

Mentoring : The Gentler Art of Guiding

Dr. Sebastian Narively



A mentor is a guide supporting us with the ideas and resources we require to grow.

Done right, mentoring is a powerful and effective tool for learning and for climbing up the career ladder.

"The man may safely venture on his way who is so guided that he cannot stray."

Walter Scott

It looks obvious in hindsight that the most valuable insights we have gained about education, work and life, came through some form of guidance and support, not from textbooks or classroom learning. At different stages in life, we had trustworthy and experienced advisors, termed mentors, with the knowledge, skills and perspective we seek, ready to share their experience and expertise with us. Mentoring is indispensable to idea generation and skills updation throughout our career. A good mentor is a "guide, philosopher and friend", to quote Alexander Pope. He is a guide supporting us with the ideas and resources we require to grow, quite like a diagnostician examining what is going on with us.

We know from experience and observation that our capabilities are limited, especially when we do things in isolation. Here lies the relevance of the mentor who as-

sists us in self-knowledge, and in figuring out our future steps. However, mentoring is not exclusively confined to deciding which skills to sharpen for securing plum jobs or scaling the entrepreneurial ramp. It can also involve finding peace and contentment with the present life and making the most of our choices.

■ Mentoring Matters

Mentoring support is crucial in work and life since career paths are becoming in-



creasingly complex and slippery. Employees and entrepreneurs have to face several organisational hurdles and burnouts that affect productivity, and "Trouble ages us dreadfully fast", as Penelope regrets in *The Odyssey*. But mentors bring a fresh perspective combined with a vested interest in our success. They work with us to identify the keys to our progress and modify our behaviour suitably. Working intimately with such a trusted guide, we can cope with the challenges by playing to our strengths, building the right skills and learning to manage up with the right attitude so as to romp home a rosy future.

Etymologically, mentoring is an eponymous word, a term deriving from the name of a person or place. For example, jovial (friendly and cheerful) deriving from Jove alias Jupiter, the chief Greek God; a Herculean task (needing great strength); 'sadism' (deliberate cruelty) from the French writer Marquis de Sade; or badminton (a place in England). 'Men-

toring' derives from Mentor a close friend of Ulysses in 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey'. When Ulysses was away from home for 20 years to fight the Trojan war and wander over the inhospitable seas, his trusted friend Mentor groomed his son Telemachus commendably. Consequently mentor, rhyming with centaur, found entry into English lexicons in the sense of an experienced and trusted advisor. Done right, mentoring is a powerful and effective tool for learning and for climbing up the career ladder.

■ Mentoring at Home

Responsible parenthood is stage I of a child's formation through effective mentoring. "Home is the resort of love, of peace and plenty, where supporting and supported, polished friends and dearest relatives mingle into bliss", writes Edward Thomson. If a child errs, the fault lies not in the stars but in the parents. Plato, seeing a child do mischief in the street, went forth and corrected his father for it. A dutiful parent is meticulously alert and concerned about the child's behavioural problems. He inculcates a strong value system in the child and lays the foundation for a successful life. He is quite affectionate and caring, but strict in limiting the hours his child spends watching the TV. A recent US study revealed that a kid of 14 years had witnessed nearly 12,000 murders on the TV. Children who view violence in TV serials and movies are predisposed to aggressive behaviour in early childhood. Hence, "Train



children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray". (*The Bible* – Proverbs 22:6)

■ Mentoring at School

Mentoring is an essential component of success in one's education, career and life, irrespective of one's walk of life. In his formative years at school, he requires an understanding teacher, a mentor, who can mould the clay that he is, into a perfect creation. If he chooses a career in teaching, he is strongly in need of a reflective and knowledgeable mentor, first, for his formation as a junior teacher, and then, to be equipped in providing the right guidance to his own students in turn. Besides there should be a good match between the mentor and the mentee. The teacher-mentor "should not be continually thundering instruction into the ears of his pupil, but induce him to think, to distinguish and to find out things for himself, sometimes opening the way, at other times leaving it for him to open, and so accommodate his precepts to the capacity of his pupil", as Montaigne rightly puts it. He dutifully assists the learner in generating ideas and in peeling off the incrustation of ignorance exposing a dazzling world of information and possibilities. Two or three years with an empathetic teacher forms the proper foundation of a lifelong love for learning.

A mentor should be helpful and cool under pressure and regulate his own emotions as well as those of his mentees. Hanuman's first words in the Ramayana – "Do not be afraid"—provided immense reassurance and confidence to Sugriva. While facing a stressful situa-



tion, patience and equanimity should be his strongest forte. Humour can also effectively diffuse tension. A joke, relevant and precise, can let off stress and help in memorizing a point through association.

A mentor should interact with the mentee frequently and gather intimate personal details as well. He should listen empathetically to the protégé's problems, academic as well as personal, but should not suggest a magic bullet in haste. If the mentee is repeatedly problematic, try more one-to-one sessions with him like a loving parent. Build trust that whatever he confides while venting his ire or tension, will be kept confidential.

One of the most powerful forces that has revised the roles of teachers and students in modern education is the fast changing scenario of technological advancement. Unlike the teaching methodology of old times, 21st century instruction is a technical medley of multimedia presentations, online classes, technical projects, industry visits, web search and the like. The old model of "chalk and talk" teaching was necessitated by information scarcity. Instructors and study material were regarded as oracles of knowledge doling out enlightenment to a generation having no alternative to acquire it. But today's world is deluged with

Oxford University's Place in Higher Education



Oxford was ranked first in the world in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings for 2017, 2018 and 2019. There are nearly 24,000 students at Oxford, including 11,747 undergraduates and 11,687 postgraduates.

information at the fingertip from myriad sources. Besides new subjects and technologies, there are numerous possibilities for education and entertainment. The newgen learner of Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain is no longer at the mercy of the teacher whose role has, of late, undergone a sea change. However, though the millennials who have grown up with the internet have a luxury of access to information, there is generally a conspic-



uous dearth of attention to consuming it systematically.

Hence the role of mentors or educators is of vital significance. While ordinary teachers dilute the syllabus and focus on equipping pupils for exams and achieving academic goals, educators go beyond the textbook and fit up the student for life through experiential learning. They make learning multi-sensory, targeting the learner's all-round development. Put in a nutshell, a mentor is a teacher plus.

■ Mentoring Fresh Teachers

The development of a teacher is a long process, involving the support and guidance of many people from diverse walks of life. A greenhorn in the teaching profession should select accomplished teachers and flawless communicators with honesty and integrity as mentors. If the mentor that you get is unsympathetic and unresponsive, your career is almost in the doldrums. With an empathetic stance, the mentor anticipates potential

problems and seeks ways and means to enhance the quality of experience and professional growth of debutant teachers. His emphasis is on the growth of the teacher for the development of the learners and the advancement of high-quality teaching.

Fresh teachers benefit from collaboration and team work. When they work in isolation, they face serious constraints. But when they work in a sharing mode, they gain many of the advantages that experienced teachers enjoy, such as anticipation of instructional effects and student responses, awareness of resources and a clear vision of the core purposes of instruction. All these benefits converge to build the young teacher's calibre and confidence.

Induction into a teacher's professional growth is a long path, and mentoring exceeds the capacities of a single sage. As teachers grow, they have to develop a network of supporters. Besides the chosen mentor, the novice should seek the guidance of informal co-mentors like friends, family members and other beginners. A cousin may not know much about an English curriculum, but he may be well informed about the advantages



of forming positive relationships with others or about responding creatively to an angry parent. A friend may not have any clue to offer about managing an unruly History class, but might be a sympathetic listener to the fresher's disclosure of his failure in handling the class.

Mentors can be proactively helpful an-



anticipating some critical situations when the new teacher is quite vulnerable. They should visualize that the tenderfoot will have to face challenges related to classroom management, time management, recovering from mistakes and harsh criticism, cynical colleagues, and inclination to remain isolated like a maverick. A mentor's role in such situations is not just to predict trouble or give abrupt direction about how to solve it, but to facilitate the problem-solving process so that the beginning teacher explores options and assumes responsibility of a course of action.

Mentors can also serve as role models themselves or expose junior teachers to exemplary models in action, followed by discussions as to what made their teaching great, or how to emulate the best practices.

■ Mentoring Professionals

For a professional, stuck in a career rut or swimming through turbulent times, mentoring is of utmost importance in facing the challenges of the industry, like the need for continual updation, keeping abreast of changing trends, facing unhealthy competition from peers, requiring a strong support mechanism in times

of crises, tackling indecorous behaviour of co-workers, and achieving a work-life balance fundamental to security and self-fulfillment.

Ambitious professionals often invest a lot of time exploring strategies for scaling higher rungs of success such as a better job, greater recognition and higher professional satisfaction. Yet most of them fail in getting the expected sense of fulfilment. Those who earnestly strive for career advancement have to identify a right mentor, and get the right advice, at the right time.

For professionals, mentoring relationships are occasions for sharing and benefiting from the experience of experts. Strengthening interpersonal relationships and teamwork among employees is advantageous to the organization also. It improves the sharing of the compa-



ny's resources, selection of quality staff, and reduces attrition. Mentoring plays a major role in talent development and succession planning. Involvement of top management and senior executives is an additional guarantee to the success of mentorship programme in leading organizations.

As a junior employee your success de-

Largest Academic Library in the World

The Harvard Library—the world's largest academic library—includes 20.4 million volumes, 180,000 serial titles, 400 mn manuscript items, 10 mn photographs, 124 mn archived web pages, and 5.4 terabytes of born-digital archives and manuscripts.



depends on knowledge sharing and teamwork, gaining technical proficiency and meeting the company's targets. But in your senior role your business is to establish the company's strategies, policies and values. Here you have to create an environment where your colleagues also can excel. At this stage, the skills that served you well in the past are no longer adequate. As you strive to meet new challenges, you require new mentors invested in helping you succeed. And working in close liaison with those sounding boards you can capitalize on the knowledge and skills acquired in your current role and take on greater opportunities.

Now that you are into the thirties, forties or even fifties, you still need mentoring that is tailored to your individual strengths and career goals. (This is none of the company's business). At this stage you have to broaden your perspectives further and enhance access to greater career advancement opportunities. For this, you have to chalk out a network of multiple mentors who are willing to work with you to optimize your current role. Since self-improvement is your main



strategy, it is advisable to participate in external activities also that reinforce your professional strength and reputation. For example, if you have experience in managing large scale civil engineering

projects, join a check dam project of your local gram panchayat.

There are several misconceptions about mentoring such as seeking advice



from only one perfect mentor, that mentoring is a formal long-term relationship, that it is meant only for freshers and that mentoring is offered by experienced people out of magnanimity.

■ Three Types of Mentors

Diana Coutu, formerly Senior Editor, Harvard Business Review, holds that there are three distinct types of mentors. 1) The co-mentor – a peer, a colleague or friend, from whom we can learn a specific skill, one who needs us as much as we need him. It is a relationship between equals based on exchange of skills or expertise, not a top-down kinship or rapport. 2) The remote mentor – someone outside our organisation who can provide a different point of view and unbiased advice. If we want to downsize our section and are at a loss whom to issue the pink slip, instead of seeking guidance from senior managers with little experience in this situation, we consult someone outside who has managed a successful reorg at another organization. Remote mentors can be family members, old college teachers or top-flight veterans in the same line, who, interacting with us from

Countries of Origin of Foreign Students in the U.S.

Students from China, India and South Korea account for more than half (54%) of all newly enrolled foreign students pursuing degrees at U.S. colleges and universities



a distance, can hone our skills almost in mint condition. 3) The invisible mentor – someone we learn from with little direct interaction, but is crucial in our advancement. Invisible mentors can be selected from authors, leaders, social reformers, productive professionals, successful entrepreneurs and accomplished artists/artists whose creativity and integrity will motivate us with a diligent drive to excel. John F. Kennedy received mentoring support from Winston Churchill's speeches and Edmund Burke's writings, while Bill Clinton drew inspiration from John F. Kennedy.

■ Training Mentors

Fresh mentors require training mainly in the basic principles of empathetic listening and effective communication. Training should deal with the mentor's role as a facilitator in the newcomer's career advancement. A mentor has to be in the



know of the common concerns and patterns of experience of the fresher. A particular approach to mentorship may not be suitable in all cases.

■ Mentoring on the Curriculum

Mentoring is yet to gain recognition as an academic discipline in Indian univer-



sities. However, a few British universities have come up as trailblazers in this field. Oxford Brooks University offers Master's in 'Coaching and Mentoring Practice' while Manchester Metropolitan University has an MA course in 'Coaching and Mentoring'. The University of Derby proffers MA in 'Education: Leadership Coaching and Mentoring' while the University of Huddersfield and York St John University have a Master's programme in 'Education: Mentoring and Coaching'. At the Universities of Chester and Nottingham the list of courses currently on offer includes P G Certified Programmes in 'Coaching and Mentoring', and 'Mentoring and Coaching Teachers' respectively.

■ Finding the Right Mentor

If you are waiting for a competent and conscientious mentor who can recognize your potential and conduct you to happiness and fortune, you are likely to be disappointed. To exploit opportunities to grow and move ahead in academics, career and life, you have to take up the responsibility of working in tandem with the right mentors who mend minds. They have your best interest at heart and are ready to share whatever they have learnt to elevate you to greater heights. ■

Weeklies Started by Bal Gangadhar Tilak

Before Independence, Bal Gangadhar Tilak started weeklies such as *Kesari* (The Lion) and *Mahratta*. *Kesari* was in Marathi while *Mahratta* was an English weekly. Through these newspapers Tilak became widely known for his criticisms of British rule.

