

Mentoring in a modern world

WHAT QUALIFIES A PERSON AS A GOOD MENTOR? ELAINE RUMBOLL

(a) Assuming that leaders and managers can automatically be mentors is a mistake that could cost South African business dear.

The dictionary definition describes a mentor as “an experienced and trusted advisor”, and for many the word conjures up an image of an older, wiser person passing on age-old secrets. Indeed, the tradition of mentoring as a means of imparting knowledge has been around since ancient times.

But in the modern world, specifically the contemporary business environment, mentoring has evolved from a one-way flow of knowledge to a two-way exchange of ideas and information. Nowadays, the mentor in a work situation may well be older or more experienced than his or her mentee – but what is more important than simply transferring facts and figures to a colleague is the ability to build and maintain an effective relationship, one which can ultimately have a major impact on the bottom line in a business.

“Mentoring is about developing the capacity to hold effective

conversations, and learning how to listen,” says Janine Everson, Senior Lecturer and Academic Director at the Centre for Coaching at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB).

Everson points out that mentoring has become an accepted part of a competent leader’s armoury. The ability to provide expert advice, to take key staff under one’s wing and offer guidance and to be a role model is expected from people in senior positions in the contemporary business environment.

“Mentoring plays an important role in skills development, retaining and developing valuable staff, as well as in deepening the understanding of an organisation’s culture,” Everson explains.

People who work in a mentoring role often have expert knowledge and wisdom from years of work, relationships and networks. They can provide answers to difficult questions, and help newcomers settle into an environment. As such, mentors are indispensable.

However, just having knowledge and wisdom does not automatically qualify people to be good mentors.

“There is an assumption that because one has been in a job for a certain amount of time, or one is older, or one is in a leadership position, that one can automatically be a successful mentor,” says Everson. “But in reality, people often have to be taught how to develop this

critical skill.”

And unless a mentor has the necessary skills to develop a productive and effectual relationship with his or her mentee, the process is worthless. Without a clear set of ideals and the tools to carry them out, most mentorship situations will founder.

“Many people don’t know how to build and maintain a strong mentoring relationship,” says Everson. “Although it is such a crucial part of the way we operate, and there is a huge demand for this type of skills transfer and development in South Africa, there is not enough emphasis placed on learning how to mentor properly.”

She explains that there are certain fundamental competencies required to be an effective mentor, and these apply across the board. “Essentially we’re looking at a life skill, one that applies to one’s personal or social space as much as the workplace.”

The ability to listen with one’s full attention is crucial to the process. As management writer Professor David Clutterbuck points out in his article Mentors and Mentees - The Competency Conundrum, “Effective mentors spend less than 20% of session time talking. They recognise the importance of helping a mentee work things through and establish his or her own insights. They use questions to make frequent shifts of perspective, so that the mentee can understand the issues more fully.