

Mentoring at the Learning Edge

November 25th - 26th 1999

Introduction

These notes are based on our practical experience of mentoring individuals in a range of organisations in the private and public sectors over a period of eleven years.

We have found the notion of a "learning edge" useful in our work and aim to describe what it is and how to keep mentees balanced on it over the course of the mentoring relationship. A key factor in this is the application of a structure called The Development Cycle* whose power lies in the way that it seeks to combine apparent opposites:

- flexibility with structure;
- the identification of what *is* working, as well as what is not;
- a focus on improvement through challenge and support;
- work on internal and external barriers to change;
- right and left brain thinking, logic and intuition;
- past and future (as well as present); and
- a sense of overall direction with scope to explore avenues and work in a variety of ways at each stop on the journey.

It is our experience that it that offers both clarity and confidence for those new to the role of mentoring and also provides a rich tapestry for the more experienced to explore and to which they can add new panels of their own.

The Learning Edge

We are making the assumption that mentees have chosen to be mentored and are, therefore, willing to take on some changes. In "Mentoring in Action", D. Megginson and D. Clutterbuck describe the mentoring process as one of: "off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking." Significant transitions are rarely made without some mixed feelings. Mentees may have a variety of reasons for taking part.

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Perhaps they are dissatisfied with the status quo, perhaps they see opportunities and unrealised potential, maybe they have had some feedback that suggests a need to change and develop. Whatever the reason, they may have some ambivalence about being mentored. This is natural when faced with the prospect of change and with someone, often largely unknown, as a mentor.

Although this ambivalence is likely to disappear as the relationship develops, confidentiality is agreed and there have been positive outcomes for the mentee, we suggest that it is important to keep the mentee on their learning edge over the course of the mentoring process. This will require different things the mentor depending on the stage the mentee is at and the issues they are facing.

There are times when learning is on the exciting and attractive side of fear: we see opportunities and are willing to take the risks and face the losses that inevitably accompany change. We become fired up, inspired, resourceful, prepared to tackle barriers, knowing the sense of achievement and progress that will follow. We may also be motivated by the desire to pre-empt the consequences that might result from doing nothing.

Equally, there are times when we feel doubtful, reluctant or fearful of what might come from trying something new: learning is not always unadulterated fun. We can feel the sort of paralysis that resembles a rabbit in the headlights, or we find many plausible reasons for staying as we are. The signs of "panic" are not always obvious: often we have developed effective coping strategies to cover our reluctance and make all appear smooth on the surface.

As mentors, part of our challenge is to enable mentees to move from the comfort of the known onto their learning edge. This is a place where they can think, feel, decide and act powerfully. It is a place of exploration and insight, of stretch and creative tension, where clarity emerges from confusion, where difficulties and anxieties are used to find a new way forward.

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We need feedback from our mentees if we are to help them steer this course and avoid their panic or danger zone. What is exciting for one person maybe daunting to another. What was challenging last month will enter the comfort zone next. Part of the process of developing an effective mentoring relationship is to explore what this concept of the learning edge means for each individual and to identify what it is that keeps them riding on it (or will help them get back on if they fall off). This may take some time: it needs trust and self-awareness on the part of the mentee and fine judgement and flexibility on the part of the mentor.

Routes in that we have used have been:

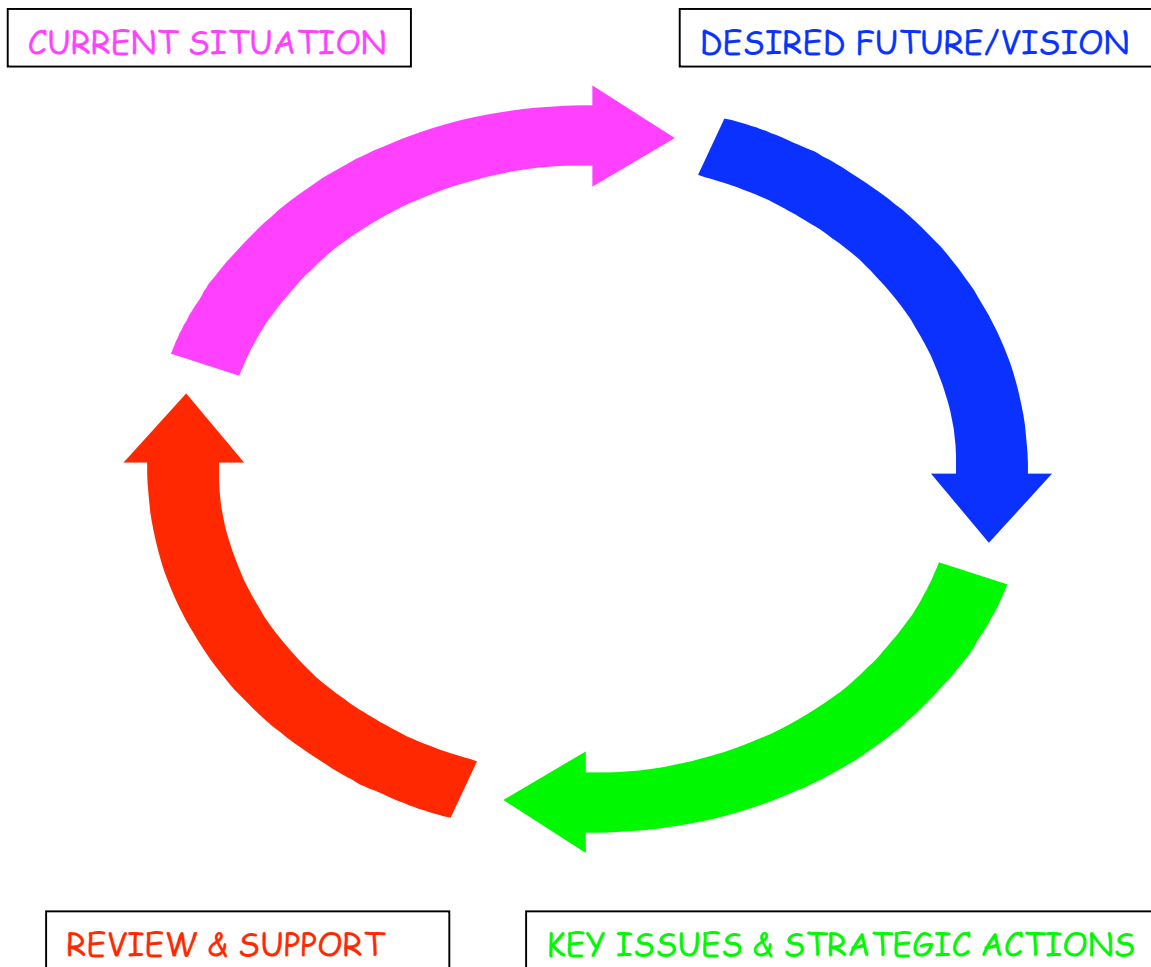
- through discussion of the concept of the learning edge itself and exploration of times on it (or peak learning experiences) or the other side of it (in the "panic" zone);
- by helping mentees to express feelings of concern, anxiety, uncertainty and doubt, yet not to be ruled by them when faced with decisions and the need to act;
- by enabling mentees to have a true sense of their own strengths and resourcefulness, as well as their current limitations;
- by using each of the stages of The Development Cycle effectively, separately and together, to create a climate that keeps the mentee learning;
- by providing feedback at an appropriate point; and
- by offering opportunities for "safe practice" before entering less charted territory outside the mentoring experience.

The Development Cycle

This has much in common with many other models that describe change (and this is set out as a table below). Briefly, it begins with an assessment of the **Current State**. This is usually done in the form of a domainal map that asks for a "helicopter view" of the terrain inhabited by the mentee and all the domains within it (e.g. home, work, social, community, themselves as individuals distinct from any roles they fulfil etc.). It is deliberately holistic, because our work is affected by our life outside it and vice versa. It asks

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The Development Cycle



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them to look at each of the domains and to describe, in words, phrases (and sometimes pictures) how things are now, both positively and negatively. They are also encouraged to include feelings as well as facts, as these influence behaviour. (For more detail on domainal mapping see page 41, "Managing Yourself", Pedler & Boydell.)

Mapping the current state enables the mentee to see the big picture and how things fit together, to identify themes and areas of greatest tension, as well as to see strengths and what is going well. Mentees often feel good at having unloaded the complexity and pressures that result from their multi-faceted experience. It is a mind-sweeping process that leads to greater clarity and usually stimulates them to think about what they want to change.

In addition to domainal mapping, we have also used psychometric tests and data from appraisals volunteered by the mentee as ways of defining the current state.

The next stage is **Desired Future or Vision**. Here the mentor's role in assisting significant transition is to set their mentee's sights on vision, rather than fixing what is broke. Enabling this launch from the territory of the map into the skies of vision is not always easy. Many techniques can be helpful. Some we have used include:

- guided visualisation;
- inspirational stories about the power of vision and goals;
- relaxation;
- use of music to stimulate the right brain;
- use of pictures rather than words, for the same reason; and
- projecting to the end of one's life and looking back (Covey's "begin with the end in mind": "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People").

In order for the mentee to engage with this, they may need to know that you will jointly address barriers, but not at this stage. It can also be reassuring to know that you have no expectation that they will achieve this quickly- it is a long range perspective and they are in charge of the time scale and the strategy.

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The creative tension or energy that results from the gap between the Current State and Desired Future provides the impetus to move forward. However, it is also accompanied by a tail wind of feelings (which Senge calls emotional tension, "The Fifth Discipline") related to the real and perceived obstacles, internal and external, that stand in the way of mentees achieving their desired outcomes.

It is important for the mentor to enable the mentee to both stay connected to the desire to move forward (creative tension) and to address the concerns, uncertainties and doubts facing them (emotional tension), without allowing them to become overwhelmed or to begin sub-optimising. They are real concerns, but they are not always a good guide to what can be achieved.

Identifying the **Key Issues** or blocks that stand in the way of change is the third stage, together with determining some strategic actions that will move the mentee forward. It is sometimes useful to map these using Force Field Analysis, balancing them with some of the helping forces that may be present in the Current State assessment.

The mentor's role here is to enable the mentee to identify both external and internal forces and to prioritise those that are key and where most leverage for change is to be had. This stage also involves identifying **Strategic Actions**. Usually these will be ones that aim to reduce or remove the blocks.

Turning these into a clear plan of action with SMART objectives defined by the mentee (which often calls for a touch of rigour and diligence on the part of the mentor). Encouragement to prioritise and to plan for success by tackling key issues that seem within reach first build confidence for those that are more difficult. We have found it important for the mentee to have a written record and to test their psychological commitment to it before moving on. In this way any remaining doubts or reluctance can be surfaced and addressed before they set about realising their plan.

Working with the mentee in a variety of ways to **address key issues** will probably be part of the plan for future sessions. Methods will depend on the nature of the key issues: creative thinking techniques, identification of and direct connection to peak (successful) experiences, stakeholder analysis, empathy exercises, brainstorming, problem-solving, role-play and mental

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rehearsal are some of the tools we have used here. In any event, what has always been critical to breakthrough and progress here has been work on the mentee's *internal* barriers, (i.e. what the person believes about themselves, how they see themselves in relation to the key issue and what part their values play in this).

Addressing key issues successfully relies upon a strong foundation of trust and the skills of reflective listening, resourcefulness, non-judgement and supportive challenge in the mentor. Tolerance of the mentee's priority and their desire for change whether it be small or large is also important.

The **final stage** is concerned with agreeing when and how progress will be reviewed and what support the mentee can draw on in order to make and stabilise changes in the work environment and elsewhere. Identifying who can support them and in what way will mean that they already know who to draw on when the need arises, which improves the chances of success. They may identify role models, gatekeepers (people who control access to opportunities), those who inspire and energise them, who to avoid, those who can offer a listening ear or a well-timed push.

Subsequent mentoring sessions entail a return to the action plan and the domain map to identify successes and difficulties, to draw out what has been learned and to celebrate positive changes.

What place the past?

The work on the Current State can also be usefully preceded some work on the past. We have often used a "Time Line" or graph that charts highs and lows over a given period in the mentee's history. This enables them to draw conclusions about their ability to manage other transitions, about their strengths and current limitations, and about themes and patterns of behaviour that may be playing themselves out unhelpfully in the present.