

Mentoring in Practice

Supporting Mentors in Registered Apprenticeship for Young People

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Five key components of an apprenticeship program: **it's a paid job; apprentices gain on-the-job experience, classroom training, mentoring, and a national credential.**

Ninety-one percent of employees who have mentors are content with their jobs (see <https://urbn.is/3c5psmp>).

Employers experience gains in **employee retention, diversity, succession planning, reduced downtime, and through their apprentices' productivity increases.**

Ninety-four percent of employees would stay longer with their employer if their employer invested in their learning (see <https://urbn.is/3PaMdnF>).

Apprentices in a highly effective program reported that their workplace learning was the best part and said the biggest improvement would be even more intensive mentoring (see <https://urbn.is/3AHmsae>).

THE ROLE OF MENTORING IN YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS

Mentoring is an essential component of every registered apprenticeship program and critical to the success and retention of young apprentices. Sustained investment in and support of mentors contributes to a host of benefits for the mentor and apprentice while bolstering apprenticeship's value as a talent development solution.

Apprenticeship depends on a relationship between a novice who is learning an occupation and an expert who teaches the competencies required. That expert is often called a mentor, sometimes referred to as a journeyworker in an apprenticeship. Mentors are especially important to youth apprentices who are learning to navigate in an adult workplace. A good mentor is even more critical if apprentices are different from most other workers in significant ways, such as gender, race, or ethnicity.

Mentoring is a natural process. Many adults are happy to pass on their knowledge and skills to the next generation and to take a younger person under their wing. Many are also gifted at it, even without training. But training can help all mentors build on their natural ability by learning what the best mentors do. Training is different from informing in that it entails changing behavior, which is best accomplished by engaging participants in stimulating activity. Participants who share ideas and experiences and answer questions will be more engaged than if they only listen. Discussions about role-playing exercises, video clips of mentoring, and group solutions to mentors' dilemmas apply general principles to practice.

Mentor roles. Mentors are fundamentally **teachers**, instructing apprentices in occupational competencies. They are also **advisors**, sharing their wisdom, passing on inside information and tips, and giving encouragement. Mentors can be **role models**, showing through their own behavior how to be a good worker. Other roles include connector, advocate, and confidant.

What mentors teach and advise about. **Technical competence** is the primary content that mentors teach and advise about—how to do the work well. They also demonstrate and build apprentices' **personal competence**—how to be a good worker and have a productive career. Apprentices also need **social competence**—how to work well in an organization. And mentors advise on **problem solving and critical thinking**—how to do work that is not routine.

HOW MENTORS TEACH AND ADVISE

The main methods mentors use to teach and advise apprentices are **demonstrating** how to do the work while the apprentice watches and helps; **explaining** both what to do and why by thinking aloud; and **monitoring** apprentices' work and giving **constructive feedback** by watching, commenting, suggesting, and correcting. Employers can train mentors to use all of these methods more effectively, especially giving constructive feedback. Additionally, mentors can be trained to pose **reflective questions**—questions that make an apprentice look back over what or how they have learned—to help them think more about what they're doing and check their understanding; and how to engage apprentices in **joint problem solving**—working together on problems the mentor may not know how to solve initially.

Constructive feedback should be specific enough to help the apprentice improve. For example, a mentor's apprentice was constantly late for meetings. When they were late for yet another meeting, the mentor communicated clearly to the apprentice that their meeting could not be made up. The mentor explained the importance of being on time as a sign of respect for their own time and the mentor's time. As a result, the mentor asked the apprentice to set up future meetings at a mutually agreeable time and the apprentice was never late again.

A reflective question requires thinking; it can't be answered with yes or no. Asking "How do you think that went?" or "How might you have done it differently?" encourages an apprentice to be self-critical and reveals their thinking. Asking "If you accomplish this task, what will the result look like?" promotes planning ahead.

Using joint problem solving to work through a challenging activity with an apprentice, a mentor can help them learn to master work that is not routine, an increasingly important ability. A mentor charged with designing and building an exhibit featuring a miniature beach environment with the tide ebbing and flowing gave his apprentice the task of calculating the rate of flow of the water, requiring him to use the geometry he had learned in school but previously wondered what it was good for.

Other examples of challenging assignments from mentors include the following:

- Conduct research involving cyber threats such as trending malware, phishing attacks, and ransomware in a cybersecurity apprenticeship and share findings with the department. This activity combines competencies of both research and public speaking for an apprentice.
- Work through backwards planning on a new program rollout and then create a Gantt chart to show interdependencies and contingencies that you need to plan for. This example provides an apprentice the opportunity to work on an assignment where there are unknowns.
- Design a happy birthday email campaign for employees. This activity teaches the apprentice about data security and transformation and how to write concise emails.
- Develop a social media marketing graphics project. It's creative, it does not require much oversight, the materials are straightforward, and it provides an opportunity for collaboration with teams or to take on a project independently.
- Work with a search engine optimization expert to understand analytics and report on how to improve the reach of the project's or organization's websites.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FROM MENTORS

- "How did you come up with that conclusion?" helps a mentor understand the mentee's thought process and not impose their own.
- "What about this project/work are you most proud of?" helps the mentee think about what they know they did well, and it leads to a good discussion of how they could do better.
- "What will go wrong in your plan?" helps the mentee think through potential problems and plan ahead with alternatives.
- "What are things that motivated you to pursue this career and excite you about this path?" reminds mentees to have this as their north star, especially when they have challenging days.
- "What are you nervous about with this plan/action?" helps mentees visualize their worries and how to work through them so they feel confident delivering no matter the outcome.
- "What motivates you? What are your greatest challenges right now?" helps the mentee understand their own motivations for work and learning on the job.