

CHAPTER 16

Bonus Chapter: The Case for Virtual Mentoring— Tips for Mentors, Mentees, and Program Managers

In traditional mentoring relationships, the mentor and mentee interact face-to-face. Yet, like all relationships, mentor-mentee interactions are evolving. Remote mentoring is a flexible, effective alternative to in-person mentoring experiences for online students and remote employees who are part of a global workforce or are working from home for other reasons.

While I believe in-person meetings build relationships quickly and are most effective for mentees, they are not the only way to connect. We learned this during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Meaningful mentoring relationships can flourish through calls, video chats, text messaging, and other virtual forms of conversation.

Of course, as with traditional mentoring, careful planning and intentional communication continue to be vital.

First, let's discuss the benefits and challenges of virtual mentoring; then we'll go into some guidelines on how to make your efforts successful.

Benefits

Virtual mentoring has many benefits—chief among them:

- **Larger Pool of Mentors.** Forward-thinking global organizations have already learned the value of being able to communicate any time virtually and from any place in the world, giving their employees access to a larger pool of mentors within their international organizations or externally. In the same way, virtual mentoring allows alumni mentors who have relocated away from their alma mater to mentor students and creates opportunities for people in rural, distant locations to connect with a mentor whose preferred skills or experience may be difficult to find nearby.
- **Flexibility and Convenience.** Participants in virtual programs appreciate the flexibility and convenience of virtual mentoring. With the help of technology, mentors and mentees can agree upon a time to meet, which allows them to manage different time zones, heavy workloads, and even childcare duties. If a busy executive is eager to mentor but can meet only after “regular office hours,” s/he can be matched with someone in a time zone that allows the mentor to participate after hours and the mentee to participate during his or her regular hours—a win-win for all.
- **A Trifecta Win for Employee Morale.** Emotional support is vital to help combat the loneliness and isolation some remote workers report. A virtual mentor can provide that support. In a *Forbes* interview, Janice Omadeke, CEO and

founder of The Mentor Method, described a three-way win for organizations that invest in mentorship programs: "You're providing a safe space for them to discuss their feelings, you're connecting your talent to resources that build resiliency, and you're showing an investment in their development, which can offer peace of mind, personally and professionally." (Tarr)

But is virtual mentoring effective? The answer is yes—it absolutely can be effective.

Research presented to the Society of Academic and Research Surgery (Erridge et al.) shows that mentoring via real-time videoconferencing yields equivalent outcomes to in-person mentoring. Researchers conducted a systematic review of 66 research studies focused on the remote mentoring of surgeons. Their results suggest that mentoring via real-time videoconferencing is feasible and provides *some* equivalence to on-site mentoring in regards to clinical and educational outcomes. I emphasize “some” because face-to-face mentoring continues to be the most ideal.

Challenges

Virtual mentoring presents some communication challenges. For example:

- **Things get lost in translation or misinterpreted.** Face-to-face mentoring offers more information about mentor-mentee engagement than can be gathered with virtual communication. Methods like email, chats, and text messaging are especially prone to misunderstandings because facial expressions, nonverbal gestures, and body language are missing. Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, and similar technologies are perhaps a happy medium.
- **Communication preferences vary.** Some people find it difficult to build rapport using a telephone, teleconferencing,

email, or text. Some are more comfortable with the phone than a video conference call. Some prefer email because it gives them time to reflect and to think, while others enjoy the immediate response of texting or chatting via WhatsApp. Hint: Program managers who are setting up remote mentoring programs should ask a specific question about communication preferences on intake forms and use that information if possible when matching mentors and mentees.

- **Time zones can be tricky.** For example, if the mentor is based in Australia while the mentee is in the U.S., then finding common ground for meeting times is daunting but doable through negotiation and flexibility.
- **It's easier to "disappear."** Unlike face-to-face programs, where you see someone regularly in the hallway at work or when attending mentoring events, it's easier for one party to simply "disappear" during virtual mentoring. Time zones and technology are easy excuses. Remote programs should encourage participants to establish a specific plan around when they will communicate and how they will address missed meetings to keep the relationship on track. This plan should be established up front.
- **Technology brings its own tribulations.** When the technology we count on breaks down, frustration is inevitable! Again, intake forms can help by having mentors and mentees list preferred platforms as well as those that simply won't work for one reason or another.

Interestingly, there is some evidence that when mentors and mentees communicate in multiple ways, it leads to more engagement and a greater sense of connection. So, program managers can encourage virtual participants to come up with a blended plan using more than one communication method with confidence. A mix of monthly phone calls and emails with quarterly Zoom meetings might work when time zones are a big issue, for example.