



Mentoring Program for the Water Sector: A best practice guide

Mentoring is a formal or informal relationship between two people—a more experienced mentor (usually senior and outside the mentee’s chain of supervision) and a less experienced (usually junior) mentee. Mentoring has been identified as an important influence in professional development in both the public and private sector. The relationship is established to strengthen competencies needed to enhance job performance and career prospects for the mentee. Ideally, it should be based upon encouragement, constructive comments, openness, mutual trust, respect and a willingness to learn and share information.

The concept of a national water industry mentoring program was initiated by the Young Water Professionals (YWP) network in response to concerns that the Australian water industry would face serious workforce loss in the medium to long term future unless there was an explicit attempt to transfer tacit knowledge and consequently retain skills and knowledge within the industry. Mentoring programs are an effective way to develop skills via the transfer of knowledge from experienced to less-experienced personnel. It is envisaged that a successful intra-industry mentoring program would see early-career water sector employees paired with a more experienced mentor whose expertise and circumstances are suited to the needs of the mentee.

This brief document provides some general guidelines on how to ensure that mentorship results in a positive and valuable experience for all parties involved. Importantly, these guidelines are generic and should be amended to accommodate the specific needs and circumstances applicable to your particular situation.

Terminology

Mentorship – A mentor / mentee relationship

Facilitator – The person or people that facilitate the mentorship.

Mentor – An individual who is experienced and knowledgeable in a particular field, who provides guidance and leadership to an assigned mentee.

Mentee – A less experienced, usually early-career individual who is guided by an assigned mentor

Best practice mentorships

Mentorships should involve a facilitator, a mentor and a mentee. Depending on the specific circumstances, a mentorship should follow the procedure below:

- An individual interested in becoming a mentee approaches a facilitator with a view to being paired with a mentor
- The facilitator considers who the mentee might be best paired with and initiates a meeting between the two
- The first meeting occurs which involves a discussion about mentoring, the signing of a mentorship agreement, and the negotiation of a communication schedule
- Subsequent meetings should occur as agreed between the mentee and mentor in their first meeting
- At the second meeting, a more detailed plan of action can be developed, where goals for the mentee can be broken down into specific tasks. Tasks for the mentee to complete by the next meeting should be agreed upon
- At the third and subsequent meetings, the mentee should present the results of the set tasks.
- From the third meeting onwards, mentor and mentee should discuss the progress made by the mentee (and include obstacles met in trying to achieve desired goals)
- The mentor can then provide feedback and analysis of issues, and offer advice and guidance for future actions
- The mentor and mentee then negotiate the next tasks to be undertaken and decide on the next meeting date
- Completion of the mentorship occurs either at the negotiated completion date or at the discretion of either party. This meeting should involve the facilitator and can be used to review the process and outcomes.

Best practice for the facilitator

The facilitator enables the mentorship and provides a point of contact for both parties. Their role is to provide an appropriate pairing, ensure a program for interaction is developed and adhered to, facilitate negotiation if applicable, monitor the relationship's progress, and provide evaluation once the mentorship is complete.

Some general tips for the facilitator:

- Ensure you give sufficient thought to the pairing process. Consider the circumstances of both the mentor and mentee and ensure these are conducive to providing an effective mentorship. Research shows that the most effective mentors are sourced from outside the mentee's chain of supervision. Things to consider when pairing a mentor and mentee include:
 - The duration both are available
 - The nature of their roles
 - The skills the mentor can offer in relation to the skills the mentee seeks
 - The frequency with which both are willing to meet
- Involve the mentee in the pairing process in order to ensure their expectations are addressed. This may also be an opportunity to discuss the concept of mentoring if the mentee's expectations are unreasonable.
- Once a pairing is achieved, arrange a meeting so the two can be introduced. This meeting should include:
 - A series of questions asked of both to ensure the pairing is appropriate
 - A discussion of the concept of mentoring to ensure expectations are realistic and compatible
 - Negotiation of a mutually suitable meeting or communication schedule
 - A formal mentorship agreement which should cover expectations of both, duration of the relationship, objectives of the mentorship, and any applicable confidentiality clauses.
- It is ultimately the role of the mentor and mentee to negotiate a mutually serviceable mentorship. Avoid encouraging them to achieve unrealistic goals, but rather help facilitate and monitor the agreed aims and timeline.
- You should be available to both parties in the instance that either feels the relationship is not working.

Best practice for the mentor

The mentor enters into an agreement with a mentee in order to provide expertise and practical experience. In addition to acting as a sounding board for the mentee, mentors provide industry knowledge, an in-depth understanding of networking and protocol and advice on career progression.

Some general tips for the mentor:

- In providing the mentee with career guidance, the mentor might cover a range of areas, such as: the mentee's resume and job searching, performance reviews, technical skills, professional development and further study or training, work/life balance, job satisfaction, interpersonal and networking skills, and career management and planning.
- A mentorship should not be viewed as only benefiting the mentee. Mentorships provide mentors with the opportunity to invest in the lives of others and make a contribution to their industry. Mentors can also inadvertently learn from the mentee.
- Mentors must have: good listening skills, an inquisitive mind, a passion for their work and industry, the ability to provide constructive and positive feedback, patience, and good organisational skills.
- Mentors are not required to provide all the answers, instead the mentor encourages the mentee to use their available resources to identify solutions. It is therefore, a partnership where the mentor and mentee work in a collaborative manner. Sometimes it might be easier to simply provide the mentee with the answers, but this is not conducive to a meaningful learning experience.
- Mentees may be apprehensive about contacting their mentor, not wanting to intrude on the mentor's time or resources. Mentors can help alleviate this concern by periodically forwarding encouraging emails to give the mentee confidence to maintain contact.
- Ensure you have a good grasp of the mentee's circumstances and structure your advice and feedback accordingly. Convey practical advice in terms of the mentee's career development goals. This means continually asking questions of the mentee, not making assumptions.
- Understand that mentoring is a commitment and you should be in a position where you can be available to the mentee in line with the mentorship agreement. There may also be instances outside of this agreement when the mentee approaches you with questions or issues. You should be open to this possibility, but should approach the mentorship facilitator if the mentee becomes too demanding.
- Provide feedback wherever possible, and bear in mind that as an early-career employee, feedback should be conveyed in a constructive and sensitive manner.
- Get the mentee active. Involve them in appropriate meetings, either as an observer or as a presenter and introduce them to relevant contacts. Arrange projects or assignments for them if appropriate and achievable in terms of the mentorship agreement.
- Consult the mentorship facilitator if you are unhappy with the arrangement

Best practice for the mentee

The role of the mentee is to take advantage of the opportunities offered them by their mentor. Mentees enter into an agreement with a mentor in order to gain knowledge and experience. As such, they should be open to new information and learning experiences. Mentees should strike a careful balance between being critical and inquisitive in relation to the guidance offered by the mentor, and being respectful of the service they are providing.

Some general tips for the mentee:

- It is the mentee who is expected to drive the mentoring relationship by developing the agenda or discussion points for the mentor to comment on. It is the mentee's responsibility to build rapport with the mentor and to ask the right questions, seek relevant information and utilise the connections given by the mentor.
- Consult with your employee if appropriate to advise them of your intention to enter into a mentoring program.
- Mentees should be: interested in developing their careers; good listeners and communicators; able to take responsibility for their own development; open to receiving feedback; willing to accept challenges; positive about change and growth; and able to set goals and work towards them.
- Give great thought to what you want out of a mentorship prior to approaching a facilitator. Consider your strengths and weaknesses, what you would like to learn and where you want your career to go.
- Prepare an individual development plan. Start with a skeleton plan prior to meeting with the facilitator, and then use the first meeting with your mentor to flesh out greater detail. Ensure your objectives are specific, measurable and achievable.
- Take an active role in the initial meeting with your prospective mentor. Ask them questions such as:
 - What can you, as a mentor, bring to a mentoring relationship?
 - What positions have you held in the past?
 - What qualifications or training do you have?
 - How much time do you anticipate being able to spend working with me?
 - What type of communication methods (i.e. phone, in person, email) would you prefer for this mentoring relationship?
- Be scrupulous in the notes you take during your mentorship.
- Ask questions.
- Honour your commitments to the mentorship in terms of attendance at meetings and communication with the facilitator and mentor. Be courteous and provide advanced notice if you cannot honour a meeting commitment.

- Ask for feedback often and take it onboard in a constructive manner. Remember that you are in a mentorship to learn and receive feedback so avoid taking this personally or getting defensive.
- Make the most of opportunities offered such as networking possibilities, attendance at meetings and seminars etc.
- Revisit your individual development plan often and assess the extent to which you are on track. Make adjustments where appropriate.
- Consult the mentorship facilitator if you are unhappy with the arrangement.

Mentoring programs foster skills enhancement and information sharing, while providing a means to transfer valuable experience and expertise from experienced to early-career employees. Mentoring programs can offer a plethora of benefits for all parties involved so long as the systems are in place to ensure its success. Provided the individuals involved follow best practice, the water industry should benefit greatly from this initiative.



SAMPLE MENTORSHIP AGREEMENT

We are voluntarily entering into a [INSERT TIME PERIOD] formal mentoring partnership, between [INSERT MENTEE] from [INSERT ORGANISATION] and [INSERT MENTOR] from [INSERT ORGANISATION]. The following highlights the features of our partnership:

- Mentoring partnership objectives

As a result of working with a mentor I would like to accomplish the following:

- Specific role of the mentor

I will support my mentee’s developmental process by:

- The logistics of our meetings will generally include the following:

When:

Where:

How long:

Frequency:

Who is responsible for initiating:

- We will honor the following confidentiality agreement:

- The agreement may be terminated at any time by either the mentee or mentor.

Signature:

Signature:

MENTEE

MENTOR

Signature:

FACILITATOR