

## Thinking Space Paper No.17

# What makes a great mentor?

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### **Can anyone be a mentor? Are there things that make great mentors unique?**

As in all things I think it's helpful to go back to the beginning. The first mention of a mentor was in Homer's 'The Odyssey', where Odysseus heads off to fight in the Trojan Wars and leaves his young son in the care of his wise and trusted advisor – Mentor. However, in the true tradition of Greek Mythology – Mentor's role was taken over by the Goddess Athena because, quite frankly – he wasn't all that effective. The interesting part of this, barring the fact that the first mentor was a woman, is what she represented. Athena was the Goddess of both Wisdom and War - not the fighting of wars but the strategizing of war, and in that she represents the two main features of mentoring – support and challenge. As mentors we offer mentees many things, but at its core mentoring is about providing support by listening and offering challenge by asking good questions.

I do not believe there is a single definition of a great mentor. Mentoring is a very individual experience and the trust and quality of the relationship is built by the two people involved. Therefore a mentor that is great for one person, may not be great to another. However, there are some key features that I see all great mentors sharing:

**They listen** – we hear a lot know about the quality of listening and its importance in all areas of work, mentors not only listen but they understand that sometimes they are adding most value by just listening and are not frustrated that they should be doing more.

**They ask great questions** – I have seen a lot of mentors at work and the one thing that stands out for me is that the really good ones have a store of great questions. Questions that don't require context, questions that automatically make you think differently, questions that allow them to focus their attention on listening and not thinking about the next question or suggestion.

**They offer no judgement** – mentoring requires you to question the intent behind everything you say. A great mentor acts with their mentee in mind at all times and ensures that all they say and do is for their benefit alone.

**They understand the importance of connecting** – all great mentoring relationships start with the building of rapport and trust. This is a skill in itself and can be a tricky one when you are paired up with a relative stranger that you don't automatically find common ground with. Great mentors are aware that they need to share their personal stories and create an environment of ease for the mentee to relax in.

**They are responsive** – great mentors free themselves up from feeling the need to be "experts", they understand that they are there to respond to the needs of their mentee and are comfortable with that role.

**They understand empathy** – and the importance of standing by someone’s side and truly being in their shoes and relating to their challenges. They know that sympathy rarely cuts it.

**They balance challenge and support** – just like the goddess Athena, they balance the push and pull of giving challenge and offering support. They are also conscious that one person’s challenge is another’s attack and so they define exactly what challenges means with their mentee.

**They are fully committed**– mentoring only works when both mentor and mentee give their time and energy to the relationship. Mentors understand that they can show commitment in more ways than just being there. It is the small signs that solidify the message – a text at the right time, small details remembered, the following through on actions.

And the most important one for me is that mentors truly believe that this is a **two way learning partnership**. I have matched hundreds and hundreds of pairs over the years and the first thing I look for in a mentor is someone who says that they expect and want to learn just as much as the mentee.

We can all think of that one person who made a difference in our lives, who took the time to listen, to really hear us and support us in achieving our dreams. What made them great for you? I’ve certainly been reminded this month that it is a huge privilege to be a mentor. So if you haven’t been one yet, I highly recommend you find an opportunity to do so.