

Aidan Harney reports on a study of 18 adults participating in effective mentoring which reveals four essential components



Successful mentoring

study identifies four key factors

As more and more engineering-led organisations in Ireland invest in establishing and supporting mentoring relationships, it is important that the key factors which make these relationships successful are closely understood. So, what are the most practical, applicable processes that can be applied to optimise how your mentors and mentees work together? In order to find out, 18 adults from Engineers Ireland CPD Accredited Employers were interviewed in depth about their experiences. From these interviews, the 'micro-level' essences of what makes up effective mentoring were extracted. Importantly, both mentors and mentees were consulted in order to ensure that the elements identified were deemed essential to both. Participants for this study self-identified as being in 'an effective mentoring relationship for more than six months'. The four key essences, outlined here, signpost actual behaviours and approaches which can make mentoring more effective.

Development orientated

All study participants formed the view that effective mentoring is closely linked to the resultant learning and development (L&D). When mentoring is explicitly linked to L&D, this has a very high motivational factor for both the mentors and the mentees. All except one mentor in the study perceived that they had experienced 'reciprocal learning' during the process. All of the mentees identified specific learning outcomes. Interestingly though, these were not skill-based outcomes. Instead, participants mentioned that they valued the process so much because they got 'a fresh perspective', 'new insights', 'increased self-awareness' and 'improved confidence'. In this way, mentoring can be seen to be a special development intervention that is perhaps not yet fully appreciated in engineering-led firms. Mentoring allows something which classroom-based training alone often cannot, i.e. knowledge-based and

behaviour-based learning. Good mentoring unlocks new and impactful insights making mentoring a powerful change tool.

Professional friendship

This second element of effective mentoring is quite complex. All participants in the study alluded to a feeling of 'comfort' and 'connectedness' within the mentoring partnership. For effective mentoring to take place, rapport was an important factor. All mentoring meetings tended to begin with some friendly chat. Identifying commonalities (music preferences, football team supported etc) which were returned to time and again was very important in order for this 'settling in' banter to take place. That the mentor was 'approachable' was the most oft-mentioned statement from the mentees in this study. Two-thirds of all participants mentioned how important it is that the mentor be 'emotionally mature' and have the capacity for empathy.

Expertise-sharing

The third essence of effective mentoring is about giving generously. All of the mentees alluded to the experience of benefitting from the expertise of their mentor, either through hearing of their experience of a certain situation or from gleaning expert knowledge from them on a particular topic. Knowledge, when starting off in a new organisation, was particularly valued. Cultural nuances of how a firm operates were very valuable pieces of knowledge which mentees picked up from their mentors and acted upon.

Non-directive intervention

This last finding signalled clearly how mentors worked most effectively with their mentees. The specific statement 'bounce ideas off'



was one of the most frequently mentioned phrases throughout all of the interviews to describe the way in which mentor and mentee operated. Another commonplace phrase was 'acting as a sounding board' again suggesting non-directive behaviours. A frequently-mentioned technique for those who chose to work in a non-directive style was to ask questions in order to identify a range of options. Several statements from mentees showed that they found this to be a very empowering, developmental approach.

For the majority of those in the study (94 per cent) the mentor did not behave in a directive fashion at all. Most mentors worked in a non-directive manner, using specific listening, questioning and feedback techniques, supplemented by assistive or helping behaviours when required. For mentees, the least valued behaviour was direct advice-giving from the mentors.

By considering these four 'essences' of effective mentoring, all stakeholders involved can hope to optimise the mentoring process. Mentoring offers unique possibilities for learning, development and progression. Understanding how to make mentoring more effective can deliver benefits particularly in the two core functions of 'behavioural change' and 'knowledge exchange' which are central to engineering-led organisations, with resource limitations, operating in technologically-complex sectors with a rapid pace of change.

For more see www.engineersireland.ie/cpd/cpd-employer/mentoring/

Aidan Harney, Chartered FCIPD, is Engineers Ireland's CPD Director. He received a 'Best Dissertation' award from Dublin City University for his Master's thesis on mentoring and has guest lectured there on the topic. He authored and facilitates the award-winning Engineers Ireland one-day learning programme 'Mentoring for Professional Development'. Email: aharney@engineersireland.ie

the energy show 2012

RDS Dublin • March 28th and 29th

DISCOVER A WORLD OF BUSINESS ENERGY SOLUTIONS

See the latest sustainable energy solutions at the Energy Show 2012. Organised by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), it's a must for businesses interested in the latest innovative products and services.

Why not attend one of our popular seminars to learn about energy saving opportunities. Better still, book early and get a discount on all seminars.

EARLY BOOKING
**SEMINAR
DISCOUNT**

Follow us online

To find out more, visit:
www.seai.ie/energyshow