



Clutterbuck
Associates

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF GROUP MENTORING

Prof. David Clutterbuck

One of the most common problems with mentoring programmes is the shortage of suitable mentors. The higher up the organisation, the fewer people there are available to fulfil the role – and some of these may be neither willing nor able to do so. Group mentoring is one suggested solution – but how realistic an alternative is it?

The dynamics of dialogue within a group are manifestly and significantly different from those in a one-to-one relationship. Among the elements lost in a group session are:

- The sense of total concentration on the individual – a key factor in establishing and maintaining deep rapport
- Time to reflect – in a one-to-one relationship, it is easier to have periods of quiet thinking, so important for working issues through
- Confidentiality – it is hard to be fully open, especially about emotions, in a group

However, there are gains as well. In particular:

- The learner receives multiple inputs on his or her issues, from other mentees as well as the mentor
- A sense of shared concerns and mutual support (if the process is managed well)
- An opportunity for the organisation to identify common issues that may affect retention and leadership development

In addition, experience of well-managed group mentoring shows that one-to-one mentoring relationships frequently emerge out of mentoring groups. Somewhere between a quarter and a fifth of group mentees seem to establish one-to-one relationships with the mentor – or someone introduced to them by the mentor --during or immediately after the formal programme. (The proportion may be higher, but there has been no proper research.)

Group mentoring certainly seems to have become an established part of the development spectrum. But there seems to be little in the way of defined good practice.

How to manage group mentoring effectively

Experience from the limited number of existing group mentoring programmes suggests that they work best when:

Membership is diverse – people from the same team or work area are likely to be more inhibited than those drawn from different areas. There is also more opportunity to learn from people in different areas and to network. It is important to create an atmosphere, where there is little or no competitiveness amongst mentees.

Mentors are volunteers and have sufficient knowledge of the organisation, and networks within it. Mentees need to respect the mentor as someone who can provide accurate, broad guidance.

There are clear and set rules to define the boundaries and behaviours expected of mentees towards the mentor and each other. These should include confidentiality (Chatham House Rules), the need for positive feedback, supportive analysis, and openness of dialogue.

There is clarity of issue – mentees think through each issue and why they are bringing it for discussion. The agenda for each session should be agreed in advance, although there should be opportunities to divert to other important issues, as and when they arise.

The mentor's role is clearly defined – especially in terms of the degree (if any) of sponsorship involved, whether s/he will provide feedback and how

The mentor acts as a facilitator – s/he leads the group in sharing experiences; and in discussing the impact and origin of problems

The mentor acts as advisor – drawing on his or her own knowledge and experience

The mentor acts as a sounding board – the group rehearses arguments for presentations to senior managers and talks through decisions about career choices

There is a clear theme for each session, decided in advance – the group is thus able to focus on issues sufficiently to discuss them in depth

The mentor offers one-to-one meetings outside the group sessions, as needed. This enables participants to address issues, which they feel reluctant to pose before the group as a whole.

Mentees are encouraged to network together (see the case study below). Much of the value of the group process comes from the learning and support they give each other outside the formal sessions with the mentor.

Mentors are brought back together every few months -- review sessions allow them to continue to learn group mentoring skills and provide mutual support. Together, mentors may identify and raise with HR wider organisational issues concerning development and/ or retention.

Case Study: Allied Irish Bank

AIB was experiencing a major problem with retention of graduate recruits. Up to 200 graduates were recruited each year. In some cases a full quarter were leaving within the first 12 months. Group mentoring was introduced as part of a retention strategy. It was also seen as an excellent opportunity for the graduates:

- ◆ to network with their peers and senior management in the organisation;
- ◆ to provide an opportunity within the peer group to share similar experiences,
- ◆ to provide career direction and a greater sense of belonging &
- ◆ being valued by the organisation.

The sets ('Learning Groups') of 8-10 graduates were selected to be diverse and groups were made up of graduates from across different functions and divisions i.e. Retail Banking, IT, HR, Capital Markets. Senior Management nominated a panel of potential mentors & the 'Learning Groups' selected their mentors from detailed descriptions (C.V.'s). Mentee groups are expected to self-manage, meeting on their own every few weeks, with the mentor present every second or third occasion and to work together on a work related project facilitated by their mentor. An added benefit was the mentors developed their mentoring skills.

Some of the mentees also had one-to-one sessions with the mentor, leading to a post-programme mentoring relationship. Others set up informal mentoring relationships with other managers.

Key to the success of the programme was the clarity of the process, gained from initial training (mentors & mentees) and subsequent support from the programme co-ordinator, the commitment and support from senior management and the line managers to the process. Mentees were also encouraged and enabled to develop networking both within and between groups. This proved very useful in helping people gain knowledge of and introductions to other areas.

The outcome was a two-thirds reduction in retention. The reasons were many, but included the organisation's commitment to the mentoring process, having someone more senior to talk to outside their direct reporting line, gaining practical career advice and having a peer support network.

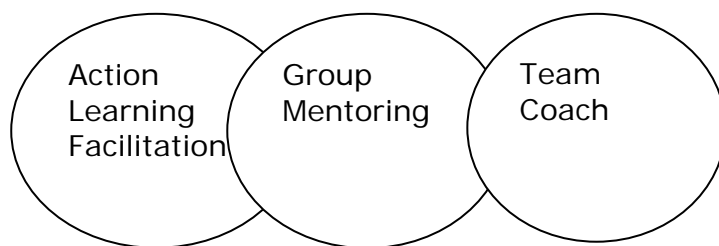
Group mentoring v team coaching and action learning

Action learning facilitation = enabling a self-managed group of learners to develop and work to their own, shared curriculum

Group mentoring = supporting a group of peers through career and personal development transitions

Team coaching = facilitating a group of people, working on a common task, to develop specific skills, both individually and jointly

These three approaches to learning have much in common, as the diagram below indicates.



All three:

- Operate in a multiple-learner context
- Require the learner to take at least partial ownership of the process
- Demand flexibility of style and approach from the process leader

Where they differ is in terms of:

- The relative emphasis on acquisition of knowledge, understanding or specific skills
- The required level of cohesion between group members
- The relative directiveness of the process leader
- The group's primary aim (task achievement, learning, or a mixture of the two)

Awareness of these other roles and of the differences between them provides a baseline for effectiveness as a group mentor and for the design of practical learning programmes, because it helps establish boundaries and expectations. A beneficial outcome of training and positive experience in any of these roles is that people may be drawn to the others as well. As a result, they can acquire a versatility of "helping to learn" styles, which contribute greatly to building and sustaining a positive developmental climate.

If you would like to receive David's latest articles by email, please let us know at info@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk

Clutterbuck Associates

Grenville Court
Britwell Road
Burnham
Bucks
SL1 8DF

T: 01628 661 667

F: 01628 661 779

E: info@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk
www.clutterbuckassociates.com