ENGINEERS IRELAND

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ESSENTIAL ASPECTS of MENTORING TRAINING

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In 2008 Engineers Ireland developed a new 'Mentoring for Professional Development' one-day learning programme. In 2009, the course won a national training award from the Irish Institute of Training & Development (IITD) as a 'Best Practice Initiative'. Here the course author and programme facilitator Aidan Harney writes about how others can improve training for mentors.

My dilemma in developing a new mentoring 'offering' was that mentoring is notoriously hard to define. Universal agreement on the functions and desired outcomes of mentoring is lacking. How can you train engineers to get better at an intervention that is couched in such 'fuzzy' conceptualisation?

From studying the 'CPD' dossiers Engineers Ireland had amassed by 2008 on 100 of Ireland's leading employers of engineering professionals, it became clear that the traditional U.S. model of mentoring as a form of sponsorship and protection aimed at promoting exposure and visibility was truly defunct. Contemporary mentoring has instead two core functions: knowledge exchange and professional development. If this is the case, mentors need to understand how knowledge is exchanged and how adults learn. I took these principles as my foundation stones for the development of a new mentoring course. My own experience of attending various mentoring training programmes over the years also tainted my approach. Inevitably, I found the training focused on the core competencies needed to be a mentor yet an integrated and applicable process, or tool, was always lacking. I feel strongly that most people have an intuitive sense of what skills are required to mentor. Certainly, the literature on mentoring is clear. To be an effective mentor, certain skills, largely communication skills, are required of the mentor (and the mentee). The mentor needs to be an adroit listener first and foremost and have the abilities to question, challenge and offer feedback and support. There needs to be trust. The ability to tell stories is crucial. For mentees, it allows them express what's going on and helps sets a developmental agenda. For the mentor, story-telling allows tacit knowledge and experience to be conveyed in a rich and textured way.

We know all this and yet why is mentoring so difficult to get right? The literature also shows that the biggest downfall of mentoring is that mentor and mentee don't meet. They just don't get together. Why? It's simple. They know *why* they should meet and they know *what* skills will be required. What is lacking is the *how* part. Educating mentors to use a simple process-tool is the key to effective mentoring training. Without it, with training focused solely on the functions and competences of mentoring, there may be some learning but it won't have much application and hence little impact.

The process of mentoring

Alred, Garvey & Smith (2006) reduce mentoring to a simple, three-stage process-form, namely:

- **Exploration**
- **New understanding**
- **Action Planning**

I train course delegates to use a 4C Model, constructed by adapting ideas from a number of books including Pegg's "The Art of Mentoring" and Egan's "The Skilled Helper." The model consists of four stages, namely:

- **Challenges** – what are the professional development goals of the learner?
- **Choices** – what options do they have? What are the consequences of each?
- **Creative Solutions** – what's the best option, based on shared experience?
- **Conclusion** – what quick wins and next steps can be agreed?

Training mentors is not easy. However, with more than 20 programmes now run for small-, medium- and large-sized organisations, both in the public and private sector, I've certainly gathered some good tips for trainers. My top three are as follows.

1) Don't worry too much about selection and matching. The time spent trying to predict who might possibly 'click' can be far more effectively spent educating mentors (and mentees) how to use a simply process that works no matter what the combination of participants.

2) Spend less time on theory and more time on role play and reflection to come up with good ground-rules. This allows you to show mentors good adult learning theory in action. Allowing them to run mentoring sessions in a safe setting is invaluable and essential.
3) Mentoring has boundaries, limitations and phases. Make sure mentors are aware that mentoring is not counselling. Make sure they recognize that it takes time to build rapport. Make sure mentors aren't afraid to acknowledge they are only human and they too will be learning as they go.

HR can be of great support in terms of facilitating new mentoring pairings and also in checking with both sides to make sure things are progressing well. HR might brief mentees on what to expect before they begin. This can greatly increase participation and success rates. And how do you rate success? Consider quantitative and qualitative evidence. Certainly the number of graduates achieving Professional Engineer or Chartered Engineer status might be indicative of success as will be the frequency and duration of mentoring meetings. However, don't forget to simply ask participants if it is working for them? Are they exchanging knowledge? Are they undergoing the desired professional development? Have they made the hoped-for transition?

Those who volunteer to act as mentors are unlikely to get much thanks for their efforts so don't forget to arrange a get-together to celebrate their contribution and achievements and get their feedback on the process too. ❑

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See: **http://www.engineersireland.ie/cpd/cpd-employer/mentoring/**

CPD COMMITTEE met at VDE TEST and CERTIFICATION INSTITUTE

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The November meeting of the FEANI Committee of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) was hosted by VDE (Verband der Elektrotechnik Elektronik Informationstechnik e.V. . The meeting took place at its premises in Offenbach in Frankfurt am Main. Besides the meeting's daily business and project planning, VDE took the opportunity to give the participants a picture on its profile as a technical and scientific association.

Dr. Michael Schanz, member of the Committee since 2000, gave an overview of VDE's history to the CPD Committee. VDE covers the whole range of electrotechnology: amongst others science, education, profession, standardization, testing and certification.

After the lunch break, a part of the testing facilities was shown during a guided tour comprising one of the most modern test facilities for electromagnetic compatibility (EMC) worldwide. VDE grants its well-known certification mark to electrical products which meet e.g. standards for safety or usability. One of the pressing topics many engineering associations in Europe deal with, is the lack of Engineers. **Dr. Uwe Pfenning**, University of Stuttgart, gave an outline of newest results of research in young people's technical education, their so-called technical socialization, their attitudes towards technology and the vast number (nearly 1000 in Germany) of single projects to attract young people to technology. ❑

FEANI CPD Committee members