

# Building the mentoring relationship: some suggestions for mentors

The following advice is from the IMP team, who hope your mentoring partnership will be fulfilling and meaningful.

## Getting started

Many books have been written on the topic of building a strong mentoring relationship – but don't worry if you're not an expert; we've done the reading for you! Below, you will find a few guidelines that we hope will help you craft a productive and satisfying partnership with your mentee.

## Get to know your mentee – and let them get to know you

We suggest dedicating your initial mentoring conversations to building the rapport with your mentee. This will help to establish a foundation of trust, an essential ingredient for a transformative mentoring partnership.

- Demonstrate your genuine interest in your mentee by asking thoughtful questions about their interests, experiences and background.
- Be an active listener by reflecting what your mentee has said and using body language to demonstrate your interest and engagement.
- Don't be afraid to be vulnerable – sharing your mistakes can remind your mentee that everyone fails from time to time and empower them to be more resilient in the face of any challenges they are experiencing.

## Setting goals with your mentee

Did you know that it's common for people to struggle with goal setting? That said, setting goals at the beginning of your mentoring relationship is critical, as it sets a direction for your work together and clarifies how you can best assist your mentee.

For many people, the fear of failure is greater than the potential reward of succeeding; or they feel so intimidated by their goals that they convince themselves they're happy enough with the status quo. As a mentor, one of the most powerful things you can do is support your mentee to clarify their goals and help them develop an action plan to achieve them. Encourage them to reframe any failures they may experience as delay, not defeat, and to see these as necessary steps on the path to success.

If your mentee does not know their goals, this can be your first mentoring moment. Ask questions like,

- "What prompted you to sign up for the IMP?"
- "What about my profile stood out to you?"
- "What specific concerns or questions do you have right now?"

- “How can I help?”

Goal setting can be a process, so make a point to check in with your mentee to determine whether their priorities are changing or evolving. This often occurs in mentoring partnerships as the mentee gains more exposure to their industry and clarifies their career aspirations through your support. For more information on goal setting, please see our [Goal Setting Guide](#).

## Setting expectations with your mentee

Just as your mentoring partnership will benefit from clear goals, clear expectations about the way you and your mentee will work together are the foundation for a successful partnership. In the early stages of your relationship, your mentee will initiate a discussion about this as you work through your [Mentoring Agreement](#). Here are some quick tips to help guide this discussion:

- Determine how and when you will communicate with one another. You may find that your communication preferences will change as you get to know one another better. Renegotiate as needed.
- How long will each of your mentoring sessions last? Be clear about how much time you can dedicate to each mentoring session, so that you can make the most of each one.
- Consider your mentee’s learning goals. How might these influence the way you work together? Can you dedicate a session or two to work shadowing to provide industry exposure, or set up informational interviews for your mentee with colleagues or attend a networking function together to help them build their network?
- How would you like your relationship to operate in terms of confidentiality, feedback and progress monitoring? Are there any other aspects that feel important about the way you work together?

## Options vs Solutions

It’s easy to feel that you have to provide all the answers to your mentee, but it’s likely they already have at least some of the answers they’re seeking – they just need a bit of encouragement to take the leap.

The [GROW](#) (Goal, Reality, Options Way) model can be a useful structure for a mentoring conversation, as it provides a framework for a thorough exploration of the current situation and a thoughtful, methodical approach for surfacing options to move forward. The GROW approach is also helpful because people tend to believe most strongly in a solution they have come up with themselves. Here are a few quick tips if you don’t have time to explore the GROW model in depth:

- In the early stages of the conversation, closed questions might be a good way to establish the circumstances and gain information. Show empathy, and where possible, voice your support for your mentee and use confidence-boosting language, like “This is a challenging situation, for sure, but you are more than capable of working out a solution. Let’s consider some options together.”
- Try to avoid giving quick solutions. While the answer might feel obvious to you, your mentee will benefit from working through their challenges with your support.
- Offer suggestions of things your mentee might try, for example, “Have you considered looking into...” or “Something I found helpful when I was in a similar situation was...”. Steer clear of words like ‘should’ and ‘need to’ as much as possible.
- Use more open questioning to empower your mentee to think through solutions and develop a plan. Questions like, “What do you think is the first step to take here?”, “How could you go about setting that up?” or “How have you approached situations like this in the past? What worked well/less well?”

## Share your story

Human beings are programmed for stories. Before written language, stories helped us evolve to pass on lessons, evade threats and build individual and collective identities. Storytelling is the most powerful way to educate and engage, which makes it a powerful tool for mentors to share their knowledge and experience. Stories are also an amazing way for mentors to reflect on and learn from their experiences – so in the context of the mentoring partnership, storytelling benefits both parties! As a mentor, stories help you to:

- Demonstrate humility and relate to your mentee in real terms, breaking down the perceived barriers around power distance and experience levels and building rapport and trust
- Highlight important ideas, suggestions or opportunities by sharing the outcomes of their own action or inaction. This can empower your mentee to make informed decisions and act on them more effectively.
- Expand the mentee's point of view by helping them visualize what is possible – often altering limiting beliefs and empowering growth mindset in the process.

## Coaching vs Mentoring

Much has been written on the difference between coaching and mentoring. In brief, the IMP Team would define the difference as follows:

- **Mentors:** support a mentee to attain their learning objectives through a guidance process. Relationships unfold over time, containing elements such as trust and mutual interest. Typically, mentors will have detailed knowledge and experience in the discipline/future industry of the mentee. Mentoring engagements can take varied forms – work experience or shadowing, networking with other professionals, guidance and support through the job-seeking process, to name just a few.
- **Coaches:** focus on improving performance or skills. Coaches typically do not give advice – instead, they provide encouragement using open-ended questions to problem-solve and strategise solutions with their clients. Coaches often have a background in psychology and/or have undertaken other specialised training to qualify as a coach. Coach-coachee relationships are often characterised by a formal, short-term engagement, with typical client interactions conducted through in-person or online conversation.

As a mentor, there are likely to be many occasions where you will put your coaching skills to good use. However, it's important to understand the difference between the two roles when setting goals and expectations for your partnership.

## Coordinating schedules

It can be challenging to sync up schedules with your mentee. We suggest determining a regular weekly/fortnightly/monthly meeting schedule to start with (depending on your preferred schedule). Diarising all meetings at the beginning of your partnership allows you to place the scheduling aspects of your partnership on auto-pilot while still allowing you to re-negotiate meeting timing when needed.

Some mentors find it handy to make the most of students' late-night routines by scheduling catch-ups online after business hours. Whatever approach you decide upon, by keeping your mentoring relationship a priority and encouraging your mentee to do the same, you will be well set up for a productive partnership.

## How to relate and icebreaker questions

A good strategy for getting to know your mentee is to look for common ground. If you have both studied at Griffith, this can be a good place to start, but any common topic of interest will suffice. Try questions like:

- “What led you to choose your current degree?”
- “Who do you look up to and admire?”
- “Who or what inspires you?”
- “What do you like to do in your leisure time?”

General questions can help you build rapport with your mentee and can provide important clues about how best to assist them.

## We are here to help

If you would like support with any aspect of your mentoring partnership or experience, please do not hesitate to contact us.

## CONTACT

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