

## **TWO WAY MENTORING FOR INDIGENOUS APPRENTICES AND STAFF**

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### **Abstract**

The terminology *mentors* and *mentoring* is everywhere - it is used in different contexts at all levels of education and training, and across diverse sectors for a variety of purposes. The terms are laden with conflicting interpretations and expectations from all stakeholders. Namely the VET system and the workers within this sector, industry and small business and most significantly the clients, who in the case of this paper, are Indigenous apprentices.

Mentors and mentoring are also terms that promote the prospect of ‘a magic wand’ or a ‘quick fix’ for complex employment, training and learning problems as well as more deep-seated cultural negotiations.

From an Indigenous apprentice’s perspective, these concepts often appear to never quite deliver the level of successful mainstream engagement as initially promised.

### **Introduction**

Recently mentors and mentoring has gathered momentum and accrued a positive reputation in the workplace. Mentoring programs are numerous in a variety of areas - Leading the Way, Mentoring and Capacity Building Initiative, Mentor Marketplace for Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Indigenous Leadership programs and Indigenous Mentor Program (Employment and Training with Mission Australia), to name only a few.

This paper will provide an Australian Indigenous perspective on ‘*mentors and mentoring*’, and interrogate the widespread perception that this phenomena inevitably benefits the disadvantaged as well as provide some discussion of the emerging findings

from a research project being undertaken by this group training organisation. It is written by an Indigenous practitioner in an organisation that is currently working towards the development of support strategies which will improve the recruitment, retention and completion of apprenticeships by Indigenous Australians.

Field officers are recruited into the organisation to undertake the critical and complicated interface between the group training organisation and the apprentice and the host employer and the training provider. Part of their role is to undertake regular mentoring visits to apprentices in their caseload and the field officer/mentor function is assumed to be interchangeable. The appointed mentor is expected to develop in isolation with minimal initial or ongoing professional development and learning.

Within the organisation a significant amount of resources are being invested in ensuring quality service to all stakeholders. This research project in progress provides the space to critically analyse and reflect on how we currently support Indigenous apprentices, identify what works and what does not and what is needed to enhance our service delivery. The process of building staff and organisational capacity to effectively mentor has transformed how we do business, particularly with our clients, Indigenous apprentices. The process and the importance of *two way mentoring* is emerging. It is apparent that it is critical that we value Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being, and embed these practices into the day to day operations when mentoring Indigenous apprentices. There is a risk that mentoring that is only one way can fail because it involves 'blaming' that prompts resistance from those being mentored and ultimately acts to perpetuate the current status quo of Indigenous disadvantage.

## **Literature Review**

Clutterbuck, (2001) and Colley, (2003) note that there is confusion and no clear consensus in defining mentoring. Mentoring is described as classic or traditional, where it is one to one, with an older experienced person who can provide some guidance (Bernard, 1996; Linney, 1999; cited by McDonald, 2002). Mentors and mentoring are

loaded terms which, intentionally or unintentionally, imply deep cultural values anchored in an invisible and silent deficit thinking which influences people's interpretation and construction of this phenomenon.

In the research project and within this paper, two way mentoring is being identified and interpreted as a collaborative, developmental and ongoing social learning process where the relationship is based on the foundation of respect, shared responsibility and a commitment to achieving positive outcomes.

*Mentoring is many things ... but at its heart lies an affirmation of human relationships and the capacity for good relationships to enable those involved (the young people and their mentors) to learn and to grow. At the same time mentoring is no soft option. Quality programs require hard work and tough decisions. They require firm undertakings from all involved. They operate with purpose and deliver real outcomes from rising self esteem, healthier behaviours, and improved school attendance through to better informed career choices and a more secure place in education or the workforce. (Hartley 2004, p. 2)*

MacCallum; Beltman 2002 and Lovelock 1999 (cited in Hartley 2004 page) agree with Hartley 2004 in that the human element is important and necessary for successful mentoring relationships. As a practitioner, this view is significant especially with Indigenous apprentices as this acknowledges their ways of knowing, doing and being. As Philip, Shucksmith and King (2004), and Colley (2001a, 2001b) note, mentoring programs are being developed, promoted, and implemented across a range of sectors. Application of these programs are believed to be particularly useful in settings where the employees are defined as the disadvantaged, the most at risk and with the least social capital.

As Indigenous disadvantage persists in this country, the quest by policy makers for intervention strategies, capacity building programs and empowerment policies remains a

stronghold in Australian politics, government departments, businesses and systems across the nation. This overwhelming desire to find ‘something that works’ as stated by Colley (2001a; 2001b; 2002), Brabazon & Disch (1997), and Philip & Shucksmith (2004) has produced a rapid rise, resurgence, and advocacy of mentors and mentoring. However, caution is highlighted with ‘casting the net’ too widely and broadly.

*Research suggests that enthusiasm for mentoring should not be allowed to run ahead of the evidence. Mentoring is not a panacea for all young people and is problematic with some groups of young people. (Hartley 2004, p. 17)*

Colley (2002) states that given the positive policy stance towards the use of mentoring, and the overwhelmingly favourable, even celebratory, regard in which the practice is held, we might expect that the last 20 years would have produced clear theoretical and practical frameworks. However, 20 years later, Piper and Piper, (2000, p. 84) reveal:

*The concept of mentoring remains ... evaluation has tended to be programmatic and anecdotal ...*

*However, gaps in our knowledge about the theoretical base for such work, and questions about the aims, methods and effectiveness of the concept, have become evident. ...*

*Overall many programmes start with a ‘deficit’ model, implying that young people and their families fail to meet some undefined ‘norm’*

Colley 2001b echoes the same concerns, and emphasises the plight of the ‘deficit view’. As does Howard 2006, p 113 states:

*“For non-Aboriginal people, it can be difficult to escape from the ingrained cultural view that equates ‘difference’ with ‘deficit’. The legacies of history, the expectations embedded in*

*notions of professionalism and 'good management', and peer attitudes all support negative judgements about the responses of Aboriginal people where these differ from what is expected."*

This point of view highlights the need to maintain the *challenge filter* - to continue to confront the unconscious uptake of mentoring programs without due analysis and consideration, especially when these programs are promoted as the solution for the Indigenous apprentices perceived shortcomings. As an Indigenous Australian, one cannot help but think that mentors and mentoring is yet another 'tag' which contributes to the amplification and exaggeration of the Indigenous Australian's collective deficit in contemporary Australian society. Whether the context is within the government, private or industry context the terminology is commonly used and the process readily embraced and appears to have saturated every workplace context.

In reviewing some of the literature on mentors and mentoring it was evident that knowledge and information about Indigenous apprentices which described the meaningful and engaging mentoring process for this cultural cohort was limited.

## **Methodology**

The methodology is informed by using a critical ethnographic approach. According to Thomas (1993) critical ethnography describes, analyses, and opens to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centres and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain. As Thomas (1993, p 2-3) argues:

*If critical ethnography is about anything, it is about freedom from social repression and a vision of a better society. Research helps identify what oppresses and how it can be altered. It requires that we understand our subjects, our culture, and above all ourselves ... critical ethnographers challenge comfortable, but repressive,*

*cultural definitions and offer an invitation to engage in social change.* (Thomas, 1993, p. 71)

This research project is about ‘privileging Indigenous voices’ in a particular context for a specific period of time. The primary objective will be to describe Indigenous apprentices perspectives that emerged during contact and support provided while involved in the above mentioned work. This helps to describe the experiences of an apprentice in the public sector and will help develop a better understanding of their lived ‘working life reality’. Laplantine (1996, p 15) advocated an emic approach to reveal the invisible: ... “The seer is the one who sees what is not “in front”, but “inside”, that is to say, at first sight the others cannot see what is not immediately visible for all: the invisible.”

This research project aims to explore and analyse the current mentoring process undertaken with Indigenous apprentices in a group training context. This phenomenon will be explored from the multiple perspectives of the field officer, the Indigenous apprentice and workplace supervisor. This research project will provide the opportunity to critically analyse, reflect, discuss and describe the approach of two way mentoring and the importance of deconstructing and reconstructing the terms mentors and mentoring within this context.

It will be context specific and conducted within a local group training organisation’s partnership with the state’s public sector with 10 Indigenous apprentices, 4 field officers, 2 group training organisation managers, 3 host employer supervisors and 1 trainer.

The methods which will be used to collect the qualitative data include transcripts from semi structured interviews and focus groups, analysis of artefacts, a literature review and the critical reflections of workplace observations and anecdotes from an Indigenous practitioner’s perspective. There is a variety of data collection methods which will amplify the patterns and themes, enabling us to see and understand ‘the invisible’. The data will be transcribed and thematically analysed. The reference group will ensure validity and the collaborative critical friends group has already proved to be invaluable.

This research project is limited in that it is a *case study* of a small number of Indigenous apprentices and their appointed mentors. However due to the openness and the commitment of the group training organisation and the field officers working directly with the apprentices it is envisaged a comprehensive and critical understanding will manifest itself. This data will have the depth and richness necessary to articulate the type of mentoring needed for Indigenous apprentices. And the implications drawn from this research project may be used to encourage and guide other organisations and other groups of Indigenous apprentices, mentors and workplaces who desire better social, economic and political, outcomes.

### **Emerging Findings and Discussion**

When non-Indigenous people discuss mentors and mentoring the assumption is made that only Indigenous people need a mentor to develop the knowledge, skills and understandings required to conform, comply and succeed in the mainstream workplace.

What has crystallised in this project is that the issues experienced by, and with, Indigenous apprentices is a shared responsibility for all stakeholders and it is essential that a two way mentoring approach is implemented.

Two way mentoring is a developmental, shared, learning process, not dissimilar to parenting; where a quality relationship is vital. The outcomes to be achieved and the understandings to be facilitated are dependant on the willingness and the capacity of the mentor. As described by an Indigenous field officer/mentor:

*... its about supporting the apprentice by walking side by side  
...sharing the issue rather than pointing ... standing side by side in  
a shared role where the mentor guides and creates the opportunity  
of decision making which leads the apprentice to making a choice  
with the knowledge of consequence either positive or negative.*

*(Indigenous Field Officer)*

*...it is important to not be too direct or confronting or the apprentice shuts down because they feel they are being blamed. People don't like just being talked at in a rapid pace, they want a discussion. They wait for a hook so they can come in, so they can talk too. The apprentice needs to feel safe and not intimidated by the type of language ... you know nothing too formal. (Indigenous field officer)*

Interpersonal communication skills, level of self awareness, emotional intelligence, passion and empathetic understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being are vital. A foundation of mutual respect, shared equal responsibility, critical reflection and a passion and commitment to dig deeper; to understand what 'other' does not know and an acknowledgement of the diversity that exists are the significant values needed for a meaningful and trusted mentoring relationship with Indigenous apprentices.

The emerging findings from this project is highlighting mentoring as one of the value added services that is implemented by this group training organisation to support Indigenous apprentices. A myriad of definitions and interpretations were held of mentoring by field officers, workplace supervisors, managers and apprentices. Consciously or unconsciously, these interpretations impacted on expectations of service, day to day practice and most importantly an individual's construction of this phenomenon. This project has highlighted the dangers of mentoring being informed by deficit thinking or a deficit view (Colley 2001b; Howard 2006; Piper and Piper 2000).

In view of the above, this project has affirmed that it is important to continue with the internal cross cultural learning and development for the group training organisation's staff. And that we need to continue to systematically analyse the organisational processes, procedures and the policies ensuring they are reflecting Indigenous knowledge

systems. The positive outcomes achieved is demonstrated in the following observations of a field officer:

*“... He has become much more reflective ...willing to listen before he approaches a workplace issue ... he now has a different perspective of the Indigenous apprentices and much more inclusive of using the Indigenous people within the company ...”*

Indigenous colleague's observations of a field officer

What has also emerged is the level of commitment and active support from the group training organisation's board and senior management. The CEO has been a stalwart advocate and supporter ensuring there are reportable organisational and work division key performance indicators targeting Indigenous employment and training outcomes. Without this executive support the staff and organisational transformation would not have been possible.

## **Conclusion**

This project in progress has highlighted there appears to be an over simplification and unquestioning acceptance of this phenomenon without adequate contextualised analysis and interrogation. Mentoring appears to be viewed by many as the “knight in shining armour” coming to the rescue however care must be taken that the purported rescue is needed and wanted and that the rescuer knows what to do and how to do it. Moreover, to be effective the knight may need to get off his horse often - take off his armour and be prepared to learn from those he is ‘rescuing’. Mentors and mentoring promises much but the process implemented and the outcomes attained are questionable. Especially if operating within a traditional one way mentoring model in an Indigenous context. There is a danger that mentoring may become another tool of the collective deficit thinking which serves to blame Indigenous people for their position and lack of, in the wider society. Yet it is actually the failure of mainstream systems to adapt to inclusive,

collaborative and non judgemental ways to ensure the engagement and success of Indigenous people.

To conclude, this article advocates that the celebratory, uncritical approach to mentoring needs to be revised. There is a need for further research investigation which can help develop the theoretical understandings about this phenomenon specifically from an Australian Indigenous perspective as active participants utilising a two way mentoring approach. Without this we risk mentors and mentoring, performing as a tool to perpetuate the current positioning and disadvantage of Indigenous Australians in the apprenticeship sector.

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