

WORKPLACE MENTOR CASE STUDY

Successful mentoring

In his role as a senior manager in Assurance & Advisory Business Services at Ernst & Young in Dubai, Sameer Khan is mentor to a number of people, trainees and qualifieds alike. His team includes ACCA and CPA trainees, as well as qualified accountants, from India, Pakistan and the Philippines.

'We're highly service-oriented here – which means our employees are regarded as our most valuable assets – it's they who deliver exceptional service to our clients,' he says. 'That's why people are encouraged to become mentors as they progress through their career.'

'However, for many of us, we need little encouragement – if you've had the benefit of being mentored yourself, then you understand the benefits and usually the experience rubs off on you in a way that means you want to give something back yourself.'

In Ernst & Young's Dubai practice, training in acting as a mentor is built into a structured development programme. The system used to combine career counselling with mentoring; however, the firm is now moving towards separation of these two key strands, with counsellors focusing on personal aspects and mentors examining issues of a more professional nature.

PATIENCE WINS THE DAY

For Khan, the most important characteristic of an effective mentor is patience. 'It's absolutely critical,' he says. 'You have to be able to let the other person talk, in order to demonstrate an understanding and win their trust. Only then can you be appropriately responsive to their personality type – everyone's different, and you can't deal with an extrovert in the same way that you would with someone who is more reticent. You can't enforce your own style onto mentees; you must let them lead the discussions.'

Khan also uses that initial listening period to watch his mentees' behaviour. 'It's all about the way they act when they're talking – their physical behaviour gives you a good idea of what they're like as a person,' he explains. 'Keep an eye on how they behave while you're speaking to them – are they taking in what you're saying? Are they being dismissive or receptive?'

'Some people think faster than they talk; others do the exact opposite. You have to be able to judge; it's a little like a personality analysis. Then you have to check that your initial assessment is correct, so that you can move onto setting realistic objectives for your future mentoring sessions.'

PUT IN SOME STRUCTURE – BUT EASY DOES IT

Ernst & Young's mentors are given a framework to work within when taking on new mentees – but with a remit to very much use their initiative and adapt the guidelines according to the needs of the individual.

It's a highly inclusive process, part of which involves consulting mentees' current and previous line managers: 'I'd initially sit down with them to get their feedback on the mentee's performance and anticipated future progression,' says Khan. 'Once I've gained an overall picture from their perspectives, it's then that I'd get together with the mentee to discuss setting up objectives for over the coming six months, as well as looking at longer-term aims. Together, we'd document those objectives – which could include development of both technical and soft skills, as well as milestones along the way to work towards.'

'We might have that chat informally over a drink or lunch – so that it puts the mentee at their ease. You want your mentee to be open and forthcoming, which won't happen if you stick to a structure that's too rigid or overly formal.'

That doesn't mean time management skills can be abandoned though. Mentoring can generate unexpected demands – often at times when other priorities are fighting for the mentor's attention.

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'I think it's important not to forget when you were a mentee yourself,' he advises. 'Especially at more junior levels, people may disturb their mentors with issues they feel need to be resolved right now. If you're managing your time effectively, then it should almost always be possible for you to give them some attention or at least ask for 10 minutes. The last thing you want is for your mentee to feel they can't approach you if they have a problem that's pressingly urgent.'

REAP THE REWARDS

Khan has been mentoring for some five years now; while some of his mentees have been with him for six months, others have been under his guidance for four years. He's in no doubt that there's been payback for him too: 'When you act as a mentor, it helps you develop an understanding of people in general,' he says. 'For me, understanding the human psyche is an interesting study in itself – and mentoring enhances your knowledge of how people think and behave, and of how to help them. And it's rewarding to know that you can turn your own setbacks or the lessons you've learned in your career – and in life – for the benefit of others, so that they can have a more fulfilling experience at work.'

He's also convinced that, while mentoring is a serious and demanding task, it shouldn't be the daunting prospect that many assume it is: 'Yes, you have to play a pivotal role in someone's life – often in situations you haven't necessarily come across yourself – and you have to be confident in your judgement, and sincere in your answers. But it's not the role of the mentor to be all-knowing. If you're unsure about something, just be frank and say you'll come back to your mentee when you've done some investigation. That's how you win and keep their trust – not by giving false hopes or rash promises.'

Some of Khan's mentees have since gone onto leading positions: 'It's immensely satisfying to watch someone work hard and progress, and know that you've made a contribution to that,' he says. 'And in a way, you've also made a positive contribution to your profession – by paving the way for future business leaders.'

'I'm extremely proud of the people I've mentored – and the bonds that have been created between us will, I hope, be long-lasting.'