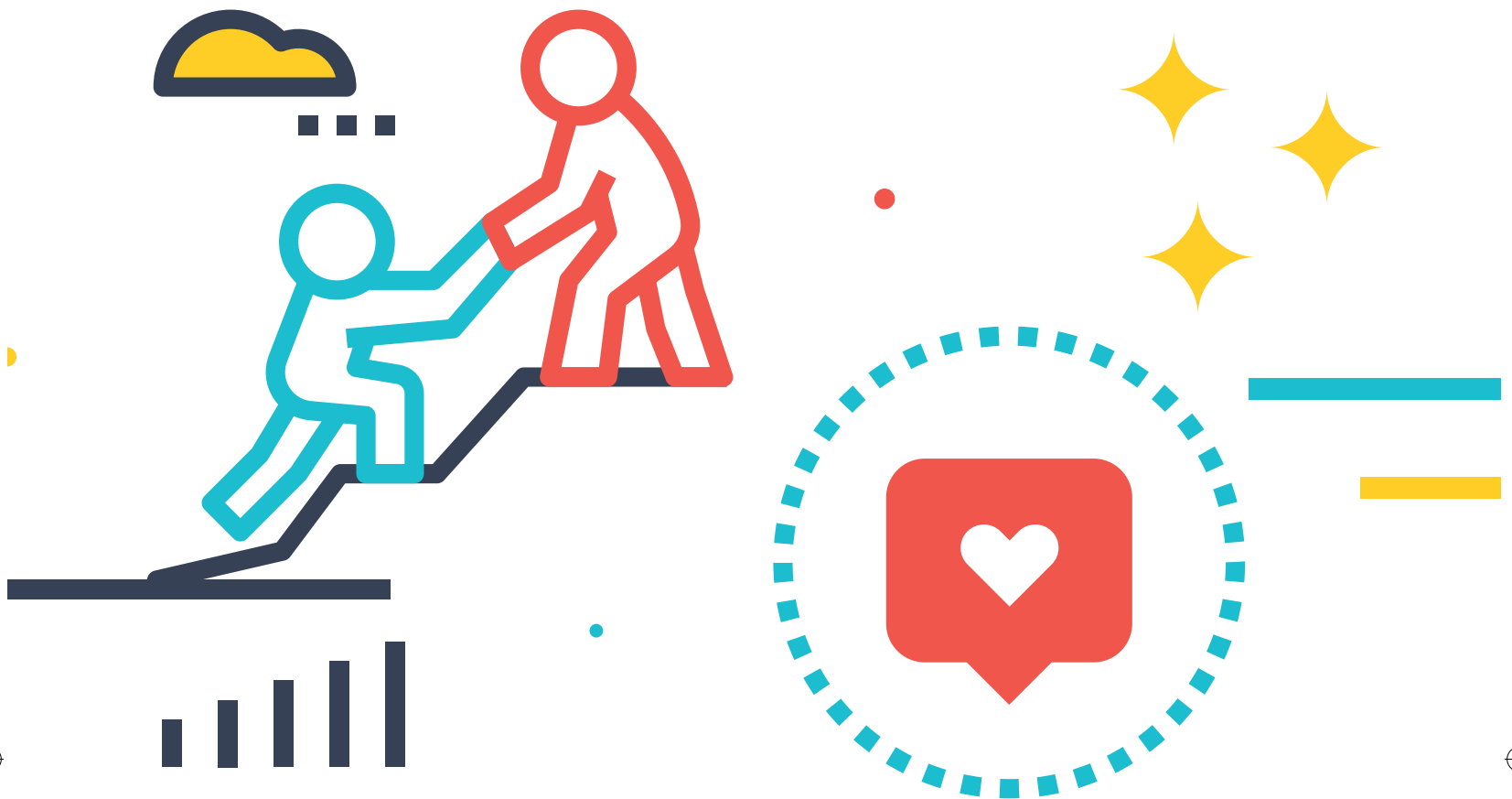




TRANSFORMATIVE MENTORING

Randy Emelo sets out the stepping stones
to successful mentoring relationships



When mentoring works, it can be a truly transformational process for the individuals involved. It can impact a person's skill, ability or career direction, which in turn can change their life. For example, my former business partner was one of my mentors who transformed my life. He could see potential in me and encouraged me to obtain my advanced degree in Organisational Development so that I would have the credentials to go along with my existing abilities in this area. He saw the path in front of me that I didn't even have on my radar, and he served as a guide to help move me forward.

Bringing this type of transformative mentoring into the workplace is a noble and vital mission. Learning and development leaders who bring mentoring into their companies can help build a sense of belonging and community through the programmes. This is valuable work, but it is still work. Mentoring programmes need administrative attention to run smoothly;

they will not just run themselves. Consider these two statements. Do you think these are facts or myths?

- ▶ Mentees and mentors know what to do once matched in pairs or groups.
- ▶ Participants know how to maintain the right level of focus on the mentoring relationship over the life of the relationship.

If you think these are true statements, then you may already be running a stellar mentoring programme at your organisation. Good for you! Unfortunately, these statements simply aren't true for most organisations' mentoring programmes. There may be a few participants who have no fear and will dive right into mentoring relationships if the opportunity arises, but that is more the exception than the rule. The same can be said for the people who maintain momentum over the course of their relationship; most need help and guidance with this.

The truth is that mentoring participants need support from



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administrators. Once matches are made, administrators should provide tips, tools and training to participants so that relationships can start off strong and maintain momentum. As I stated earlier, this is work, but it is important work that should not be shrugged aside.

Here are three areas that can have a tremendous positive impact on mentoring relationships, along with ways that administrators can help support them.

Essential element 1: Setting goals

Writing development goals can be daunting. Goals and objectives are often confused. However, they serve two very different purposes. Goals →



are the purpose towards which actions are directed; they are an aspirational desire that is worth striving towards. Goals are not measurable or tangible.

Objectives are things that one's actions are expected to obtain; they are specific actions that result in goal attainment. Objectives *must* be measurable and tangible.

With these definitions in mind, I contend that, when establishing developmental goals, it is better to avoid the rigour of the SMART acronym. While SMART goals are great for establishing performance measures, they conflict greatly with developmental activities. Instead, I recommend REAL goals for mentoring. The REAL acronym stands for Relevant, Experimental, Aspirational and Learning-based.

When creating developmental goals, mentoring participants should try to incorporate these four attributes:

- ▶ Relevant – indicate why the development goal is important and worthwhile.
- ▶ Experimental – identify development activity that will lead to greater insight.
- ▶ Aspirational – identify an area of desired development.
- ▶ Learning-based – express outcomes that are focused on gaining capability.

For example, notice how the REAL elements come into play in these sample developmental goals:

- ▶ *Goal: Develop more strategic thinking.* I want to improve my ability to see the big picture and take a longer view of critical business trends. I want to rise above the tactical day-to-day details that I manage and focus on the developing trends within my discipline.
- ▶ *Goal: Develop better remote management.* I want to increase my effectiveness as a team leader with the direct reports

that I manage remotely. I want to make better use of virtual technology to plan, connect and collaborate.

- ▶ *Goal: Develop improved time management.* I want to spend more time on important work activity. I want to learn ways to more effectively manage my priorities.

If these developmental goals had been written using the SMART acronym, they would look vastly different. They also would shift from being developmental goals to becoming performance objectives.

When working with your mentoring participants, encourage them to focus on goals, not objectives. Have mentees and mentors put their attention to what they want to accomplish over the next six weeks, or month, or quarter. Their REAL goals provide a clear criterion against which activity can be planned and progress can be assessed.

Participants can reflect on what they want to accomplish, envision what success could look like, explore options for bringing their goal to



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reality, and then agree on an action to take in pursuit of their goal. From there, they can take action, assess results and then adjust their goals or next actions as needed.

This is much different from focusing only on measurable outcomes, as they would with SMART goals.

Essential element 2: Building trust

Having trust in one's mentoring partner is critical for a relationship to be successful. Administrators and leaders can provide some guidelines for participants when it comes to establishing trust within mentoring relationships. These guidelines should help mentees and mentors set the tone for their relationship and give them a framework for expectations.

Three guidelines to emphasise are:

- ▶ Give willingly and generously.
- ▶ Act humbly and courageously.
- ▶ Engage others honestly and openly.

Give willingly and generously

Mentoring is a two-way street. Mentees and mentors both gain through the practice of mentoring, and both need to be engaged in giving willingly and generously to their mentoring partner. People can do this by being highly collaborative, by willingly sharing their know-how, and by generously giving time and energy.

Sometimes mentoring is simply about being there for the other person, and generously and willingly giving time to one another is an important way to build trust in the relationship.

Act humbly and courageously

One of the keys to building trust in a mentoring relationship revolves around embodying the characteristics of humility and courageousness. A large part of the collaboration and knowledge-sharing that occurs in mentoring involves revealing personal understandings about one's weaknesses or growth areas, what may have gone wrong in the past, and what lessons have been learned through previous experiences. Not everyone is willing to communicate these types of insights for fear of being seen as incompetent, unknowledgeable or foolish.

However, when mentees and mentors are courageous enough to let down their guard and expose their vulnerabilities to one another, deep and profound knowledge-sharing can occur. As a result, transformative mentoring can take place.

Engage others honestly and openly

Honesty is vital to building trust, because trust is based on confidence in other people's character. Trustworthy mentoring partners are frequently described as people who walk the talk, follow through on commitments and are consistent in their actions. In a word, these people act with integrity.

Being mentally present and actively listening will help mentees and mentors ask meaningful questions of one another and engage in deeper conversations. This, in turn, can build profound trust between

the mentoring participants.

Community exists when people come together to share a common purpose or interest, supporting and collaborating with one another to achieve something meaningful. Openly sharing insights and understandings can create a more connected and responsive organisation, and can help establish trust among mentoring participants. Building trust and community in this manner can help knowledge flow unimpeded throughout the organisation and make for a richer mentoring experience for all involved.

Essential element 3: Maintaining momentum

One of the hardest parts of a mentoring relationship is maintaining momentum. People are often surprised by how their mentoring relationships start off with high energy, desire and drive, but then flounder as other areas of their lives take priority (or at least become the squeaky wheel that grabs their attention).

Building and maintaining momentum in a mentoring relationship is all about being purposeful with the time spent in and out of the relationship. Participants may feel like their interactions with one another ebb and flow. To address this, mentees and mentors can try meeting every week for 30 minutes rather than the typical suggestion of once a month for an hour. These shorter touchpoints allow mentees and mentors to focus on smaller, incremental steps being taken each week that can lead mentees to their goals and keep the relationship moving along. Each 30-minute meeting can be spent reviewing what actions were taken since the previous week, assessing if progress was made, and generating ideas for how to take the next step toward reaching their goals. Each meeting should end with a concrete action that the participants will take. This type of purposeful and goal-driven conversation will make these weekly mentoring meetings more productive.

Accountability

Another area that administrators should address with their mentoring participants is accountability. Building and maintaining momentum in a relationship is not the sole responsibility

of the mentor; the mentee is an equal partner in this. Accountability in a mentoring relationship directly affects the amount of learning that can take place within the relationship, and consequently impacts the momentum the relationship can attain.

Without high accountability, mentoring relationships can lose focus and drift away from their developmental mooring. Subsequently, without a strong developmental focus, mentorship soon loses its effect and dialogue becomes more social than transformational.

To be accountable means to be responsible to someone for some activity – to be answerable. In the context of a mentoring relationship, this refers to mutually held expectations and agreed upon mentoring activities, including activities to monitor and evaluate progress toward stated developmental goals. In a sense, accountability is the learning tool that can be used in every mentoring conversation to ensure that mentees and mentors are progressing in their development (which they can tie to their REAL goals), and that development is thoughtful and meaningful.

Five accountability principles serve as a guide for mentoring behaviour,



and can encourage the development of accountability that is effective for personal transformation. Administrators can use these principles with mentoring participants to help them get the most from their relationships.

► *Project an attitude of action.*

Encourage mentoring participants to develop a positive, take-charge attitude. They need to be willing to take risks in their mentoring relationship, and should stretch and take actions they normally would hold back on.

► *Eliminate excuses.* Urge mentoring participants to be ruthlessly honest in communicating their intent, actions and results with their mentoring

partner. The old axiom “Let your yes be yes and your no be no” comes into play here. Excuses do not change the facts, and accountability rests on facts. All that is needed is: “Yes, I was able to get it done” or “No, I did not get it done.”

► *Hold others responsible.* Help mentees and mentors gain confidence to expect others to do what they say they will. For example, if someone needs to be accountable for an action that impacts you, help them (and yourself) by establishing a measure of accountability. Don't expect or allow excuses from others who have made commitments to you.

► *Get and give support.* Accountability needs nurturing and support. It should not feel like a pass/fail test of one's resolve, but rather like an attempt to accomplish the extraordinary. This means that attempts to accomplish something have value in that they tell us what can be done, and what can be improved upon on the next attempt. Encourage your mentoring participants to withhold judgments and treat these mentoring conversations differently than they would a performance-based conversation with a manager or subordinate.

► *Engage in courageous conversations.* It takes courage to admit that you attempted to meet a commitment but fell short. Likewise it takes pluck to ask for a progress report from someone who has made a commitment to you. Encourage your mentoring participants to take this courageous stance in their relationships to help nurture their partnerships.

At their core, mentoring relationships are about people. As such, mentoring administrators are part coach, part facilitator, part support network, and part matchmaker. Training and learning leaders must consider these various aspects and participate in the mentoring programme in multiple ways in order to make the programmes work. Transformational mentoring can occur; we just have to want it badly enough to make it happen. **TJ**

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