenarios and situations, for example sales calls, with you. If you are a Reflector you will take your time

and think more before acting. You might prefer to research a topic or prepare a report to assist and consolidate your learning. Theorists like to have a model or big picture to place their learning in context and, for you, your mentor will help you to identify associations between what you are learning and what you already know. Pragmatists need to know whether something will work – "what's in it for me?" and in this case you will be discussing the real benefits and applications of your learning to your role and your success.

A mentor is an extremely powerful ally in your quest for personal excellence and career development. He or she will help you to consolidate your learning and accelerate your acquisition of skills and knowledge. Through offering you personal attention, they will help you to improve the quality of your decision-making and support you in the successful application of your learning.

Is a mentor worthwhile?.....definitely!

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Further reading:

Experimental Learning Experience as a Source of Learning & Development, by D.A. Kolb. Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1984.

Mentoring A Handbook for Mentors, by Fred Forster, Dai Hounsell and Sheila Thompson.

Mentoring A Guide to the Basics, by Gordon F Shea. Kogan Page.

Successful Mentoring in a Week, by Stephen Carter and Gareth Lewis. Institute of Management Foundation, Hodder & Stoughton