Personal support 2: How to make the most of a mentoring relationship

Anita Houghton continues her series of articles on personal support with advice on how to reap the maximum benefit in a mentoring relationship

Finding a co-mentor or coach is a great first step towards having some personal support, but if you’re to make the most of the relationship, it’s important to think through how you’re going to work together. For simplicity this article talks about how pairs of people getting together to coach each other can reap the maximum benefit, but it applies equally to one way mentoring relationships and small groups.

Sorting out the practicalities

How often shall we meet and for how long?
The key to success here is commitment. If you start off by saying you can manage a meeting only once every three months it’s unlikely it will survive beyond the first couple of sessions. Meeting fortnightly in the early months of a relationship is probably optimum, or even weekly. It takes a while for two people to get to know each other, and as they do the relationship becomes more and more productive. For the same reason, if you can manage a couple of hours for each session in the early days, both your understanding of each other and your skills as coaches will quickly increase to the point where an hour is likely to be enough for both people to derive benefit.

Timing, scheduling, and venue of meetings

Again these need to reflect commitment. If you try to squeeze a co-coaching session in between two tiring commitments, you reduce its usefulness immediately—that is, if you ever actually meet. The chances of keeping up the meetings are increased by scheduling them at regular times when you are unlikely to be disturbed and don’t have another commitment to rush off to. If you meet at the end of a busy day, you need to plan a little time to unwind first.

A comfortable and relaxed environment is the best place for coaching conversations. Public places are fine providing you’re happy to entertain any eavesdroppers, and you are not talking about individual patients.

Rules

It can feel quite uncomfortable setting rules for a relationship, but not as uncomfortable as assuming them and then being disappointed. Useful topics to agree on include confidentiality, how to use the time and how to divide it between each person, not judging each other, not giving advice without permission, mutual feedback on the coaching process, and commitment to keeping appointments.

Some suggestions on content

The areas in which we can all benefit from support and development fall largely into the two categories of professional and personal lives. Box 1 lists the areas that might be covered.

Example: Deepak and Sarah are consultant pathologists in different trusts—Deepak is coaching Sarah

Sarah: The problem is that I have a really difficult person in my team. David. He always says yes to everything I ask him to do, but then he doesn’t do it.
- Deepak: And how is that a problem for you specifically?
- Sarah: It means that I think things have been done, and then discover they haven’t.
- Deepak: And how’s that a problem for you? (getting to the root of the problem)
- Sarah: Well, last week, for example, I had an extremely angry patient on the phone complaining she hadn’t had the results of her test. I’d asked him to call her, but he hadn’t.
- Deepak: So he says he’s going to do something, doesn’t do it, and then people complain to you? (he’s checking understanding here, and she nods) And how is that a problem?
- Sarah: It makes me look as if I’m not doing my job properly, that gets me a bad reputation in the department, and then my relationships with other people deteriorate.
- Deepak: So what would you rather have? (on to the positive)
- Sarah: (thinks) I would like to be clear about what I can ask David to do and know that he will do it.
- Deepak: And if you could be clear about what you can ask David to do, and know that he will do it, would you be happy with that?
- Sarah: (without hesitation) Definitely.
- Deepak: So what will it be like when you’ve achieved that? (helping her to experience the outcome will help motivate her to get it)
- Sarah: (sighs) I would feel much more relaxed. I would feel confident that David would do what I asked, and my work would go much more smoothly.
- Deepak: Anything else?
- Sarah: I would appear competent and organised, and people would appreciate me for that.
- Deepak: So, what do you need to do to get to that point? (moving her on to action)
- Sarah: I definitely need to talk to David. I need to find out what is stopping him do the things I ask. If he doesn’t want to help me, I could find someone else, or just do the things myself.
- Deepak: Because what is most important to you is to be clear about what David is and isn’t going to do.
- Sarah: Exactly.

(Characters are fictitious)