



Mentoring on the Move

First published 2002

The last 5 years or so have seen an explosion in the use of coaching and mentoring to support individuals from CEO to graduate recruit in developing skills and managing career and personal development.

Coaching or mentoring – the terms are often used interchangeably – can be simply described as directive and ‘non-directive’. The first is typically used to quickly acquire knowledge and information from someone able to pass on the benefit of their experience. In the second, the mentor does not specifically advise the individual. Instead, they prompt, through questioning and reflecting, to facilitate the client’s own thought processes.

That there is value in using both directive and non-directive mentoring to assist employees in adapting to diverse environments seems evident. John Leary-Joyce, director of the Academy of Executive Coaching, which provides master coach training, sums up the opportunity. “Our work and home lives are a made up of a complex system of relationships and interactions between ourselves and others. Strength comes not from isolating ourselves but from being comfortable within this complex and constantly changing environment. How often do we feel at odds with someone’s behaviour or with what they are saying? Chances are that if we feel like this then so do they. Having a greater understanding allows us to explore this with others, leading to more positive, productive and mutually beneficial relationships. Coaching and mentoring help us to achieve this”.

David Clutterbuck, director of the European Mentoring and Coaching Centre (EMCC), highlights what this means to the expatriate worker. “Establishing a relationship with someone who will act as your mentor can really help. Finding an internal mentor who can help you navigate the company politics and networks can be valuable. However, for senior staff I’d also recommend finding a mentor outside the organisation – perhaps a peer in another company. One senior manager I know found, on arriving in his new country, that he seemed to rub his colleagues and staff up the wrong way. Through mentoring from a company leader outside the company he found the root of the problem to be his lack of sensitivity to local style. He learnt, for instance, that it was customary to get to know the families of his employees – to invite them to dinner and so on – and as a result was able to re-establish better working relationships”.

Cross-border working is an every day fact of life within BT Ignite which has a presence in seven European countries. According to Rachel Porter, Head of Resourcing Ignite HR “We are no longer structured by country but by function. This means that project teams are made up of people who originate from and live in a variety of different European countries. We have to get used to cross-cultural working and of course it makes good sense given that’s how our business operates”.

Rachel comes from the UK and, having worked on a number of international assignments, has now made her permanent home in the Netherlands. She observes “Mentoring helped me to make my first move into an international role and since then I’ve been lucky to have a number of informal relationships with people who supported me. We didn’t call it mentoring at the time – but that’s what it was”.



Rachel is now participating as a mentor in a BT (British Telecom) e-mentoring programme. Zulfi Hussain, Head of BT's Ethnic Minority Network which launched the programme, describes its aims.

"I believe that e-mentoring will become key to BT providing support for ex-pat and mobile workers whatever their ethnic origin and home country. One of the reasons I was keen to develop e-mentoring in BT was to overcome the time and distance barriers which can affect matching suitable mentors and mentees. For instance, we've recently arranged for someone in Italy to mentor an individual in the UK who is interested in working internationally. They can explore whether or not this lifestyle and career direction is really for them. If it is, they will enter into it from a position of knowledge and strength. If not, then they've discovered that without taking any risk".

Zulfi also stresses that maintaining links back home during an international assignment can be as important as building new networks abroad. "Working with an e-mentor back home helps keep a foot in the camp and means that the individual still feels connected with what's going on. That's particularly crucial if they are planning or expected to re-join the same part of the business when they return".

Mobile telecommunications company Altron Europe is using coaching to harness the power of cross-cultural working. Agnese di Paolo, is an Italian working in Brussels. Alongside her role as one of Altron's technical consultants she heads up their coaching programme in Belgium. She describes the scheme. "Many of our consultants are living and working abroad. We are pioneering a coaching programme that supports our junior consultants in their first 6 to 9 months. Most are under 30 and we help them to establish their professional and personal goals and how they plan to achieve them".

"For those of us arriving in Brussels there are some fantastic opportunities – to learn and speak different languages for instance – but it can be challenging to start with. We have definitely found that coaching helps new arrivals to quickly build a network around them and to fit into the culture of both the company and their new country".

In Altron's case, coachees are matched with coaches according to a number of criteria. Personal rapport comes first, of course, but Agnese points out that if, for instance, an individual is keen to learn another language she will try to match them with a native speaker, harnessing the "richness of experience" cross-cultural working can bring.

It's not just the employee that benefits from this type of relationship. The Stichting Outpost Expatriate Network Centre for Shell in The Hague, for instance, offers a variety of support services for spouses through their Inpost programme. According to director Jacqueline Evans they don't offer any formal mentoring schemes but volunteers do 'buddy' with new arrivals. "It's very low key and informal but quite widely done. They'll take the spouse for a coffee, share their experiences and help them find their way around – where the appropriate shops are, how to pay for the bus etc. They are a friendly face and someone to talk to".

It seems then that much that might be defined as mentoring or coaching for mobile workers and their partners happens either informally or, like Altron and BT's programmes, under the umbrella of wider reaching programmes such as diversity or management development initiatives.



Mindy Howard, Diversity Consultant at Shell People Services, picks up the point. “Our diversity programmes, which are not exclusively aimed at expats, are all about helping people learn about other cultures through perhaps mentoring someone from a different background. It’s important to our business that people are comfortable working with others who are different. Sometimes we can find that seasoned expats have only lived within a Shell ‘camp’ and never integrated into the local culture or got to know the people. Our diversity initiative aims to change this”.

There seems, anecdotally at least, to be a general growth in organisational mentoring and coaching worldwide. However, according to Drs Jan Selmer and Alicia S M Yeung at the School of Business, Hong Kong Baptist University, programmes to support female development do not seem that widespread. In their recent study “Female Business Expatriates: availability of corporate career development support” they compared the levels of support offered to western male and female business expatriates working in Hong Kong. The results suggest that very few female business expatriates, in Hong Kong at least, receive any significant career support at all, and certainly less than their male colleagues.

Interestingly, two of the authors’ observations reflect clearly the opportunities presented by mentoring. Firstly, they suggest that “lack of corporate support may signify a shift of career responsibilities from the organisation to the individual [implying that] firms should encourage and teach their employees self-management”.

Secondly, they found that the ratio of male to female expatriate workers was still heavily weighted towards men but that this was slowly changing. They therefore proposed that “More women are attracted to careers abroad and those who are successful abroad can provide career counselling and mentoring to their female colleagues. Their international experience and knowledge may facilitate not only their upward mobility but also their support of women who are developing an interest in international postings. This in turn may speed up the overall globalisation of business strategies and their implementation. That must be a crucial accomplishment of successful business firms”.

Mentoring can, it seems, facilitate the success of expatriate working for employee, spouse and the organisation itself. Judging by the feedback of those that are reaping the benefits, that it is not more widely adopted seems to be a missed opportunity.

Perhaps the need is being superseded by the emphasis that many global businesses are placing on mentoring for diversity which encourages employees to work comfortably with colleagues from different backgrounds, regardless of whether they themselves travel. It might be a little optimistic to think that this could be a case of the mountain coming to Mohammed but, as the world becomes smaller, perhaps expatriates will start to find that their local colleagues become better adapted to meeting the cultural differences half way!