EqualEngineers

Reciprocal Mentoring outline

Stewart Eyres, EqualEngineers

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This document outlines in some detail the requirements for a successful reciprocal mentoring programme. It provides definitions and approaches that illuminate the differences from a more traditional mentoring programme where the mentor's experience is seen as the driver in the

relationship. It then details a number of practical components to ensure successful mentoring for the participants as well as a framework for organisations to maximise benefits and efficacy.

What is Reciprocal Mentoring?

A gamified experience should naturally introduce how this mode differs from mentoring the participants may have experience or heard about. There is a decision to make as to if we introduce it assuming no knowledge, or if we build on and emphasise differences from traditional mentoring.

The experience could then develop, to include some discussion of benefits and then provide some examples of both positive and negative experiences, along with tools and techniques to address both. These would illustrate the need for ground rules such as pre-agreed aims, drawing in external support etc.

Definitions

In traditional mentoring, the mentor provides support and insights, and the mentee applies what they learn. In reciprocal mentoring, the mentor undertakes to reflect on the insights gained into the mentee's experience, and both parties expect to both expect to both learn.

Benefits for both parties

The mentee gains from the mentor's knowledge of the industry, including tacit knowledge such as how things work in practice, and often gains access to opportunities and contacts only the mentor can provide. These are broadly similar to traditional mentoring, but they may also be more likely to understand their mentor as a similarly flawed human being rather than perhaps as a representative of the "right" way to be successful.

The mentor gains an improved understanding of how the industry appears to those earlier their careers, which may be very different to how it was in their day. They also gain an understanding of the impact of the mentee's circumstances, for example if they experience racism in their every day how that changes their lives and their perception of the industry. While the mentee continues to benefit from the contact with the mentor, the mentors can additionally consider how they can use their position to address any negative aspects of the industry that they gain an understanding of.

Ground rules

As is usual in any mentoring programme, it is important to provide an outline to support commitment. This would include time commitment, scope for goals, boundaries, confidentiality and practical arrangements for meetings.

For reciprocal mentoring it is in addition important to establish a basis for the mentor to learn from the experience of the mentee. As the more experienced partner in the relationship, the mentor needs to consider some techniques for putting the mentee at ease and allowing them to challenge the mentor's assumptions or behaviours, especially where these are unconscious.

Ground rules that acknowledge this possibility can include: the mentor taking time in every meeting to check if any assumptions contradicted the mentee's experience; inviting the mentee to share their experience where it might differ from what the mentor shared; and explicitly asking the mentee to flag any behaviours by the mentor that were problematic for them. This allows learning and an open discussion to develop the mentor's understanding and approach.

Implications for process

At induction and during ongoing support, the mentor may need support translating what they are hearing from their mentee. It is essential that the mentor understands that there may be uncomfortable insights from the relationship, including about their own views, experiences, and assumptions. This requires somewhat more training and self-awareness than is typical of traditional mentoring.

Conversely, the mentee may need support to be honest with someone more senior, for example about the reality of their lived experience or how the mentor's attitudes impact them, or people like them. They also need to be prepared to expand on their experience to help the mentor understand them fully, including how it affects the mentee's ability to progress and thrive in their studies or graduate career.

Anyone supporting the mentoring process needs to be able to look out for signs that one or both participants have been negatively affected by insights from the process, help them to process these and normally continue with the relationship.

Matching mentors to students

The best model for mentoring is that the mentor and student have technical knowledge and as far as possible lived experience in common. However, for reciprocal mentoring the technical knowledge is primary, as differences in lived experience can enrich the reciprocal learning. The benefits for the mentor in particular expand significantly.

Student needs

A student will typically have a limited understanding of the industry where their skills might be used. Where they are part of an under-represented group, they may or may not be aware of how they might experience the working environment, gaps in their social capital, or differences between how they would act or respond to situations compared with members of the majority group.

Mentor needs

A mentor will typically have a good understanding of the industry where their mentee might pursue a career. In reciprocal mentoring the time since entering the industry needs to be kept in mind – a recent graduate engineer may have different perspectives to a senior engineer. Where the student is part of an under-represented group, the mentor may not be aware of how that changes how the mentee might experience the working environment, their social capital, or differences between how they would act or respond to situations compared with members of the majority group, perhaps including the mentor. These differences can be partly addressed at onboarding but the greatest benefits come from reflecting on what is shared during the relationship.

The mentor gains the usual benefits such as supporting a future engineer, gaining experience that can be applied in future or current leadership roles, and contributing to the success of the company or the whole profession. But added to these, the mentor should benefit from a widened perspective, more empathy with those of different lived experiences and an improved ability to address aspects of work culture that discriminate against those from under-represented groups.

Employer needs

Employers are typically seeking to identify and encourage students to view their organisation positively. They may also view the relationship as a means to examine potential candidates for future roles. In both cases some maturity is required as reciprocal mentoring may seem more

exposing than traditional mentoring. For example, the mentor might identify employer policy or culture that exclude minoritized groups or favour the existing majority group. How the employer responds to this will both impact how the mentee (and mentor) views these discoveries, and the additional benefits the employer can gain if it addresses the identified issue. So the employer gains more than auditioning a potential employee and gaining exposure with the student body – but only if they are prepared to address discoveries positively.

Ensuring alignment

The ground rules for reciprocal mentoring define include scope of goals. This is the opportuntity for mentors and mentees to ensure both their needs are being met, by sharing those in the first instance. As with the ground rules, as the more experienced participant the mentor need to take the lead in ensuring the mentee feels heard and the goals meet their needs. By also being explicit about their own needs, and allowing the mentee to ask questions, the mentor sets the scene for aligning both sets of needs.

In general the employer needs should be available up front to the mentee as they sign up for the programme. The mentor may also include a goal about ensuring they are able to reflect back to their employer. This helps to set the relationship in the context of a wider professional setting, where the employer's perspectives need to be accounted for.

Ensuring success with a good match

Assuming that matching mentors and mentees has been achieved appropriately, there is work to do in ensuring each relationship is successful in maximising the benefits for both participants and the employer. It is important this is intentionally and explicitly built into programme design.

Onboarding for all

Particularly for reciprocal mentoring, having both mentors and mentees onboarded together is a powerful way to ensure a consistent set of expectations. An event supported by materials that help the participants to engage is the best way to do this, although remote mentoring might require alternative techniques with more self-driven onboarding. An approach that emphasises the commonality between mentors and mentees while still acknowledging the differences is optimum. As far as possible, addressing the potential for difficult conversations and insights at this stage with establish the best basis for success.

Mentor touchpoints

Where an employer is properly supporting the mentoring programme, mentors should have suitable time allocated to the process. However their workload may vary, deadlines need to be met and they may not be experienced in maintaining student interest. Hence regular touchpoints are an essential means of support. They also allow those supporting the mentoring programme to spot problems early. In reciprocal mentoring this may include mentors who have not been able to assimilate insights from their mentee that challenge their assumptions, experiences or concept of a professional. The touchpoints should be an open and supportive opportunity to explore anything the mentor finds challenging, so that it does not derail the relationship and ideally enhances the benefits.

Student engagement

While students traditionally are perceived as having time to spare, the reality for many in under-represented groups is often very different. Some have caring responsibilities, health challenges, work or other impacts on their time, which also differ from their peers. Others may not have

sufficient experience with structuring their own study, engaging with tutors or understanding the requirements of assessment, making their study less efficient and more fragile than their peers. Add to this that their workload also varies, and deadlines for assessment are always individual (someone else in the team cannot cover), one can see that poor student engagement is rarely due to lack of commitment, but may be due to other pressures they are experiencing. Hence it is essential that mentors and those supporting the process approach disengagement from a position of understanding rather than judgment.

Addressing faltering relationships

Beyond ensuring engagement on both sides, there is always the possibility that a relationship doesn't work as it should despite engagement. In reciprocal mentoring there is the additional risk that the very differences that can lead to a richer experience for both participants in practice prevent it from thriving. As with all relationships, each situation is different. Those supporting the process need to be able to explore with participants in a way that exposes the causes, and allows one of both of them to address it. Regular contact, lack of judgment, open questions and reflection are the key tools needed to make this work. NEEDS MORE

Employer enhancements

Mentoring programmes can operate perfectly well built around just the mentor-mentee relationship. However, the benefits for both participants and the employer can be enhanced if additional opportunities are offered to students on the programme. The possible enhancements below are given broadly in terms of escalating additional support for students.

Visits or virtual tours

Particularly for students from under-represented groups who have lower social capital, the work place can be an unknown. Being able to visit and see an employer's factory, design studio or client site in person is a powerful way to engage students. However, where the student is from a group under-represented in the current workforce, or where they are from a minoritised group, the employer needs to consider alternatives to help them "see themselves" in the workplace. This might include asking about adjustments for disabled students in advance, talking about policies to allow for religious observances or having those in the workplace learn about the students' lived experiences.

Providing "insider" views beyond the mentor's experience

Any mentor will have a specific scope of experience. By engaging with other members of their team, or reaching out more widely within the employer's workforce, they can add narrower but deeper insights to how things work. In a reciprocal mentoring relationship, some thought should be given as to how much reciprocation can be expected of these necessarily shorter engagements, to manage the expectations of both students and the wider staff. The mentor could also reflect on what they have learned about the student's experience and aspirations, and see if they can identify others in the organisation that can specifically address those e.g. via similar lived experience, or by having a role that is better aligned to the aspirations.

Engagement with senior staff or recruiters

Beyond simply a wider engagement across the employer, engagement with more senior staff to gain a strategic perspective on the industry, or with recruiters to better understand how jobs are advertised and filled can add additional value to the mentoring programme. In general, these are better formally organised by the employer so as not to just rely in the mentor's own contacts and confidence. It also allows for more time to be dedicated by the participating senior staff or recruiters in planning, particularly if they can meet mentees as a group. Depending on the organisation it might

also provide mentors with access not otherwise easy to achieve, further increasing the benefits for all.

Supporting placement and internship applications

Where mentoring is seen as an opportunity to "audition" candidates, placements or internships while students are still studying can take that even further. It is important to recognise that many from under-represented groups can have constraints on how and when they can take up such opportunities, for example family commitments or a need to retain a long-term job to support their studies. This means that the design and compensation for any opportunity needs a flexible design, to maximise the options for inclusion.

Programme close-out

The end of a mentoring programme is an opportunity to reflect on the experience and sum up the benefits. Where the employer sees it as part of their recruitment strategy, it is also the last chance to ensure these are clear and available to all student participants.

Celebration event with awards

Like visits during the programme, a celebration at the formal end point is an opportunity to ensure everyone has an opportunity to reflect on the positive benefits. It can also serve to thank participants for their engagement, and for the employer to show their commitment to the process.

Supporting continuing relationships

Where a mentoring relationship has developed effectively, the employer and those supporting the programme may want to consider how to support an ongoing process. This needn't require constant maintenance, but allowing time for the mentor and maintaining access to a mentoring platform could be a low-cost means to extend the benefits for all parties. At the very least, supporting ongoing communication can support future mentoring, internship, placement or employment opportunities.

Feedback and evaluation

While this is given at the end of this outline, an effective evaluation would start at onboarding with a review and recording of participant expectations and understanding. Follow up during and at the end of the process can then determine if expectations have been met or exceeded, and the learning by participants. With careful gathering of feedback during the process, this can result in rich information both to maximise benefits and inform future instances. As with all evaluations, having an intentional plan at the beginning will help secure good feedback and valuable insights.

Signposting to further opportunities

Even if there is nothing immediate for students to progress onto, both the employer and those supporting the programme should ensure opportunities in the future are communicated to them. Similarly, future chances to participate again can be shared with mentors. If this can be formalised, information can be fed into recruitment processes to the benefit of students and employers, as well as mentors where the resultant roles are part of their team.