

Thinking Space No.27

Remote mentoring

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Every good mentoring relationship is based on trust and rapport. When you have the opportunity to go for a walk or have a coffee together it is easy to learn more about the other person. Developing trust using video calls and other means of remote communications is a bit trickier. So here are a few tips & tricks which might come in handy.

Face-to-face dialogue has an immediacy that allows two people to creatively bounce ideas off each other. It is easy to get into the 'flow' when interaction is supported by non-verbal communication. Easy to explore what each party understands by a word or phrase. The close visual contact allows mentors to build rapport with the mentee. With video calls, it is more difficult to recognise the undertones in what someone is saying. In addition to that, with written electronic exchanges, you miss hesitations, prevarications and revealing facial expressions. Words in emails or WhatsApp can be misleading; written communication therefore requires considerable skills in explaining issues clearly, precise, succinct and considerate. ¹

If both – mentor and mentee - have the required written communication skills, mentors using emails or other messaging tools are able to spend more time thinking about the advice they give and the questions they will ask. The quality of questions improves and mentors ask fewer but more succinct and more insight-provoking questions than in the heat of a face-to-face dialogue. Equally, mentees have more time to consider their responses. Self-reflected mentees might appreciate this space; for strongly action-oriented ones it provides a useful discipline to stop and think an issue through. Nuances that may be missed in a face-to-face dialogue often become more obvious in text. Also, online communication allows for much more rapid responses by the mentor to the mentee's urgent enquiries. The remote dialogue can be broken down into shorter, progressive exchanges spread over several days or more. People are apt to be remarkably open in their self-disclosures online. "It seems that online mentoring reduces the power distance between people, so they tend to have more open, more challenging conversations with someone more senior than themselves."²

While mentoring can be done remotely, the intensity of the communication will not be the same. We would establish a hierarchy of intensity levels of communication with physical meetings at the top followed by video calls, calls without videos and lastly written communication. If transformational mentoring with personal development is intended, physical meetings are certainly the best option. As this is not always possible, the virtual relationship should at least start with physical meeting. Nonetheless, even if virtual means of communication are used, time needs to be spent in each call on relationship building to not have purely transactional meetings.

Establishing a high-quality exchange using one or a mix of different online communication tools, we therefore recommend to:

¹ David Clutterbuck (2013), Everyone needs a mentor, 5th edition, p.147.

² Idem, p.148.

- Use video whenever possible, as it facilitates building connection between the mentor and mentee. Also, building rapport and connection is here more critical than ever. Therefore, it is important to give this proper time in every conversation
- Choose technology that works for you both but try for something with video
- Keep the video meetings short as they are exhaustive, as they require extra cognitive processing to fill in the missing 50% of the conversation that we normally get from non-verbal clues and smells via the exchange of chemicals and hormones.³ Rather communicate regularly and more frequently.
- Ask the mentee to write an agenda for each interaction defining what the issues for discussion are, what outcomes are looked for, and what kind of response the mentee is looking to the mentor to make.
- Ask the mentee to summarise from time to time, to ensure that they are both on the same wavelength – this is often forgotten when communicating in text.
- Ensure conversations always close with a focus on what's next.

And finally, some practical hints and tips for successful video sessions:

- **Rituals:** prepare a cup of tea (or coffee) and have a sip before you start working on the topic of the day.
- **Video:** Watch out for facial expressions (and how they change) as well as body language.
- **Interests:** Try to figure out what's on the desk. What pictures/photos are on the wall? Check LinkedIn page to learn more about the person (i.e. hobbies). Start the conversation with something your mentee is really interested in (i.e. sports).
- **Questions:** Use questions to start the conversation (i.e. WeConnect Cards⁴). Use Must-Choose questions (i.e. do you prefer movies or books?). Encourage your mentee to ask these questions as well.
- **Reflection:** Use questions like: Was today's session useful for you? What can we do better next time?

If possible, meet with your mentee at the beginning of the relationship. There is definitely value in an initial face-to-face meeting before the remote mentoring relationship gets under way.

³ Steve Blank, What's Missing From Zoom Reminds Us What It Means To Be Human, posted on April 27, 2020, <https://steveblank.com/2020/04/27/whats-missing-from-zoom-reminds-us-what-it-means-to-be-human/>

⁴ <https://weand.me/product/we-connect-cards/>