

Mentorship: How it can take you from bottom to boss

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When wanting to advance professionally, we often look to courses that may assist us in honing or broadening a specific skillset. What is often overlooked - and can be an invaluable tool in elevating existing capabilities - is the acquisition of a mentor.

Hanifa Jassiem, HR Manager: Talent & Culture at Ackermans, believes that mentorship is simply about having the support you need to achieve personal goals. "Whether it's learning an unfamiliar system or transitioning into a new job role, human beings are more effective with the right support."



Hanifa Jassiem, HR Manager: Talent & Culture at Ackermans

In a broader context – and in South Africa particularly – mentorship plays a very important role. "Many individuals still don't have the luxury of a tertiary education; coaching and mentorship enables new opportunities. Education is fundamental to personal and professional development - yet learning doesn't only happen in a classroom.

"Coaching and mentorship assists in bridging gaps between knowledge and skill," explains Hanifa. "Many skills cannot be acquired from a textbook, but rather through seeing and experiencing these skills in action."

What is a mentor?

A mentor is often described as a person who guides and supports another person towards reaching their personal goals. A mentor engages their mentee by building trust, and tailors their guidance according to their mentee's specific needs.

Ultimately, a mentee chooses who they recognise as their mentor, whether this person has been assigned to them in a professional capacity or not.

Mentorship vs coaching

There is much debate on the difference between mentorship and coaching, and a quick Google search will result in many views.

"I think coaching typically involves teaching a practical skill, such as how to use Microsoft Office. There is usually a finite outcome, within a shorter or predetermined period.

"Mentorship is likely to involve a longer relationship with its desired outcome based on what the mentee needs, rather than what the mentor wants to achieve – but it doesn't mean a mentor can't teach you a practical skill."

Hanifa prefers not to let semantics get in the way: "Coaching and mentorship are often interchangeable and equally important."

Mentorship programmes

Hanifa's advice for those seeking mentorship is to first understand what it is you require help with and write down your specific expectations. "This goes a long way towards finding the right mentor.

"At Ackermans, we have a number of development programmes that include a coaching and mentorship component. This

supplements the classroom training with practical on-the-job coaching and ongoing guidance and support.”

In addition, she believes that it is important for companies to have employee development as a core part of its ethos. “Ackermans promotes a culture of continuous learning and has a plethora of formal training programmes available to employees. More importantly, we encourage employees to take responsibility for their own success.”

Finding a mentor

Hanifa maintains there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and finding a mentor should be based on what you need.

In her experience with professional mentors, she believes that asking the following questions may help you find a suitable mentor:

- Do they set an example that resonates with me?
- Are they genuinely interested in what I am looking to achieve?
- Do they listen more than they speak?
- Do they challenge my thinking?
- Do they guide me towards finding my own solutions instead of simply giving me answers?

“If the answer is yes to all, then they’re more likely to be a good mentor.”

And for those considering adopting a mentee, is there any benefit to you? Hanifa believes there is. “Through mentoring others, you also learn from the experience and have the opportunity to enhance your own skills – from communication to leadership. Mentors also reap the reward that comes with knowing they’ve played an integral role in someone else’s success.”

She refers to the Jack Welsh quote; before you are a leader, success is about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is about growing others.

“Open yourself up to finding a sincere connection with someone who makes you feel inspired and motivated to be your best.”

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