

University of Oxford  
Department of Primary Care Health Sciences

## **Skills for mentoring and co-mentoring with colleagues**

Internal professional development seminar

30<sup>th</sup> April 2013, 1.30-5pm

Venue: Seminar Room A, Said Business School

Facilitator: Suzanne Shale, Health Experiences Research Group

The materials in this document are based on those developed for the Kent, Surrey & Sussex Deanery programme 'Thinking Partnerships for New Consultants' in association with:

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## **Mentoring and co-mentoring**

Both mentoring and co-mentoring are completely independent of any form of assessment or appraisal, and focus on personal development needs. The process supplies a space for reflection outside the immediate service demands of day-to-day clinical or academic practice. It encourages fresh, independent thinking and allows possibilities, difficulties and strategies to be considered with the help of an interested and informed colleague. Both

mentoring and co-mentoring use the close understanding of context that a peer can give, but, with a moderately structured process, good mentoring is far more than an informal chat.

**Mentoring** is generally a relationship between a senior and junior colleague in which the aim is to support the junior colleague's development in a particular institution, role, or phase of career. It is often construed as advice giving, but the emphasis in this seminar will be on using listening and questioning skills to support deep thinking by the mentee.

**Co-mentoring** invites colleagues to work in thinking partnerships to support and extend each other's professional development. Unlike traditional mentoring, co-mentoring does not rest on one colleague having superior knowledge or experience. Because of its reciprocal nature, co-mentoring benefits both participants equally and empowers less senior staff by inviting them to the role of mentor. Both participants are aware of the general approach to mentoring sessions, so each supports the other to make the process work well.

In this session you will be introduced to skills for mentoring and co-mentoring drawn from two primary sources.

The first is the simple and effective T-GROW model, which is widely used in coaching. The second is Nancy Kline's work on 'Thinking Partnerships'. Her first book, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* introduces her thinking and techniques and describes how to use them to develop thinking partnerships and thinking environments. Her second book, *More Time to Think*, describes some of the issues that arise working this way and is akin to a 'masterclass'. Both are very readable. The first, in particular, is strongly recommended if you'd like to deepen your mentoring practice or think about how these techniques can be used more widely in your professional life.

As someone who has trained both mentors and co-mentors at the University of Oxford and in clinical settings, my strong recommendation is that you seek out *in preference* a co-mentoring relationship. I have witnessed how extraordinarily empowering these are, not least because each party is equally committed to them and both benefit. By the same token, I have seen many mentoring schemes founder for lack of skill and commitment in the mentors.

## **Mentoring and co-mentoring using TGROW**

Thinking Partnership conversations are co-created between the mentor and mentee, and are significantly shaped by what emerges during the session. Having said that, there are flexible models that can be used to provide the session with a loose structure. TGROW, based on the GROW model developed in the 1980s and widely promoted by Sir John Whitmore, provides a useful structure for co-mentoring meeting. The five steps are summarised below.

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### TOPIC GOAL REALITY OPTIONS WAY-FORWARD

**TOPIC** - After a few sessions you will probably find that the 'official' start to the meeting happens quite naturally, with little or no effort on the part of the mentor. However, at first you might find it helpful to use one of the following 'openers' to get you off to a good start.

Suggested 'openers':

- *What would you like to talk about today?*
- *How would you like to use today's session?*
- *What is the most important thing for you to focus on today?*
- *What has been happening since your last session?*
- *Where would you like to start?*

The 'openers' work best if they are open-ended and non-leading. Asking a question that has no particular agenda or assumption embedded within it also gives the mentee total control over the direction in which s/he wishes to take it.

Below are some less appropriate ways of starting a session:

- X** *Did you do all of your actions from the last session?*
- X** *I think it would be wise if we spent some time talking about your time management since that was obviously very important to you when we last met.*
- X** *I think you will agree that what you need to sort out in today's session is...*
- X** *So, as I'm mentoring you today, I think we should focus on...*

**GOAL** – Declaring early on in the meeting what your partner would like to get from the session is essential. Without a clear session goal, it becomes difficult to navigate your way through the ideas, thoughts, insights and options which emerge. If you don't know where you want to be by the end of the session, you won't know how to get there and whether or not you've arrived.

Suggested questions to help clarify the session goal:

- *What would you like to go away with from today's session?*
- *What would be the most useful outcome from our session?*
- *By 5pm, what would you like to have achieved?*
- *What is the most important thing you would like to get from today's meeting?*

Keep in mind that the mentee may need time to clarify precisely what they would like to get out of the session. Sometimes their session goals will be too

ambitious to tackle within the scope of the session. Here your questions will be important to help them to 'chunk down' their session goal to something more realistic.

You can do this by asking questions such as:

- *Given the limited time that we have today, what would be a realistic goal for this session?*
- *Which aspect of that goal is most pressing for you right now?*
- *Is there a sub-goal within that overall goal which you would like to look at first,*
- *and what would that be?*

**REALITY** – This will often be the most important and 'meatiest' part of the session. Here your task is to help your mentee to explore what is currently happening in the mentee's life and to make sense of it. It is a truism that what we say out loud sounds, looks and feels different from the messages that circulate round and round in our heads. The benefits of describing your reality to a truly attentive listener are frequently underestimated, particularly by academics accustomed to working and thinking alone. However, this is in large part where the power of co-mentoring lies.

It is important to give time to exploring the REALITY, because this is where the mentee generally starts to rethink their situation and see ways forward for themselves.

To get the REALITY part of the session kick-started, ask questions such as:

- *Tell me what is happening right now in relation to...?*
- *You say that you're finding it difficult to communicate with the project Principal Investigator. How do you communicate with her at the moment?*
- *Why don't you start by telling me a little bit more about what's going on in your department that's making it difficult to get away on time?*

**OPTIONS** – With careful listening and questioning in the REALITY section, the OPTIONS that seem obvious and viable will gradually reveal themselves to the mentee.

To facilitate the process of uncovering what OPTIONS your partner can consider, ask questions like:

- *What needs to change?*
- *If you could only do 3 things to change things right now, what would you do?*
- *What needs to happen in order to make this work better?*
- *What options are open to you right now?*

- *If I had a magic wand, what kinds of things would you like to see happen?*
- *If you could only do 3 things to change things right now, what would you do?*
- *What do you think you can do to improve this situation?*
- *What solutions are you considering?*

**WILL or WAY FORWARD** – This is where the mentor helps the mentee to come up with a plan of action which they will begin implementing. Once they have distilled the various OPTIONS, their WAY FORWARD will begin to come into focus.

*Your role as mentor is to keep an eye on how the action steps are linked to the session goal agreed at the start of your meeting.*

Also, you will want to do a commitment check to establish that the mentee has the will as well as the willpower to follow through on the agreed plan of action. Finally, you can ask questions to discover what specifically they will do, how and when they will do it and what difficulties they can see and how they will deal with these in order to stay on course.

Clarifying the WAY FORWARD comes from asking questions like:

- *What will you commit to doing in order to make that change?*
- *How will you make that happen?*
- *What is the next step?*
- *What does your action plan look like?*
- *How committed are you to taking that forward?*
- *What might stop you from doing that?*
- *How will you overcome any obstacles that could block your progress?*
- *What support do you need in order to move forward?*
- *Who can help you with this next step?*

## **Questioning skills for mentoring & co-mentoring**

“The mind works best in the presence of a question, especially when our goal is to promote good, independent thinking.” (Kline, N, More Time to Think, 2009).

Giving your mentee your full attention by practising active listening is one part of the approach. As you begin experimenting in your 1:1 sessions, you will quickly become aware of the important role questions can play in helping to move your mentee forward.

Powerful question techniques for your sessions include:

**Clean and concise questions** – the shorter the question, the more powerful the impact on the mentee

**Open-ended questions** – help widen the co-mentoring conversation and options to explore

**Reflective questions** – often ignite a sense of curiosity and wonder within the mentee, inviting them to explore their own thoughts, beliefs and values

**Pre-supposition (slide-past) questions** - allow the mentee to slide-past anything that could be blocking them from taking action, moving forwards

**Sustaining the silence** – possibly one of the most powerful ‘questions’ of all which is the ultimate form of respect for the thinker as it allows sufficient space for thoughts and insights to take form and emerge.

And the next is not really a question but often works in the same way as a question:

**Reflecting back** – provides the mentee with an authentic ‘mirror’ for their thoughts, allowing them to check the accuracy of what they’ve said and take a fresh look at what is truly meant or felt

Questioning skill develops with practice. We become more competent and confident in our questioning skills by trying out a specific question, getting it wrong, trying again, reflecting on what went wrong, trying another question, ie through engaging in the learning process of ‘failing forwards’.

Questions help the mentee to:

- Relax and reflect
- Expand and widen the focus of attention
- Make a decision
- Raise awareness and deepen understanding of thoughts, feelings, behaviours,
- beliefs, values, assumptions
- Clarify understanding
- Make connections between different facets of awareness

## **Open and Closed Questions**

All questions fall somewhere along the continuum of open and closed questions. At the closed end are questions designed to obtain specific responses by offering the other person limited choice. At the opposite end are

the more open questions which offer endless ways of responding. With closed questions, the response may be a factual piece of information or a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Open questions 'open up' the individual's thinking, allowing them to explore their thoughts and seek the most appropriate answer.

**How would you turn these closed questions into open questions (to get beyond a 'YES' or 'NO' reply or a one word answer):**

*Did that make you feel angry?*

*Do you agree with my diagnosis?*

*Are you happy with this decision?*

*Is there anything that will get in the way of you committing to following through on that?*

**And what would turn the following questions into slide-past questions:**

*Are you going to get your case study written up and submitted for publication?*

*Are you going to start playing your guitar again to help you relax?*

## **A selection of powerful questions**

The type of question you ask will, to some extent, determine the response you get. Below are some 'good' and 'powerful' questions, which you may find worthwhile and could keep them in your question collection to help awaken and refresh the thinking during a session. Questions are simply ways of responding when your partner seems to be stuck, blocked, finding it difficult to resolve an issue or unable to find a way forward.

Questions particularly useful in the early (goal and reality) stages of the session:

- *When you're in this situation, what happens?*
- *How can I help you with this issue?*
- *When you think about this issue, how does it make you feel?*
- *How else could you interpret that?*
- *What is the worst thing that could happen?*
- *What is the best thing that could happen?*
- *What action have you taken so far?*
- *What would the ideal look like?*
- *What is the question that needs to be answered?*

- *What question would you like me to ask you most?*
- *What do you know now, that you are going to find out in a year?*
- *How will you know when you have it?*
- *What are we not mentioning that needs to be addressed?*

Questions that are particularly useful when considering options and ways forward:

- *What would it take for you to find a solution to this problem?*
- *If your friend was struggling with this same issue, what advice would you give him/her?*
- *If it were entirely up to you, how would you improve this situation?*
- *If you could only change 3 things about how you are approaching this situation, what would you do?*
- *What are the consequences of not doing that?*
- *How will you know when you have fully achieved your objective?*
- *What has stopped you from achieving this so far?*
- *What do you feel when you think about this new goal now?*
- *Whose support will you need?*
- *What obstacles might you encounter?*
- *How might you overcome them?*
- *How do you want to move forward?*
- *What is the very first step?*
- *What else will you do?*
- *What happens if things don't work out the way you think they will?*

## **Limiting beliefs – our internal assumptions**

Listen closely to your inner dialogue and self-talk and you will uncover those beliefs which you are holding onto and, if they are negative, will be holding you back. Negative or limiting beliefs stand in the way of forward movement, stopping you from taking decisions that work for you, finding fulfillment or achieving success. A limiting belief is based on an assumption – whether true or untrue – which we have arrived at based on our past behaviours. This conditioning affects our beliefs, both positively and negatively. And our beliefs are the things that create our reality – only we can control them, only we can choose to act on them.

**A limiting belief or untrue assumption is not merely a negative idea the mind possesses, it is a negative idea that possesses the mind.**

There is a strong unconscious drive to behave consistently with our beliefs. Since beliefs are given back to us exactly as our subconscious mind took them in, we think and behave in a way that is consistent with our beliefs, whether positive and affirming, or negative and contradicting. Breaking through these blocks begins by gently challenging the unbeneficial belief, looking at the underlying assumption rationally, asking whether it is true or

untrue and understanding how it impedes our progress. Through challenging the limiting belief we are given permission to unlock the power and potential within us.

## **Incisive questions**

Incisive questions are a fantastic tool developed by Nancy Kline for challenging limiting beliefs and the negative self-talk and assumptions from which they are formed. These questions serve a dual purpose. When the co-mentee hears the first part of an incisive question, they put their limiting beliefs to one side. They are transported into a more affirming realm, where they are allowed to believe the opposite about themselves. The second part of the incisive question will open up new possibilities and thinking processes.

For example, your thinking partner may be expressing a desire to develop their career by becoming more involved in teaching, but think their research group leader will refuse to sanction this because they are in a junior contract research role with no clear career development trajectory or apparent support.

The first part of the incisive question would simply be a re-framing of the limiting belief that they are a 'research grunt':

*"If you knew that you are at the beginning of a successful academic career..."*

Notice that Kline has formulated the first part of the incisive question in the *present tense*. This is the invitation to step into a new, positive place, planting the seed of possibility and potential in the subconscious mind. Ignore the grammarian in you and stick with the present tense.

And then the question might continue with: *"...then how would you go about developing the teaching aspect of your role?"*

**Importantly, there are several vital steps leading up to framing the incisive question.**

Kline has developed these from long practice and experience in formulating the question, and it is strongly recommended that you stick exactly to the process she suggests. The great advantage of co-mentoring is that you don't need to pretend that you and only you know how to do this, because it is a difficult process to get right until you've practised it. So work on it together.

### **Step One – Find the goal**

Ask *'What would you like to have happen?'*

Write down the answer in your co-mentee's exact own words.

### **Step Two – Fish for the limiting beliefs or untrue assumption**

Ask *'What might you be assuming that is stopping you from...?'*

*'What else might you be assuming that is stopping you from...'*

Write down these assumptions, and keep going until there are no more.

**Step Three - Identify the limiting belief or untrue assumption**

Ask about those assumptions: *'What is stopping you the most...?'*

**Step Four – Test the limiting belief or untrue assumption**

Ask *'Do you think that assumption is true?'*

**Step Five – Create the liberating assumption**

[IF NO, IT IS NOT TRUE]: *'What is true and liberating instead?'*

[IF YES, IT IS TRUE]: *'What else is true and liberating?'*

Write down the answer in your co-mentee's exact own words.

**Step Six – Formulate the INCISIVE QUESTION:**

*'If you knew that*

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*[insert liberating assumption],*

*then how would you*

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*[insert the goal]*

Then keep asking it until your mentee has done with it