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38 – Mentoring – a Quality Approach to Professional Development

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The term 'mentoring' is derived from the character 'Mentor' in Homers Odyssey. In the story, Mentor was an old friend of Odysseus and was the respected advisor to Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope. Odysseus entrusted his Son and household to Mentor when he sailed against Troy. The goddess Athena took on the appearance of Mentor in order to guide young Telemachus in his time of difficulty, giving him prudent counsel. Since then, wise and trusted advisers have been called "mentors".

Appraisal is now an annual requirement of every doctor registered with the GMC in the UK in order to continue to demonstrate their ongoing fitness to practice.

Revalidation occurs in a five yearly cycle enabling a doctor to continue the practice of medicine. Although the process of Mentoring has been around for a long time the advent of annual appraisal has meant that appraisers have identified 'doctors in difficulty' who need the advice and guidance of a mentor with increasing frequency.

So what is Mentoring?

"Mentoring is to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be." (Eric Parsloe)

Mentoring is a powerful personal development and empowerment tool. It is an effective way of helping people to progress in their careers and is becoming increasingly popular as its potential is realised. It is a partnership between two people. The MENTOR (the person doing the mentoring) and the MENTEE (the person receiving the mentoring) normally work in a similar field or share similar experiences. It is a helpful relationship based upon mutual trust and respect and is different to coaching an individual. It is for the mentee to find their own path rather than being told what to do.

A mentor is a guide who can help the mentee to find the right direction and who can help them to develop solutions to career issues. Mentors rely upon having had similar experiences to gain an empathy with the mentee and an understanding of their issues. Mentoring provides the mentee with an opportunity to think about career options, personal difficulties life hurdles and helps them to progress.

A mentor should help the mentee to believe in themselves and boost their confidence and above all do no harm in this relationship.

A mentor should ask questions and challenge, while providing guidance and encouragement. Mentoring allows the mentee to explore new ideas in confidence. It is a chance to look more closely at themselves, their issues, opportunities and what they want in life. Mentoring is about becoming more self aware, taking responsibility for your life and directing your life in the direction you decide, rather than leaving it to chance.

How is it achieved?

Usually there is an agreement between the mentee and the mentor for a number of sessions over a period of time. The session length and the number of sessions are predetermined so that dependence on the mentor does not occur. The mentor should have a proven track record of helping others and of continuing self development and continuing professional and personal development.

The sessions may consist of whatever the Mentee may bring but the premise of the Mentor is to get the Mentee to 'solve' the problems themselves through the use of powerful questioning and putting the mentee in the driving seat to re-frame the problem and approach it from a different point of view. Powerful questioning should take into account the learning styles of the mentee i.e. Honey and Mumford - Theorists, Activists, Reflectors and Pragmatists. The powerful questioning can then be tailored on these styles so that they are even more relevant to the mentee. This process often begins with the mentee producing a time line and looking at significant life changing events that have occurred that may influence behaviour, to get the mentee to understand why they behave as they do.

At the end of the sessions it is implied that the Mentee will have been on a journey of self discovery and been empowered to change their behaviour.

This process can be divided into the ' five phase' approach to mentoring:

Phase One: Contracting and building the relationship: the mentor and mentee build an initial relationship, getting to know one another and building rapport. They establish what the mentee hope to gain from the mentoring and confirm what the mentor has to offer. They jointly agree the mentoring contract.

Phase Two: Understanding the Mentee: the mentee describes their current situation and how they would like things to be in the future. This looks at the mentees strengths and weaknesses, skills and experience.

Phase three: Analysis: the mentee and mentor work together to apply appropriate frameworks to help the mentee gain awareness and understanding, recognising the patterns of behaviour that are relevant.

Phase four: Action Planning: the mentor and mentee identify the options that will extend the range of possibilities for the mentee. This involves looking at problems in different ways and the possibility of acting as 'devil's advocate', to challenge the mentee to change and take a different perspective. This involves considering and comparing the options and helping the mentee to understand the implications of each option in order to work out the best option and create a detailed action plan.

Phase five: Implementation and review: this is where the mentee puts their action plan into practice. This is the result of the mentoring process.

The elements of this process are

Awareness - understanding what's going on in the here and now, not reacting in ways that are historical and redundant.

Alternatives- being able to identify and develop choices for any given situation and not having one way of responding.

Authenticity - being able to build genuine relationships with others.

Key to the success of mentoring is the relationship established between mentor and mentee, the formulation of a 'contract' between the two parties to reach a successful end point involving a changed behaviour to enable the individual to progress and continue in their career.

Take Home Messages

- The need for Mentoring is increasing.
- A contract is needed between mentor and mentee.
- The premise is 'Do no harm'.
- The mentee should be empowered.
- Effective change should be an action plan outcome.

