# Questions and tools for establishing mentoring relationships

When establishing effective mentoring relationships, it is essential to carefully negotiate and agree on the specific roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees. It is also crucial that mentoring relationships are built on a foundation of trust, understanding and mutual respect, so it valuable for mentors and mentees to spend time getting to know each other personally and professionally.

## Determining roles and responsibilities

The following set of questions may be used to determine and clarify each person's role within the mentoring relationship. Bear in mind that roles may differ depending on the needs of the mentee and skills of the mentor: for example, the mentee could be a beginning teacher, an established teacher, an aspiring leader, or currently in a leadership role. It is also important to consider whether the mentoring relationship is focused on teaching and learning in the classroom or on leadership practice. If the mentoring is focused on leadership practice, some of the questions and activities listed below may be adapted. As part of the process of negotiating roles and responsibilities, mentors and mentees should also collaboratively decide on improvement-focused goals.

• Which of the following activities do you think should be part of this mentoring relationship?

• Which do you think are not part of this mentoring relationship?

• Which ones are the main focus for this mentoring relationship?

> Providing training or resources
>
> Co-planning learning activities
>
> The mentor observes the mentee and provides feedback
>
> The mentee observes the mentor teaching
>
> The mentee records reflections on their practice
>
> The mentee collects data to inform the discussion, such as: student voice (e.g. surveys and interviews), assessment results (formative or summative assessment results), examples of student work
>
> Evaluation (for example if evidence from this mentoring relationship contributes to certification)

## Building relationships based on trust and respect

Successful mentoring relationships are underpinned by trust and understanding which are built by mentors and mentees getting to know each other personally and professionally. While people will differ in how much they want to share and that should be respected, getting to know the people you work with is an important part of building trust and community.

The following questions[1] can serve as a prompt for getting to know each other as teachers and understanding each other's educational philosophies. They can also help new teachers to develop and refine their educational philosophy.

- What would you say are the top three educational aims for the students in your class / this school?

- What is knowledge? What does it mean to be knowledgeable?

- In terms of your teaching and student learning, what are your major achievements over the last year?

- What do you think is the social and cultural significance of what students learn?

- How do students learn? What is the role of the student in the learning relationship?

- What are your attitudes about the curriculum / programmes offered at this school?

- How do you see the role of the teacher?

- What is your preferred mode of teaching and learning?

- What types of language do you use in the classroom? What are some of the phrases you often say?

- What is your preferred type of teacher-student relationship? Why is that important to you?

- What are the three most important qualities, norms or values in a school for you to be working at your highest potential?

- What is your image of the role of parents and the community in education? What is your definition of community?

## Mismatches and disagreements

During the process of establishing roles, deciding on goals and providing feedback, there may be instances where mentor and mentee disagree. To minimise the chances of this occurring, where possible, consideration should be given to ensuring the mentor and mentee are well-matched personally and professionally. A certain level of disagreement at some stage of the process may be expected, but if mentors use principles from Open to Learning conversations, this can be handled in a way that builds trust and respect between mentor and mentee. If either mentor or mentee feels that disagreements cannot be resolved, it may be time to call on a third person for support (with the agreement of all parties), as they may provide a different perspective that could be valuable. Alternatively, mentor and mentee may agree to end the mentoring relationship. Also be aware that some of the mentee's needs may not be met through the mentoring relationship and other support may be more appropriate – for example, if a mentee is struggling with stress or personal problems, they could consider contacting an organisation such as the Employee Assistance Program (to which many schools are signed up), or contacting their GP or helplines such as Lifeline.

## Next steps

Once you have agreed on roles and spent time getting to know the mentee and their needs, the next steps are for the mentor to work alongside the mentee to help them reflect on their practice, set goals, decide on actions, and monitor their progress. See Questions to use during mentoring conversations for ideas on how to do this.

## References

Foltos, L. (2013). Peer coaching. Sage.

Robertson, J. (2016). Coaching leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through partnership (2nd ed.). NZCER Press.

## Endnotes

1  Adapted from Robertson (2016), pp.122-3.

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