

# What is mentoring and why is it important?

In the first of a new series, **Dr Janine Brooks MBE** talks about the ins and outs of mentoring...



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**M**entoring is by no means a new intervention or method. In one form or another it has been used in human interactions for thousands of years. This gives a reassurance that mentoring is not a fad nor a fashion and most certainly not an experiment.

So, even though mentoring has been around for some time, it is only fairly recently that mentoring has been more fully utilised within clinical healthcare, and specifically dentistry, as a relationship that needs to be undertaken by those with specific skills.

There are a number of definitions of mentoring but I like this definition from the leadership development organisation, Forton, as it includes both the mentoring relationship and the qualities that a mentor should possess:

‘Mentoring is a developmental relationship where one person, typically older, or more experienced, or with more expert technical knowledge, willingly and freely shares

their knowledge, skills, information and perspective to support the personal and professional growth of someone else. In some cases the mentor may also share their contacts or networks.’<sup>1</sup>

There is some excellent published work on the use and importance of mentoring within dentistry. A series of articles published<sup>2-4</sup> sets the scene for mentoring in dentistry. Work has been published looking at the use of mentoring in dental foundation training<sup>5</sup> and the roles that mentoring (and Personal Development Plans) play in postgraduate education<sup>6</sup>.

It can sometimes be difficult to understand the distinctions between mentoring and other supportive conversations and interventions. These include coaching, teaching and supervision. The boundaries are often blurred as the interventions I have noted share some of the same skills. However, there are some basic differences that differentiate mentoring from other interventions/conversations. Here are four examples:

→ **A mentor** is most usually an individual from the same professional group as the person they are mentoring, (the mentee). They share the same professional background and environment. Within the mentoring relationship there will be a transfer of expertise, professional experience and practical advice. The mentor is often older, although this does not have to always

be the case, as experience is the important attribute.

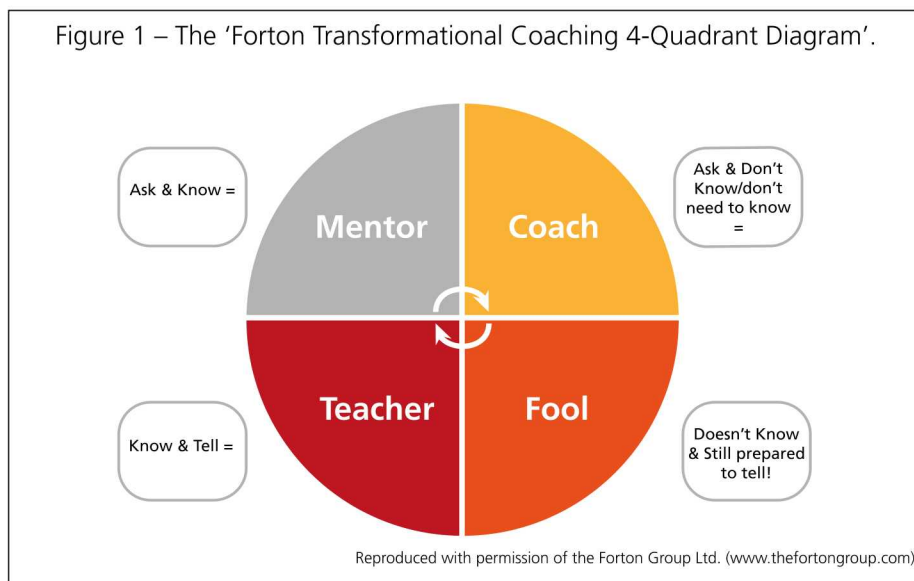
→ **A coach** does not have to share the same professional background as the person they are coaching, (the coachee). In fact, this can be a hindrance as the role of the coach is not to share their experience, skill or expertise. For those who do share the same background there is a danger for them of wishing to share wisdom and this is not how coaching operates. A coach sets the environment and supports the coachee to achieve their own goals using their own knowledge and talents.

→ **A teacher/tutor** transfers knowledge to the individuals they are working with (the student). The student is developing their own knowledge in a specific field so the transfer is most often one way. However skilled teachers and tutors encourage students to find information for themselves and develop critical skills.

→ **A supervisor** oversees and monitors work, often of a qualified individual, (the supervisee) which could be clinical or educational supervision. Supervisors are often part of training pathways. They can also have a role to play in remediation programmes. Supervisors provide constructive feedback.

Mentoring has taken some time to gain

Figure 1 – The ‘Forton Transformational Coaching 4-Quadrant Diagram’.



a position of appreciation within dentistry. The time is here and now to get to grips with the real positives that successful mentoring offers to dental professionals, dentistry and importantly patients.

In 2015 the General Dental Council published work commissioned from the University of Manchester – Evaluation of Remediation Support in UK Dentistry<sup>7</sup>. This work highlighted mentoring as one of the most common type of remediation support.

Earlier this year the GDC published their proposals to modernise dental regulation – *Shifting the balance: A better, fairer system of dental regulation*. The proposals outline four interlinked aspects. The first, entitled moving upstream, gives prevention of poor performance centre stage. There is a real opportunity here for skilled mentoring to support dental professionals before serious performance concerns develop.

The number of dental professionals who struggle is a constant concern – not only to the General Dental Council as the primary regulator of dentists and dentistry – but should be to all dental professionals. Each and every one will struggle with performance at some point in their career. It is just not possible for any dental profession to constantly produce work of a good, acceptable standard every day of their working life.

Dental professionals are human; humans have complex lives with stressors and strains. There will be times when we all struggle. That said, I am not stating that all will be consistent poor performers; that’s where mentoring can improve the outcome.

A factor that can minimise those times and make the struggle easier to combat is working

with a skilled mentor. The earlier help and support is sought and given then the less likely serious issues are to develop. More on that important point later in the series.

Working with a mentor aids personal development in many ways. Mentoring conversations can be used to deepen reflective practice and allow individual dental professionals to gain more from the reflective activities undertaken.

A mentor supports the crafting of a meaningful personal development plan and can assist in choosing the right continuing professional development activities. Mentoring conversations are important when considering career paths and opportunities. An experienced mentor will have an

extensive network across dentistry and can help in making introductions to new career opportunities.

Successful mentoring can be part of successful patient management. The skills that are acquired by a mentor can directly transfer to patient care and helping patients to manage their own oral health. How this can be practically achieved will feature in a future article.

I hope this introduction to the series of mentoring articles has whetted your appetite for more. Working with a qualified mentor can help you improve your performance and help you gain your goals, whatever they may be. Working as a mentor is a deeply satisfying addition to your career and can increase your own motivation for dentistry. Both mentor and mentee gain from the conversation and relationship of mentoring. ♦

1. The Forton Group. Foundations in Mentoring: A Model and Resources for Mentoring. Available online at [www.thefortongroup.com](http://www.thefortongroup.com).
2. Holt V P, Ladwa R. Mentoring: A quality assurance tool for dentists. Part 1: The need for mentoring in dental practice. *Primary Dental Care* 2008; **15**: 141-146.
3. Holt V P, Ladwa R. Mentoring: A quality assurance tool for dentists. Part 2: What are mentoring and coaching? *Primary Dental Care* 2009; **16**: 19-24.
4. Holt V P, Ladwa R. Developing a mentoring culture in Dentistry: Making a difference in a changing world. *Primary Dental Care* 2010; **17**: 93-98.
5. Mauthe P.W. Mentoring and Dental Foundation Training. *Primary Dental Care* 2010; **19**: 69-76.
6. Spicer R. Mentoring and Personal Development Training in Postgraduate Dental Education: a review. *Dental Update* 2004; **8**: 472-474 and 477-480.
7. General Dental Council. Evaluation of Remediation Support in UK Dentistry. Oral presentation: University of Winchester May 2015.

## More about the mentor role

- Mentors can help people to do a current job more effectively by offering advice into different ways of working or new techniques
- They can offer insight into potential career paths or support the motivation or ambition of the Mentee
- They may have, and be willing to share, access to networks and connections, or have insights into personalities or relationships, of potential value to the Mentee
- The Mentor may offer their knowledge and understanding of the structural,

political or social field of the profession and different working environments – both the visible and invisible structures – this can help the Mentee to be better able to be resourceful, influential and successful in the profession or that particular environment.

- The Mentor may act, at times as a teacher or trusted counsellor, or at other times in a more coach-like way. Skilled mentors know when to flex their skills to be most helpful and supportive to their mentee
- Mentors are often powerful and influential role models