

The power of mentoring

BY EMMA STAPLETON AND ROHMA ABRAR

What is a mentor, and what are the benefits for mentee and mentor?

Emma Stapleton and **Rohma Abrar**, mentor and mentee respectively, explain.

The term 'mentor' is derived from Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the goddess Athena, disguised as Mentor, guides and advises Odysseus's son. Mentoring has become an everyday word, it is a process recommended within the General Medical Council's 'Good Medical Practice', and a concept lauded by The Royal College of Surgeons of England, in their 2021 'Kennedy Report on Diversity'.

In our Mar/Apr 2019 issue, Harry Spiers wrote an inspiring Trainee Matters article on 'Mentorship and its role in surgical training' [1], observing that the importance of mentorship has been documented in surgery and other industries [2]. Interestingly though, he didn't describe his experience of mentorship, but of effective supervision, patronage, and surgical role-modelling. And this is a good place to start!

As professionals in ENT and audiology, many of us can think of 'mentors' who guided and supported us through our training and even beyond. However, more specific definitions of mentoring have emerged, and it is recognised that, whilst there is overlap between supervision, patronage, mentorship, role-modelling, coaching and perhaps even counselling, these are precious individual entities which should not be blurred into one another.

Wikipedia tells us that "a mentor influences the personal and professional growth of a mentee. Most traditional mentorships involve having senior employees mentor more junior employees, but mentors do not necessarily have to be more senior than the people they mentor." And so, of course, one's mentor can be the

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Figure 1. (L-R): Rohma Abrar, Emma Stapleton, Tanya Ta.

same person as one's supervisor or role model, but this does not have to be the case.

I'm fortunate to be considered a mentor by numerous colleagues in ENT, but I'm not really their mentor. I'm a supervisor, an older friend, an opinionated and encouraging guide on their journeys through early ENT careers. I garner far more inspiration from their youth and optimism, than they could possibly learn from me. And I think these are the rich, valued, professional relationships to which Harry referred in his 2019 article (Figure 1).

A great deal of work on mentoring has been led by Mary Connor and Julia Pokora whose book, *Coaching and Mentoring at Work*, is an accessible text, stuffed full of evidence, wisdom, and guidance [3]. I highly recommend it. A comment in the blurb mentions "being a coach or mentor is very different from the expert helper role... a lot more difficult, and a lot more effective." This is a beautiful encapsulation of the value of mentoring which, performed expertly, can serve to complement, and enhance supervisory and other roles.

Connor and Pokora use Egan's Skilled Helper model for a mentoring conversation,

with three points that need to be explored to move forward: What's going on? What do you want? How to achieve this? [4] (Figure 2). Whilst this may appear complex at first, it's a reliable framework for effective exploration of an issue. While clunky in the hands of a beginner, when executed by a skilled mentor using active listening, summarising, and widening of perspectives, it is quite an artform. Of course, not everyone can (or would want to) achieve artform-level mentoring. Mentors must have a genuine interest in mentoring and must adhere to a professional code of respect, empathy, genuineness, and

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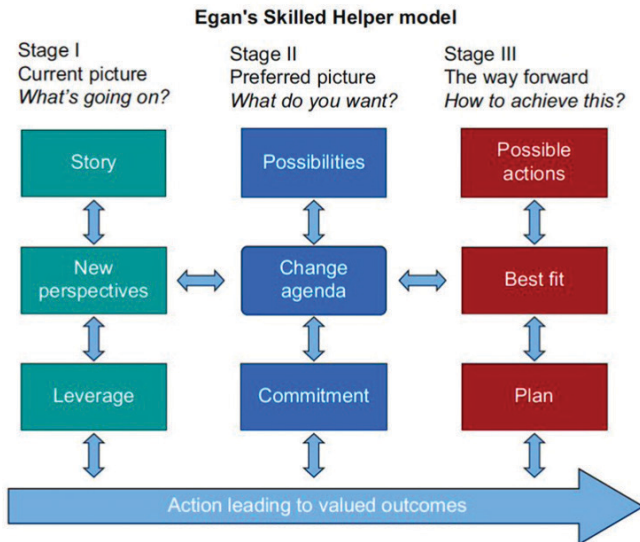


Figure 2. Egan's Skilled Helper model. Used with permission from McCrossan R, Swan L, Redfern N. Mentoring for doctors in the UK: what it can do for you, your colleagues, and your patients. *BJA Education* 2020;**20**(12):404-10.

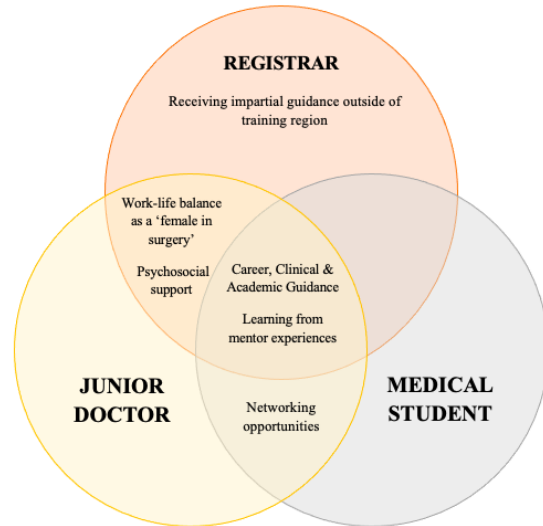


Figure 3. What do mentees seek from mentorship?

confidentiality to their mentee. Voluntary, informed mentees are also an important part of this process.

Effective mentoring provides a psychologically safe, confidential space to discuss an opportunity or dilemma. It is not only for use in times of crisis! One of my strong personal beliefs is that we must move on from viewing mentoring as a punitive process for those in difficulty. On the contrary, it is a powerful tool for all colleagues, including those at the top of their game, for whom mentoring can be used to discuss and navigate new professional opportunities.

When we consider Egan's model from the mentee's point of view, it may appear a little simplistic. Will a three-part algorithm help process and move forward the complex, confusing, perhaps even hostile situations in which burgeoning professionals might find themselves? We carried out some qualitative research within the WENTS (Women in ENT) mentorship programme, exploring mentee expectations [5]. What are colleagues who sign up for a national developmental mentorship programme hoping to achieve? Figure 3 demonstrates several interesting findings. Participants of all career stages seek career, clinical and academic guidance, and a wish to learn from the experiences of their mentor. Participants in early careers seek networking opportunities. Those further down their training pathway seek psychosocial support, and gender-specific wisdom. Senior trainees seek impartial guidance from outwith their training and employment regions.

And so, we see that, whilst informed mentees are an essential part of a successful mentoring relationship, the expectations of mentees extend well beyond the defined mentoring role, and these expectations reflect the specific challenges of their career stage.

The theme of seeking impartial guidance from outwith one's training and employment region is one we must take seriously. There are abundant local and regional mentorship schemes which, whilst useful for students and early-career colleagues, may not always be appropriate in environments where there are cultural issues that colleagues do not feel able to discuss or explore within that culture. This is where the value of national mentorship programmes becomes apparent. Or even international; I've previously reached out to discuss sensitive topics with overseas colleagues who had insight to the theme of my dilemma but were professionally distant from its environment. The era of unlimited instant communication technology has made this a reality, though respect for time zones is essential. Reigning myself back in geographically, I suspect there is enormous potential in the power of cross-specialty mentorship. Our friends and colleagues in anaesthesia are decades ahead of us in the mentoring game and, I envision, our most powerful ally.

We know what's going on. We know what we want to achieve. But how can we move forward with this? Trained mentors, informed mentees, national cross-specialty networks and a culture of empathy and respect is an admirable aim. There is a lot of work to do here. Encouraging motivated mentors to learn effective mentoring skills and models is a useful starting point for groups and institutions. Embedding a culture of mentoring within our respective networks is a long-term goal which will enhance individual practice, clinician wellbeing, and the professional development of mentees and mentors alike.

Let's do it.

References

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5. Abrar R, Stapleton E, WENTS National Mentoring Collaborative. Exploring mentor and mentee expectations from a national otolaryngology developmental mentorship programme (under peer review).

USEFUL LINK

The Association of Anaesthetists: <https://anaesthetists.org/Home/Wellbeing-support/Mentoring>

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