



BY PRAKASH MENON

The Value of Mentoring

MENTORING IS NOT A NEW CONCEPT AND HAS, IN FACT, BEEN AROUND FOR MILLENNIA.



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
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The process of mentoring is used in a diverse range of areas such as business, politics, sports, the arts, and supporting youth, among other fields. It was prevalent in ancient Greece, with philosophers often mentoring students. There seems to be a re-emergence of the trend and practice in modern society, particularly with regard to the idea of leadership and 'thought leaders'.

Some examples of the most noted mentoring relationships throughout history include: Aristotle mentoring Alexander the Great; Freddie Laker (airline entrepreneur) mentoring Richard Branson; Mel Gibson mentoring Heath Ledger; and, in cricket, Terry Jenner mentored Shane Warne, while Sambaran Banarjee mentors many young, aspiring cricketers. In Hinduism and Buddhism, there has always been a guru-disciple relationship.

The basic, traditional concept and philosophy behind mentoring usually involves an older, wiser person advising a younger, less-experienced person, and taking him or her under the wing. Obviously, the mentee must be open to, and interested in, the idea of receiving advice.

Today, the forms of mentoring are much more flexible and, indeed, the mentor may well be younger than the mentee. Mentoring may include advising, teaching, coaching, or counselling.

Mentoring is sometimes embraced within professional companies or organisations to assist newcomers settle into their new positions and places in the corporate hierarchy. Some mentees are groomed as protégés, or eventual replacements for (and by) a more experienced colleague. Private tutors can sometimes be considered mentors, or become as such incidentally.

Essentially, mentors usually have expertise in a particular area or areas, and they assist those with lesser experience in those fields to gain knowledge, footing, and to develop their skills, whether on a personal or a professional level. This relationship of knowledge sharing can be on either an informal or a formal basis. Examples of the latter include mentoring societies and groups, of which many assist in youth mentoring.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

So what are the practical applications of mentoring in our society today? As mentioned above, youth-mentoring programs often exist to help underprivileged children or teens, those who may be at risk, or have no suitable role models. The US Big Brother program is a good example of this.

In business, management sometimes instigates formal mentoring, or it may evolve naturally as the result of professional relationships (which may expand into friendships outside of the workplace). Obvious candidates that stand out as potential future leaders may be nurtured and taken under the wing. These days, companies are wise to invest in human capital development to reinforce and sustain the development and success of their businesses.

Not only are there formal mentoring programs that one may enrol in (usually at a fee), but some of the world's best thought leaders and thinkers are available to be hired for mentoring, coaching, and knowledge sharing. Mentoring programs can be beneficial to career development, as well as on a personal and social level. Programs and planned one-on-one mentoring may be solidly structured – with an outline, goals, training sessions, and other components to be adhered to – or the mentoring relationship may be more casual, offering a flexible approach. Apprenticeships are a form of mentoring that focus more on training for the job, rather than personal development.

LIFE MENTORS AND MYER

It is my experience that mentoring is a two-way street. Having a great mentor, or several who can truly interact, will extract the relevant information from the mentee, share great knowledge and wisdom, offer constructive suggestions, and have a great deal of input. It can be invaluable on many levels. Mentors always have a positive point of view and want to see you, as their mentee, being successful. They are usually humble in spite of their own success; they are credible, show great interest in you, and openly share their knowledge and wisdom. Mentors ask great questions and almost always have superior listening skills. If they happen to be your immediate manager or supervisor, they will often be firm, but fair. →



I believe there are a great many benefits that can be received through the mentoring process. This may include improvement in areas one hasn't been previously exposed to. Mentors are supportive, and generally hold a strong belief that their mentees will succeed. They might push hard, offer words of encouragement, and act as a sounding board while, at the same time, guiding the mentee in the right direction and realigning the course of action when needed.

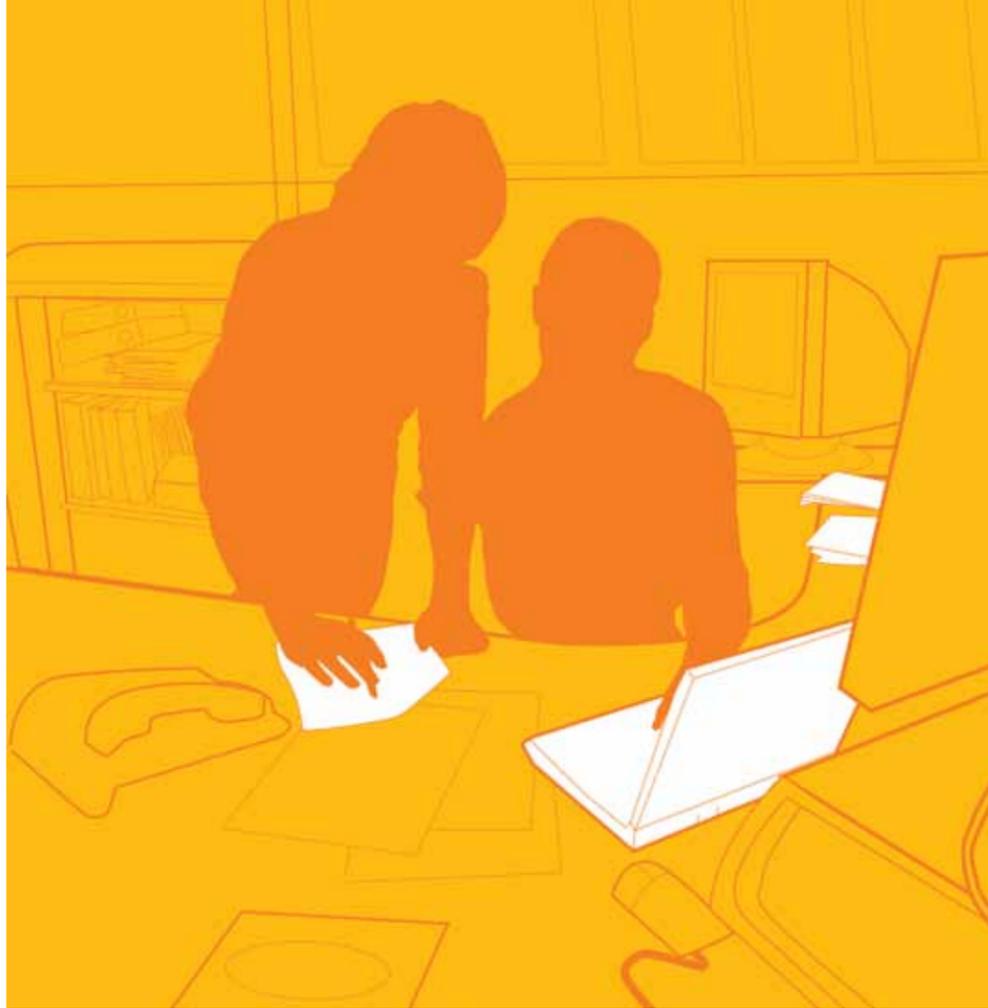
Mentors share their vision, setting desired outcomes and the route to achieve them. They can be inspirational through the knowledge they have, the wisdom they are willing to share, and the desire to see their mentee achieve goals and jump hurdles.

As mentioned earlier, there are many different kinds of mentoring relationships. I have been fortunate enough to encounter and work with some of the best mentors available under various circumstances.

As the former Director of Logistics at Myer Ltd (where I was employed for many years), I have had the great pleasure of working with CEO Bernie Brookes and former Chairman Bill Wavish.

Initially, as line managers, they were direct in their approach – very firm but, equally, very fair. Once an initial rapport had been established, and they were comfortable that I had the potential to deliver the outcome for the challenge set before us (a “Hairy, audacious goal, within a very short time frame”), they pushed me to achieve the next level, stretching my boundaries and horizons. They provided ample support and encouragement, and were there to assist where I may have struggled. It was reassuring to know I was believed in and backed; this served to reinforce my motivation to accomplish the goals. Essentially, my mentors at Myer nurtured my inspiration and drive to achieve the desired outcomes.

Bernie Brookes came into my life in 2006 as my new line manager during the restructuring of Myer. He was tough as a line manager – very firm, extremely fair, very generous, humble to the core, wise, and happy to share. He was an exceptionally good communicator, great listener, terrific adviser, and always followed through. Always consistent with his message, Bernie was very encouraging, had great



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empathy, and was always around for troubleshooting. I consider Bernie a very fine mentor indeed, and an outstanding role model.

Highly energetic and self-confident, Bernie has an enthusiasm that is catching; he has the ability to coax the best out of people, even in high-pressure environments with complex problems. As a mentor, Bernie is deftly skilled at handling people, foreseeing outcomes, organising and leading teams, inspiring, and empowering.

Bill Wavish is a fiercely intelligent man who is happy to share his abundant wisdom. He believed in my potential for success, was a great teacher, consistent with his expectations, and had exceptional follow-through. He helped me to achieve what had seemed to be the impossible, and my experience with this stretched me beyond my own comprehension.

Peter Ramsay, who worked alongside me at Myer, was a consultant (a specialist in logistics) who came in to help develop a supply-chain strategy. He had excellent insight, and furthered my understanding of the key aspects involved in creating a world-class supply chain.

Consequently, it became possible for someone like me, without an extensive background in supply chain, to be appointed as the Director of Supply Chain for the ‘new’ Myer (under private equity ownership). Additionally, not only was I enabled to complete the transition from Coles eight months ahead of schedule, but also to transform what was a mediocre supply chain at a time of acquisition into a world-class operation, with large savings to the company's bottom line, way ahead of time frame.

I have no doubt that this was all made possible because of the mentoring received from Bill and Bernie, and also, to certain degree, the

subject-matter expertise imparted by Peter Ramsay. These are examples of mentoring relationships that occurred as a result of excellent working relationships. They were not of the formal variety, but informal, transpiring naturally, and hugely beneficial.

FORMAL MENTORING

Other mentoring relationships I have experienced were as a result of actually seeking someone out with the aim of expanding my knowledge base and outlook. These are formal mentor-mentee relationships, with an underlying structure (including planned sessions, conference calls, and the like). Essentially, I was looking for someone to help take me to the next level – someone with all the great qualities mentioned earlier. I found Matt Church: a professional speaker, communication educator, thought leader, and mentor.

There were things I knew that I didn't know and, hence, I could pursue information pertaining to them. However, there were things I was unaware of and did not know to ask about. Working with someone who had been exposed to a wider range of experience and different expertise from that encountered within my workplace – someone like Matt Church – was ideal. I was driven to learn more. Matt has an innate ability to put others at great ease. It's possible to feel comfortable with him quickly. He combines exceptionally good people skills with a great sense of humour, terrific foresight, and wisdom. As a mentor, Matt takes his work seriously and has his mentees' best interests at heart. He is very articulate, a great role model, and takes his mentees forward on their journey. He's everything a professional mentor should be.

Kylie Hammond is a highly experienced and skilled executive career coach with whom I have had the pleasure of working. Due to the close way she works with her clients, Kylie can also be considered a mentor. As well as being an excellent coach and communicator, she is ‘hands on’ when it comes to organisational details for executive career transitions (in my case, leaving Myer), including overseeing résumés, LinkedIn profiles, et cetera. Kylie is also adept at facilitating outplacements and strategic networking, enabling board appointments and other progressive career moves. She has, additionally, offered assistance as a ‘sounding board’ for possible business ventures.

LEADERSHIP = MENTORING

My firm belief is that leadership equates to mentorship, and that solid leadership requires excellent communication skills, rapport, and a personal empathy towards colleagues, employees, and team members.

I have always felt it of vital importance to spend time with my team, individually or in a group setting. If, as a leader, you can commit quality time to your team, this will underpin the leadership role, thereby making it easier, more efficient, and certainly a lot more effective in the long term. The more knowledge you pass on to your team, the more successful you will become. Remember, you are only as good as the people who work for you.

It's my sincere opinion that I have an obligation to give back to the community. For me, this involves spending quality time with aspiring individuals and executives to help make a success of their lives and careers while, at the same time, helping the organisations they work for become more successful and profitable. This

is the path I will take as a mentor.

I have been blessed to have had a great many people help me in my journey, and to have learned the intricacies and the very tangible benefits and value of mentoring. Some of the best decisions a company can make are talent management and investing in human resources and relationships. Through promoting personal development and growth, it will be found that people are a business's best asset.

The nurturing, realisation, and expansion of individual potential is one of the most valuable courses a person may pursue or receive. It is this value I intend to pass on to others through the time-proven and empowering methods of mentoring. •



About Prakash

Until recently, Prakash Menon was the Director of Logistics for Myer Australia. Since leaving Myer, Prakash has joined the board of Shooii – an online retail start-up venture (strategic investment), with more ventures to follow. A world-class mentor, he is also the author of three books to be released in the forthcoming months, including the *Retail Revolution* supply-chain success system. Prakash is an entrepreneur, philanthropist, and an inspirational conference speaker. For further information, please see: <http://au.linkedin.com/pub/prakash-menon/2/9ab/37>