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## **Establishing a mentoring programme**

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### **Addressing concerns**

In this paper, we draw on our recent experience of developing a course in mentoring for three relatively new middle management positions in Singapore schools, namely, level heads, subject heads and senior teachers. These managers are charged *inter alia* with the responsibility of facilitating the growth and development of classroom teachers. While senior teachers have a major remit to look after the welfare and professional needs of young or inexperienced teachers, subject and level heads have to concern themselves with the professional development of teachers of all ages and experience within their respective subject or responsibility areas.

This, of course, can be intensely problematic, and after the first round of operation, several concerns have been raised. How, for example, does a 26-year-old subject head 'mentor' a 50-year-old teacher? In our understanding of mentoring, the answer is simple: he doesn't! There is a danger in a system that might develop a love affair with mentoring as a human resource development strategy that it will be applied across the board without any thought of the consequences. Mentoring, though, in our view, has at its core the requirement that the more experienced and knowledgeable practitioner acts in a personal and professional support capacity to a person who is less experienced and knowledgeable. Seen in this light, mentors are usually older (but not always) than their mentees, and they are easily able to command the respect and credibility of those with whom they develop this supportive relationship.

From this concern, therefore, we have reached the conclusion that, although young level and subject heads may well engage in mentoring, it will not occur in very many circumstances. That does not mean they need not learn some of the skills of mentoring, but rather that they have to develop a high degree of sensitivity in how they relate to others in terms of their professional development. Thus, we enable these managers to learn a range of generic skills that will equip them to cope effectively with developmental situations.

Another concern focused on the differences between certain components of the programme, such as evaluative supervision, developmental supervision and mentoring. The trouble with labels is that, while they are meant to be helpful, they are often constraining. We thus tend to compartmentalise things that are not really separate. But people like things in boxes, because that is neat and tidy, so we say that this is supervision and not mentoring, and so forth. In essence, all these activities are related. What is more important to note is that the nature of the relationship between, say, a level head and a teacher has to be thought through carefully. At times, the relationship may resemble what we know as mentoring; at others, it will be more akin to what we choose to call supervision.

Other concerns were about how new or inexperienced teachers should be developed, how level and subject heads should observe and give feedback to teachers, and whether one-off observations were of much use for relatively inexperienced teachers.

All these concerns caused us to reflect on our understanding of mentoring and how it might help these managers in their developmental roles. At this stage, therefore, we need to turn our attention to what we understand by mentoring.

### **Understanding the nature of mentoring**

Meggison and Clutterbuck's (1995) definition of mentoring is somewhat limited in its scope, but it offers some clues about the nature and extent of mentoring as a strategy for development: "Mentoring is the off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking." It thus suggests that the mentor might have a broader remit than merely promoting development activity.

This is borne out by other writers, from whom we can elicit a common range of ingredients. Kram (1985), for example, expresses it as a broad range of developmental relationships between juniors and seniors, and among peers, while Levine (1985) describes a mentor as a wise advisor, one who manages, nurtures, encourages and teaches organisational responsibility. In Singapore, for principalship mentoring (which is arguably the closest model to what we seek to do in this programme for middle managers), we pull together the key strands of several definitions and use as a guide a three point explanation of the mentor's role and the mentoring process:

- A mentor is a more experienced head who undertakes to guide a less experienced manager's (the mentee) professional and career development.
- A mentor develops the unique abilities of the mentee, without detriment to others in his or her organisation.
- Mentoring is a developmental process. (Chong, Low and Walker, 1989)

What is clear from many of the definitions in the literature is the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship. A mentor, Alleman (1988) notes, "presents a broad picture, teaches generic and possible future tasks, assesses future potential, and acts as confidante, counsellor and sponsor." This, it can be seen, is fundamentally different from the nature of the boss-subordinate relationship. Indeed, mentors – in principalship mentoring, at any rate – are not seen as bosses but as the nurturers of future potential.

Similar outcomes from mentoring have been reported across a variety of fields and situations, both in and outside education. Reich (1986) found, for instance, that mentoring among lawyers, physicians, managers and computer specialists resulted in improved promotion, while Fagan and Walter (1982) linked mentoring with job satisfaction. There is indeed a consensus that mentoring is beneficial wherever it occurs (Daresh and Playko, 1990).

In short, mentoring is widely viewed as having potentially considerable benefits and its success hinges on the developmental relationship between the mentor and the mentee. The purpose of our dwelling on those definitions to highlight the range of activity in which the mentor might engage. This range may include sponsorship, coaching, protecting, role modelling, counselling and providing friendship. That list is by no means exhaustive.

### **Training the middle managers for mentoring**

So, where are we so far? If we see level and subject heads and senior teachers as mentors, then their roles encompass a range of expectations, some of which they might not be able to meet unless they have the knowledge and skills. Yet, in a short programme of two weeks (somewhat less for senior teachers), it is possible to look only at several generic skills that provide a foundation for a more extended role.

What we have been noticing in recent times in relation to mentoring new teachers has been an expansion of the notion of empowerment. This has meant a wider remit for mentors to induct and develop new teachers, and greater expectations of teachers in terms of directing their own development. Thus, there has been a move towards teacher self-evaluation (more speedier in some quarters than others), and this has had implications for mentors, who have had to con-

sider how they can establish conditions in which their charges can become self-evaluative. The transition from spoon-feeding to facilitating has not been an easy one for some, but through our programme, this is being made less daunting.

We know intuitively the sorts of people who are needed as mentors – and this is supported in the literature – but there is often a tension between who the right personnel are and which people find themselves in mentoring positions. For example, although the senior teacher role is one with a strong mentoring element, some people are promoted on criteria other than mentoring aptitude (or willingness for that matter.) Yet, mentors need to be those who:

- really want to work with adults in a mentoring capacity and understand the principles of how adults learn;
- are themselves proven practitioners; and
- are independent thinkers, holding a spectrum of convictions about teaching and learning.

Mentors need to be concerned with both the personal and the professional sides of a teacher's life. The personal element seems to be especially important in relation to younger teachers, who need a high degree of emotional support as they encounter a range of unforeseen difficulties. Of course, the emotional support goes hand in hand with professional support, for as a teacher develops in professional capability, the need for an arm round the shoulder gradually lessens. However, it would be a mistake to think that mentoring can be practised effectively without attention to a teacher's personal condition and development, and that applies throughout one's career. This view is borne out in Tan and Stott's (1998) research into teacher job satisfaction, where they indicated that personal circumstances can play a large part in dictating the level of happiness in one's working life.

### **The programme content**

In our mentoring programme with level and subject heads (senior teachers did a shortened programme), we examined several skills and issues with a bearing on mentoring and related developmental activity. First, we tackled skills of communication. One of the most important is listening, and we coupled this with giving feedback to teachers. We looked also at influencing: how can one communicate his or her point of view in a non-power relationship context? We also dwelt on the art of questioning, since this is a critical skill in the conferencing situation.

We continued by examining a range of professional development strategies that can be carried out in the classroom and staffroom. If level and subject heads are to influence the development of teachers in their areas of work, then they need to understand how various strategies might be used. Unfortunately, most of them have been brought up in a culture of external courses, these being the only vehicles for development. It was necessary to put this right by advocating a range of on-the-job strategies. This part of the programme tied in neatly with a professional development package that had been presented to principals just a year earlier, so these managers were being instructed in how to operationalise a part of it.

Our next task was to help the managers understand how they could work with individual teachers to guide their development. There are several competing models around, and while it was not our duty to advocate any one particular line, we rejected simplistic notions of courses, deficit thinking and measurement, all of which are evident in schemes operational in the industrial sector. We chose rather to focus – through conferencing – on subject development needs and on the teacher's personal development requirements, thus treating the teacher as a whole person rather than as a machine to fill a performance gap. In structuring the teacher's development, therefore, the emphasis was on the future: what could be done to help the teacher develop professionally and personally, so that any gains would be sustainable and

critical to improvement? In the light of this, a simple model was advanced that directed the level or subject head to identify with the teacher an area of focus, the development strategies that would be used, who would be involved, what the desired outcomes would be and how the process would be reviewed. We decided that, if this was going to work, paperwork would have to be kept to an absolute minimum, so one simple form would suffice.

We then dealt with a significant area of concern for most participants in our programme, that of how to work productively with more experienced teachers. While we have already said that it would be foolish to believe a young teacher could 'mentor' someone with substantially more experience, that does not preclude a developmental relationship in which the less experienced takes responsibility for the development of the more experienced. Thus, we looked at the nature of this relationship and discussed the negative impressions that many managers have gained over time. For instance, there was a prevalent point of view that older teachers are generally unmotivated because of impending retirement and are unwilling to change practice or adopt anything new. While we accept that this may be true in some cases, it represents a highly distorted view of general reality. There are many teachers in their advanced years who have the sort of commitment and willingness to change that serves as an example to those newly qualified. And where older teachers are less than forthcoming, one might ask why. Perhaps the attitude of coercion has served only to create defensiveness and antagonism. A change of mindset on the part of managers may be needed, and we promoted the idea of developmental relationships with these teachers being reciprocal in nature. In other words, we do not visit them with an attitude of "I am going to observe you, point out your weaknesses and then tell you what you need to do." That would be counterproductive. Rather, we should say, "I intend to learn as much as I can from you, and perhaps there are things you can learn from me." Obviously, much work needs to be done in this difficult area, especially at a time when the system is demanding great changes in our schools, and in the future, we hope to draw on the experience of our participants, especially those who have consciously sought to build such reciprocal, developmental relationships.

The final part of our mentoring course was devoted to developmental conferencing. Although we had tackled the skills involved, it was still problematic for those who have been taught to 'tell' rather than listen. Of course, a system that ranks its teachers and demands quantitative accounts of performance forces people into judgemental behaviour, but – it has to be said – this impedes development. Judging teachers and then telling them what is wrong is feedback that is seldom acted upon. Besides, if a teacher has to rely on external judgement before improving is going to be a slow developer, because how often can observations realistically take place? We attempted, therefore, to focus on getting teachers to be self-evaluative by moving away from a 'telling' role to a 'questioning' one. Questioning skill would have to be applied in such a way that the teacher would have to 'think' through the issues and work out where development was needed and how it might take place. This would place the manager in a facilitative and supportive capacity. It would also locate the responsibility for evaluating classroom performance with the teacher more and more.

### **Finally ...**

Much is demanded of developers – call them mentors if you wish – and the skills can be refined only with thoughtful and reflective practice. However, we saw our role not only as the givers of basic skills and insights, but also as challengers of the prevailing paradigm. In assuming this role, we believe that we were encouraging the sort of 'thinking' amongst the managers that we expect from our students in schools. In an organisation that learns, we have to challenge our assumptions and ask whether they hold in a context of new intended outcomes and of complex and dynamic change.

One final point needs mentioning. The sessions we ran with level and subject heads and with senior teachers marked an innovation in collaboration. For the first time on our management courses, each session was led by one lecturer and two school principals. Having two school leaders was a luxury that resource commitments will not allow in future, but it provided an opportunity to combine theory with practice in a unique way. The participants valued having practitioners around and experienced ones at that. They were able to listen to principals' viewpoints and their attitudes to development. But there was an additional benefit that was not planned for. The principals themselves said that they gained much from listening to ideas from an 'expert' outside the school context and also from the participants, who voiced in an unexpectedly open way their concerns and opinions. In a sense, this was reciprocal learning at its best, for it exemplified an opportunity for all those involved to learn from one another's experience and reflections.

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