



**ROY**  
GROUP

# MAKING SENSE OF MENTORSHIP

Key Findings From Our Research **September 2025**

Founder of Nawalakw Community Foundation and Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw hereditary leader 'Maxwayalidzi, K'odi Nelson shares a special moment and inspiration with the next generation.



complexability



SENSEMAKER®

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## About Roy Group:

Founded in 2004 by Anne-Marie Daniel and Ian Chisholm, Roy Group has established itself as an innovative and trusted leadership development firm based in British Columbia, Canada. Grounded by its model of change, Roy Group's philosophy recognizes leadership as a practice rooted in community and continuous learning. Roy Group has dedicated over two decades to refining frameworks, approaches and methodologies across diverse sectors including public service, enterprise, education, and social impact.

Throughout their organizational journey with clients, Roy Group works with senior teams of leaders as mentors to develop their next generation of leaders. True mentorship demands accessibility, careful attention, effective tools/methods and a safe environment where mentees begin to experience and recognize themselves as leaders.

Seeking to understand the essence of mentorship more thoroughly, Roy Group embarked on an initiative to collect narratives from a broad spectrum of individuals connected through social and professional networks. This endeavor aimed to uncover intricacies and nuances of mentorship as a practice, exploring its impact from the perspectives of mentees.



# Purpose:

This paper delves into the profound impact of mentor relationships as revealed through a research project undertaken by Roy Group since 2023. With the support of The Cynefin Co., Roy Group deployed SenseMaker® to collect 256 data-rich narratives over a 14-month period from respondents representing a diverse range of sectors and geographies. Our research identifies mentorship as a powerful dynamic that has the potential to enhance the lives of individuals, the cultures of organizations, the resilience of communities, and our society as a whole.

Through this collection of qualitative narratives (italicized passages), and quantitative analysis provided by the narrative contributors themselves (figures), this paper aims to:

- 1. Spotlight the Impact of Mentorship:** Explore how mentorship fosters trust, empowerment, and personal growth, shaping leaders across diverse contexts.
- 2. Showcase Organizational Benefits:** Illustrate how mentorship contributes to talent attraction, recruitment, development, retention, and organizational culture.
- 3. Strengthen Community:** Demonstrate how mentorship transcends individual relationships to catalyze positive change and contributes to building more connected, resilient and empowered communities.
- 4. Invite Leaders Into Mentorship:** Share stories that exemplify the qualities of effective mentorship, offering insights into what distinguishes exceptional mentor relationships.

By sharing these findings, this paper aims to inspire leaders, organizations, and communities to invest time into the development of formal and informal mentor networks as a social imperative for supporting our next generation of leaders.

*"My mentors have always been strong, powerful indigenous women. Who have always taught me to do the right thing no matter my personal interests. To take care of the people. And to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves. To help those who needed it. To serve those who have earned to be served such as elders and guests.*

*Our relationship to ourselves has always determined who we are and how we relate to the world. And so, my mentors have always ensured*

*that I take care of myself with unconditional love and acceptance. Something I am still learning. But it has served me well. We can only meet people as far as we have met ourselves, and so they always encouraged growth and healing. "We need more healers, artists and lovers of all kinds, our world is filled with judges."*

*At every stage of my life mentors have been there to guide me and direct me. At all stages of rites of passage, mentors have helped navigate*

*the world and make sense of it, so that we may better understand ourselves and our roles, so that we may contribute to the betterment of our community and world. ... Mentorship is a way of life in indigenous communities. And everyone else is catching up and rebranding and repackaging it. The practice is not new, but a time-honoured and time-tested practice."*

*An example of a Sensemaker narrative contributed to this research.*



# Key Findings:

Throughout this paper, we have examined the multifaceted nature of mentorship, revealing its impact and significance across various contexts. Our exploration has illuminated several key findings:

## 1. Nature of Mentorship:

Mentorship transcends mere knowledge transfer; it is a deep, trusting relationship characterized by empathy, authenticity, and mutual respect. Whether formal or informal in origin, mentorship thrives on genuine connections that compound its impact over time.

## 2. Factors Contributing to Impactful Relationships:

Several factors contribute to the longevity and effectiveness of mentorship. These include building trust, fostering open communication, convening impactful conversations, and committing to continuous learning. Such elements form the foundation for mentors to guide and support mentees through their personal and professional growth.

## 3. Reciprocity and Leadership Development:

Mentorship is inherently reciprocal, with mentors earning that identification through specific actions that empower mentees. By sharing knowledge, recognizing potential, offering guidance, and setting positive examples, mentors empower mentees to emerge as leaders in their own right.

In summary, this paper underscores that mentorship is not only a journey of guidance and support but also a transformative process that shapes individuals and communities alike. By nurturing authentic relationships and embracing continuous learning, mentorship paves the way for sustainable leadership development and fosters a culture of growth and innovation.



# Interesting Origins:

The term 'mentor' originates from Greek mythology, specifically from the character Mentor in Homer's epic poem "The Odyssey". When Odysseus, preparing to depart for the Trojan War, entrusted his son Telemachus to Mentor's care, the concept of mentorship was born. This narrative was later popularized in François Fénelon's 1699 work "Les Aventures de Télémaque", where Mentor's character symbolized one of wisdom and guidance.

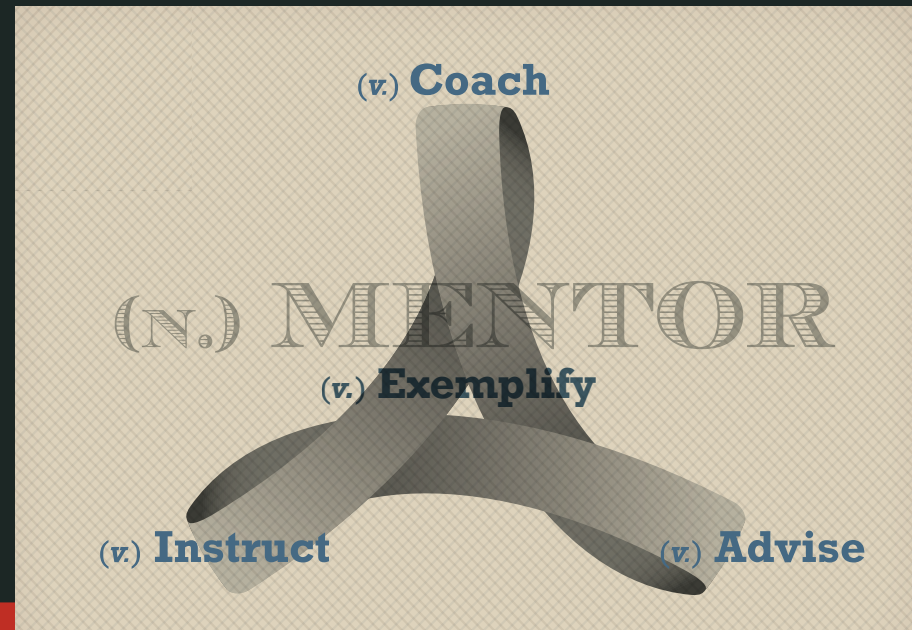
Interestingly, the original Mentor struggled in his role and was not able to create a meaningful or functional connection to Telemachus. This shortcoming prompted the divine intervention from the goddess Athena, who assumed Mentor's physical form to forge a working relationship with Telemachus.



This origin story informed our research: **What was it about the way that Athena conducted herself that made her presence so helpful? What was it about the way that Mentor conducted himself that made his presence so unhelpful?** And how can learn from both to inform our shared approach to mentorship in contemporary contexts.

# Earning the Word

Mentors earn this word through their active engagement – and their ability to adjust their approach based on what is needed most, in any given situation. A mentor may serve as an example, they may choose to instruct or provide advice. They may also choose to position their mentee for a higher level of performance through coaching. What is constant is their commitment to the growth and development of their mentees. This dedication manifests in various ways, ensuring that mentees are provided with the necessary tools, knowledge, and support to thrive in their respective endeavors. The actions and behaviors of mentors are pivotal in cultivating meaningful mentor relationships, which in turn empower mentees to grow and develop their own capacity as leaders.



*"There is a difference between leadership and mentorship. A leader strikes the direction which a team should aim whereas a mentor empowers a team and trusts them to take the needed steps in getting there. This empowerment must encompass a level of trust that doesn't typically exist in business. My greatest mentor empowered me with great responsibilities but also trusted that I am trying my best every day. In a spirit of trust, a mentor will show you how failings simply provide a sharper focus on what will work in the future. Their trust in you allows you to grant yourself the same trust and believe that you are indeed capable of great things."*

Another narrative provided outlines what a mentor does to earn the word.

*"In simplest terms, this individual, through his conduct, sets the bar extremely high for my own behavior. He guides without telling; he trusts, by giving a lot of leash to explore options and take risks; he exemplifies what a mentor is in the way he shows up with 100% focus on the person sitting with him; he holds a stance of openness / willingness to learn around things he has little expertise in; he speaks less than other people do; he rarely advises, but prefers to sit quietly until my ramblings reveal a thread; he is wise enough to wait for weak signals before he takes action."*





# WHAT WE LEARNED

*"I would not be who I am – had they  
not intercepted the story of my life."*



# 1

## How Mentorship Relationships Start

One of our most interesting findings came from asking about when someone recognized the value of having a mentor.

It would seem that, as human beings, we are wired to recognize those who could be a mentor to us – and that the value of these people in our life is often immediately apparent.

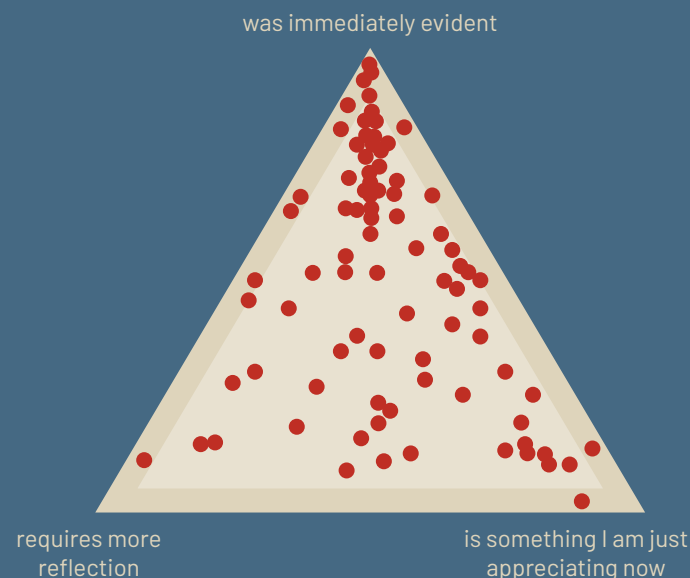
Mentor relationships start in different ways, both formally and informally. The majority of the stories we heard focused on the positive outcomes of informal mentorship. And although many of these relationships emerge organically, often mentorship is something that is sought after by the mentee.

Starting mentorship relationships can be difficult (and can be more difficult for some than for others). Asking for help, support and advice doesn't always come easily, but the results can be rewarding, for both parties in a mentor relationship.

Although the number of negative or challenging stories of mentorship was significantly lower than the positive stories, there were many people who shared the challenges of finding or starting a mentorship relationship.

*"Finding a mentor was difficult because I had never done it before, and the process overall was awkward because I felt guilty for burdening them. What I learned after I approached my mentor was how honoured they were that I asked them and how excited they were to help me build a plan for my marketing career. It was really difficult at first honestly out of fear and I had heard from others how easy the process was. Needing to shift my personal perspective was key."*

### The value of having a mentor



# Mentorship in Youth

There are, of course, mentors that can be found in all fields and professions, and relationships that lead to mentorship can start at any point in an individual's life. Mentorship often starts early in life; stories of grandparents, parents, teachers, coaches and community elders highlight the importance of role modelling, careful listening and building on strengths in the first few decades of life.

Mentorship stories that reflected back on experiences in youth begin to reach outside the family of origin, often clustered around coaching, teaching and counselling roles, and the value of having role-models and mentors from outside one's immediate family sphere. This was particularly true for individuals who navigated challenging family dynamics.

*"My Dad was my first mentor, and he continues to be. I have received from him invaluable guidance into all aspects of my personal and work life, I have learned to have faith in myself and my abilities because of his on-going encouragement. He continues to show me how hard work always pays off and the greatest advice he told me once was that if I was ever unsure on what to do to always look back and base my decision on the values I was raised with."*

*"My biggest mentor was unknown to me until later in life...an art teacher who saw me as someone needing to be seen and naturally guided a lost teen in the right direction."*

# Formal Mentorship Programs

Many organizations, educational institutions, and professional associations offer formal mentorship programs where mentors and mentees are matched based on their interests, goals, and backgrounds. In the best of these programs, participants typically go through an application or selection process before being introduced to a group of mentors.

Like a chemical reaction, it takes **structure**, contact and connection with all kinds of characters to stir up potential and **space** for multiple, frequent and substantial collisions to occur.

Formal mentorship programs can be very successful, and we heard several success stories that reflected on the value of structured opportunities to learn from others and gain new perspective.

*"I signed up for mentorship when I started a new position in a new city, and was feeling a bit lost without a solid, experienced sounding board for my concerns. Even though it was only 4 or 5 lunch sessions, it provided me with a chance to vet my self-doubts, and get some support from outside of the company, with no personal stake in the specific issues I had. I found the mentorship to be very valuable, and if nothing else acts as a confidence boost to have someone else validate your concerns, but offer a fresh but uncomplicated perspective."*

*"I have been fortunate enough to have several mentors through a local program. These mentors have worked with me and my husband (and business partner) for over 7 years and have been a regular touch point for us to reach out and make sure we are clearly thinking through our decisions and asking us questions we haven't thought of. They have encouraged us and pushed us to think about our assumptions. They have also helped us get clarity on our values and build our business with them at our core."*

*"He had been with the company for about a million years, was definitely part of "the old guard," but was a down-to-earth guy who didn't mind shooting the shit with a 22-year-old and providing advice. It was a structured program, but we got along well, and I could tell he really did want to do what he could to help me succeed at the company."*

*"I had a formal mentor as a graduate. I thoroughly enjoyed my time and discussions with a senior project director. However, I don't feel I ever took full advantage of it. I spent far too much time complaining and not enough vulnerability and challenge. Some structure would have helped."*



# Referrals, Introductions, and Networking

Sometimes mentorship relationships start through referrals or introductions from colleagues, friends, or acquaintances who recognize a potential mentor-mentee match based on their respective experiences, skills, or needs.

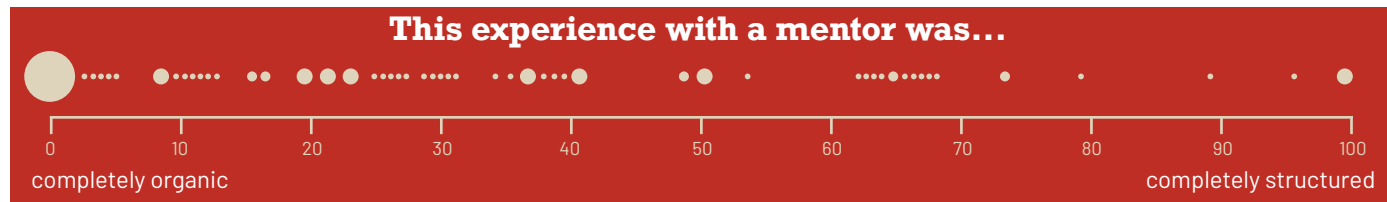
*"The experience I'm referring to never required any form of acknowledgement that there was a formal mentorship agreement. It came naturally over the evolution of the relationship between my so-called mentor and myself. To summarize a 20-year relationship in a few words, let's say it all started during the interview and hiring process when I started my career as an advisor and flourished as I moved up the corporate ranks and even lasted long after I decided I could no longer play the "game"... It was built on passion for the business, common and shared personal values, deep mutual respect for each other, support during personal quakes and periods of doubt and beer and chicken wings by the pool. His insight into the corporate world helped me navigate my own path and help me recognize and accept my unique talent and personal blind spots. I never felt judged or criticized. I felt respected, listened to and inspired."*

Introductions and networking can start mentorship relationships and can also be a valuable outcome of mentorship. It is often the informal mentorship stories that are front of mind when people are asked to reflect on positive experiences of mentorship.

# Informal Interactions

Mentorship relationships can develop organically through informal interactions in the workplace, academic settings, or community groups where individuals naturally gravitate towards each other for advice, guidance,

or support. When we asked for mentorship stories, overwhelmingly it was the stories of relationships that emerged organically and sometimes were only recognized in hindsight, that were shared.



*"My philosophy is that everyone has something to teach you. You may not recognize the lessons for what they are in the moment, but with perspective and reflection, they are crystal clear."*

*Over my career and in my personal life there have been several individuals who I would say were mentors for me. These were people who willingly spent time with me and took me under their wing (without ever being asked). They shared their experience and wisdom often through informal storytelling, but I also learned by observing them simply being themselves. They both supported me and challenged me depending on the situation."*

Regardless of how mentorship relationships start, what's important is that both parties are willing to invest time, effort, and commitment into the relationship, establish clear and explicit expectations and boundaries, and communicate openly and honestly with each other to ensure a successful, evolving and fulfilling mentorship experience.

A background image showing a person's hands writing in a notebook with a pen. The image is partially obscured by a white diagonal shape that contains the text.

## 2

# WHAT MAKES MENTORSHIP RELATIONSHIPS LAST?

Many people find mentor relationships that develop informally easier to maintain and less rigid than formal relationships. From the collected stories informal mentor relationships that develop over time also demonstrated greater longevity than relationships developed through formal mentoring program.

*"I had one that I sought out. I was very formal and asked him to serve as my mentor. He was helpful, but the relationship felt a bit rigid and strained. That made it more difficult for me to request timely advice. I had another mentorship relationship that was more informal and organic. We texted. We ate breakfasts. It was much more helpful and has lasted years."*

*"The most important aspects of mentorship as I see it is finding a person that is willing to have an on-going relationship where they share advice and guidance, but also serve as a sounding board for ideas or experiences that you have had and help with the application of a critical lens to help you develop strategies to help you reach your goals."*



**Listening and empathy are key to long- lasting mentor relationships. The stories we collected demonstrate the power of genuine connections as the foundation for sustainable mentorship. These connections are built on relationships, and building these relationships requires the following:**

## Trust and Respect

Building a foundation of trust and mutual respect is essential for sustaining mentorship relationships. Both mentor and mentee should feel safe sharing experiences, challenges, and aspirations with each other – even if the content of these exchanges is uncomfortable.

*"At around the 3-month mark of a new role/industry for me, on one of our multiple calls per day, my mentor and I exchanged some powerfully valuable words with each other: I was told "I trust you." I was able to repeat those exact words back to that person. 15 months would pass & that particular mentor would prove that statement hundreds of times over. It didn't matter what I was asking (or asking again!) – they were always available to guide and teach me."*

*"The mentor/mentee relationship is one that needs to be based on trust and mutual respect. Don't anticipate that it will be a one-way relationship as both parties can benefit immensely from the experience. It's ok to sometimes be frustrated with your mentor when you are expecting advice, and all s/he does is ask more questions and send you away to figure things out. Part of being a mentee is finding your own way with the gentle help of a guide, someone who has life experience, but not all the answers. Trust in yourself that you are where you belong, that you are a valuable person that has something to contribute, and that what you are bringing to the table is just as valuable as what your mentor is offering."*

# Communication

Open and effective communication is key to maintaining a strong mentorship relationship. Regular check-ins, honest conversations, active listening and process review help foster understanding, clarify expectations, and address any issues or concerns that may arise.

*"A mentor of mine helped me build my confidence to lead in challenging situations and also receive feedback without taking it personally. I was often second guessing myself, which led not to being a clear communicator when I felt strongly about an issue. When I felt strongly about things, I would get very emotional which made it difficult for me to articulate my points and didn't leave space for me to receive feedback."*

*"I have a mentor who number one is there for me when needed. I am listened to without judgement. I know my conversations are kept private and not shared. I am encouraged to read certain books and listen to podcasts as well. This person is passionate about their own growth as a mentor and is continuously learning and sharing experiences with me. I am coached to try techniques that are proving to be helpful at times. I know this is a lifelong journey and am grateful."*



# Shared Values

Aligning on shared values and expectations and taking the time to re-align on these themes helps ensure that both mentor and mentee are working towards a common purpose. This shared vision strengthens the bond between them and motivates them to support each other's growth and development.

Values are dynamic and can shift over time. For this reason, flexibility and adaptability is another key element in sustaining mentorship relationships.

*"A sales mentor told me to follow three rules: Honesty, Integrity and Accountability. Be honest to yourself and the customer. Say what do and do what you say. Do not over promise and under deliver. Integrity in that you should conduct yourself as if someone is always watching. Be accountable to yourself first. If you demand excellence from yourself and hold yourself to the standard you set, accountability to others will be natural and consistent. This mentor was giving me rules that would help me be someone people could count on in the industry, however it really shaped who I would become as a man. That's good coaching!"*

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*"This principal was transformational and had incredibly strong relational skills. She cultivated an entire culture for staff and students. Despite being petite, she had a commanding presence and unlimited respect. Her kindness inspired others to treat each other with care, compassion, and respect. She always encouraged me to speak up and highlighted all the positives and victories of the staff..."*

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*"To this day, I live by 4 or 5 essential leadership lessons learned from my mentor; perhaps the greatest was this: Treat everyone fairly and with respect, regardless of the circumstance or the decisions that must be made. Everyone deserves the gift of dignity. Do whatever you can to transmit this in your dealings with others."*



# Flexibility and Adaptability

Mentorship relationships evolve over time, and it's important for both parties to be flexible and adaptable to changes in circumstances, priorities, or goals. Being open to new ideas, feedback, and ways of working strengthens the resilience of the relationship.

*"My mentor taught me early on in our relationship that there are always different ways to view something. She taught me the importance of respecting the opinion of others while respecting and trusting my own opinion on the topic."*

## Commitment and Investment

Both mentor and mentee need to demonstrate commitment and investment in the relationship. This involves dedicating time and effort to meet regularly, engage in meaningful discussions, and actively support each other's development.

*"He has invested a significant amount of time in supporting me, checking in, giving me opportunities and challenges, and providing a safe space for some very candid - and occasionally even heated - discussions. During a recent mid-year appraisal, we both acknowledged that we had been surprised by how much we enjoyed working together, and I told him that I didn't really think of him as my boss, but more as a good friend and mentor."*

*I have had several mentors in the past, but this one was one of the main reasons my life has changed for good. I was very young at the time and in a difficult place in life. My mentor was much older, he had a kid and significantly more life experience than me. He was not the most easy-going type of person either, and at times he could be overly strict and tough. He, however, had a big heart and was a real, genuine person - no filters, what you saw is what you got. We often had arguments, but I always looked up to him and to his incredible resilience when facing adversity. He always showed me the way by doing, rather than talking. The number one reason I looked up to him so much was his total integrity as a person, and also how seriously he took his mentor position and seeing how much he cared for me...I was always ready to forgive his mistakes because I knew he never had second intentions and was fully, and passionately, dedicated to his role."*

## Continued Learning and Growth

Mentorship relationships thrive when there is a shared commitment to continuous learning and growth. Both mentor and mentee should be open to learning from each other, seeking out new opportunities for development, and challenging themselves to grow personally and professionally.

*"My favourite thing about a good mentor is their ability to support you in understanding what you want and need from the relationship and supporting you in your growth."*

*I have worked with several leaders that have coached me, however only one that I call a true mentor. This is someone that even years after we no longer worked together, we would reach out to each other often with a challenge or tricky that we personally needed assistance with or in some, no most cases I think he was challenging me, testing to see how I had grown. He cared about me and my development..."*

# Acknowledging Strengths and Milestones

Recognizing and acknowledging unique strengths, achievements, and milestones along the mentorship journey reinforces the positive impact of the relationship and strengthens the bond between mentor and mentee.

*"He followed my career growth and was always the one to send a celebratory message. He always called me on my birthday, did so until 15 years ago when in his mid 50's he passed away. I still to this day think "what would Rick think" when I make large decisions of importance. He challenged me, pushed me and encouraged me to be the best I could be."*

## Feedback and Reflection

Providing constructive feedback and engaging in reflective practices help mentor relationships stay on track and evolve over time. Regularly reflecting on progress, identifying areas for improvement, and offering supportive feedback fosters growth and development for both mentor and mentee.

*"I have been blessed to have had a number of mentors in my life. Each one brought different gifts at different times in my career when I have, I suppose, been open and ready to accept their influences. Above all else, I have found that it has been my personal reflection over the years on my own leadership that has enabled me to see the gifts that those mentors imparted upon me. I still think of each of them in certain situations and think, now what would X do...?"*

By prioritizing these factors, mentorship relationships can endure and continue to have a positive impact on both individuals involved. Approaching mentorship as a relationship first, with empathy and authentic connection increases the positive impacts of mentorship.

# 3

## WHAT DO MENTORS DO?

Mentorship is a two-way relationship. Many of the stories we collected emphasised mentorship's reciprocal nature.

*"The power of mentorship and its ability to transcend age, experience and stage of your career. The more that you engage and provide as either mentor or mentee the more that is returned to you."*

When asked, many people who have been part of mentorship relationships are quickly able to pinpoint critical moments where careful listening, authentic interest, genuine connection and the right questions have influenced life-trajectories. Mentors become more and more impactful when they embody certain qualities and practices.





# 1. Affinity for Connection

Genuine and sincere interactions between mentors and mentees lay the groundwork for impactful relationships. Connection fosters trust, openness, and vulnerability, creating a safe space for mentees to seek guidance and share experiences.

*"[My Mentor] supported me through a learning experience like no other. [His] warmth and enthusiasm were a lodestar for right action, and I have often invoked his approach when I am called upon to present new ideas to my colleagues. But the mentorship moment that especially sticks with me was a conversation about writing. I had presented him with a report...as I was tasked to do. Standing in the hallway of our office, at the end of a long day and with my report in hand, he observed that I clearly loved to write – and that this was a creative interest that we shared. He was a beautiful writer, and I was delighted to be seen in this way. He then told me about a report that he had drafted for a previous employer – a draft, he told me, that required 25 iterations before it was deemed acceptable. He then handed my report back to me. You can be a beautiful writer, and deliver beautiful writing, but even beautiful writing benefits from revision."*

*"They were always there encouraging me to think through problems and come up with multiple different solutions. We would then discuss the challenge, the solutions I had thought of and discuss the various attributes of the solution. Often, at the end of the discussion, the solution I landed upon was a hybrid of my earlier thoughts. What helped most is that there was never a discussion of right or wrong, just what might work better. There was no judgment of my thought process, so I felt entirely safe being totally honest about what I thought and what I didn't know."*

Affinity for connection on both side of the mentor-mentee relationship is a requirement for sustaining impactful mentorship relationships over time.

## 2. Empathy and Understanding

Mentors who demonstrate empathy and understanding towards their mentees (even when they might not agree) can establish deep connections and resonate with their needs, challenges, and aspirations. Empathetic mentors listen actively, validate mentees' emotions, and provide support without judgement.

*"I remember I gave him a phone call when I was in a lot of turmoil in my life - I had limited clarity and started to have a great deal of anxiety about the path I was on in my life.*

***He heard me out, asked me thoughtful questions about where I was at, he shared some insights from his own life.***

*I then left the call feeling so much lighter and clear. He advised me to learn to let go of things I can't control and just focus on doing a really good job at what I'm doing now, until new answers automatically emerge. He said "prizes are for those that continue to stay engaged and curious".*



### 3. Guidance and Support

Providing guidance and support tailored to the individual needs and goals of mentees is essential for impactful mentorship relationships. Mentors offer advice, share insights, and empower mentees to navigate challenges, make informed decisions, and achieve their aspirations.

*"I have had official and unofficial mentors in my career. The unofficial ones of my choosing have been the most powerful although both ways have been positive in my life. The first real time I had mentorship came when ...I was a new process engineer in an established team, in a new industry that I knew little about and in a role that was also new in scope and different from my last 9 nine years of experience.*

***My mentor helped me fathom the right way to navigate all the issues, in some cases actually being very specific around a course of action, in others more open encouraging me to explore the options.***

*The most powerful piece though was that he used our time to teach me about people and our individual impact on others with every conversation we have. He basically taught me how best to work with others which has been the cornerstone of the rest of my career."*

### 4. Challenge and Growth

Effective mentors challenge mentees to step out of their comfort zones, stretch their capabilities, and pursue continuous growth and development. By encouraging mentees to set ambitious goals, take calculated risks, and learn from failures, mentors foster resilience and self-confidence.

*"I remember being brand new to a supervisor role and telling my manager about an issue with a certain employee and she said, "what's your plan to handle this?". Being trusted to strategize instead of being told what to do was a new experience for me, but highly formative. This became the pattern of our working relationship: trust to work and sometimes make mistakes. I was expected to be creative in solving problems, not to be perfect, and this was the greatest lesson in developing my management style."*

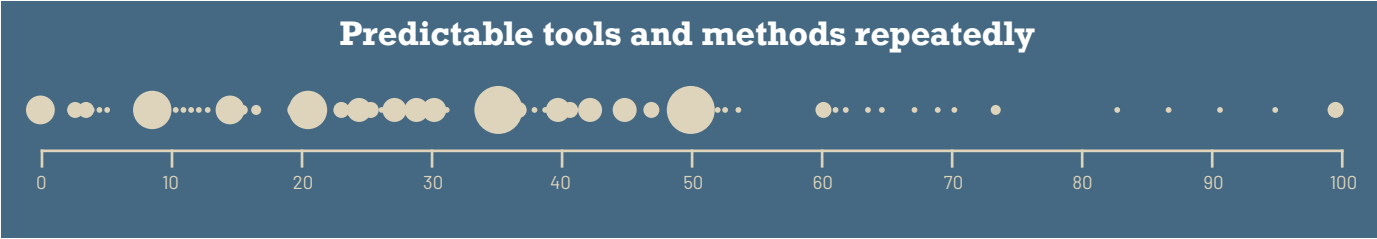
# 5. The Value of Predictable Tools and Methods

Mentors use a collection of tools and methods to create meaningful conversations that position their mentees to fully comprehend their own leadership experience.

*"The best mentors I've had were the ones capable of providing me with a new perspective, way of thinking, or framework. The not so good ones told me stories of their experience and criticized when I did things differently."*

*"In reading materials on mentorship, there is often writings on what the act of mentorship is, but it sometimes doesn't fully acknowledge the importance of an on-going relationship. In my experience, one-off advice is not mentorship. It is an actual investment of time, effort, and caring about someone other than oneself."*

These ongoing conversations, allow mentees to re-find clarity in a number of key leadership challenges.





It was clear in data collected that predictable tools and methods, used repeatedly, provided a highly effective way for mentees to benefit from the conversation and (re) find what they needed to.

While connection and commitment are key to maintaining mentorship relationships, so too are frameworks and applied tools that can support growth, new ways of thinking, and clearly lay out a structure to support leadership development.

Challenges in mentorship relationships were often associated with a lack of structure, or a lack of clarity in expectations on behalf of the mentor and mentee. Access to frameworks or resources that provide a structured approach to supporting leadership development can be particularly valuable.

*"My Captain kept the meeting brief. After a brief welcome he handed me a sheet of paper with 8 or so bullet points on it. I don't know how else to describe the document other than to say it was a roadmap to success for becoming a trusted part of the crew, staying safe and contributing. It outlined the things that were expected of me-and just as importantly it spoke of my Captain's commitment to my success, that is, what I could expect of him and his leadership...*

*I had no idea at the time, but that sheet of paper would help shape my career-and the careers of others in ways I couldn't possibly imagine. I am writing this story almost 19 years later. I am now Deputy Fire Chief, and I have a piece of paper with some bullet points on*

*it just like my first Captain, and I call it 'Managing Me'. I have used it successfully for years as a tool to establish working relationships with my direct reports, and some of them now use it too.... It establishes expectations for my reports, but perhaps more importantly establishes my commitments to my team members and our working relationship... I can confidently say that all of my professional working relationships have benefited greatly from its use. 'Managing Me' takes both sides of the page now and has evolved a great deal... My Captain's act of writing down those bullet points and handing me that piece of paper is one of the most significant mentorship moments of my career... His idea makes my work life, and our fire service measurably better every day."*

**Although the value of structure and frameworks for mentorship is recognized by those who have had the opportunity to engage with them, the SenseMaker data suggests this is an area that would benefit from further exploration.**

# WHAT DID WE HEAR?

There were a number of different kinds of stories people told when asked to reflect on mentorship. These included:

- + Example Stories
- + Instructing Stories
- + Advising Stories
- + Coaching Stories
- + Championing Stories





## 1. Leading by Example

Many stories highlighted the power of acting as a role model. Leading by example is a powerful component of mentorship that can shape mentees' attitudes, behaviours, and aspirations. Mentors who embody the values they espouse and demonstrate excellence in their actions create a supportive environment for mentees to emulate their example, particularly in highly nuanced and sophisticated attributes.

*"I worked with someone once who was more senior than me, at a time when I was quite junior in my profession. I learned the technical skills from her, but I also learned the skills of teamwork, collaboration, deeper listening, synthesis. And she was a role model for me in how she carried herself when times got tough.*

*What struck me was that, after a long career in public service and many years in a leadership role, he still possessed a humility and openness to direct public engagement. This empathy and client-focus is something I continue to carry with me and is an effective counterbalance to the risk of over-confidence or certainty that extensive experience can foster.*

*He taught me a lot about how to work with those who are difficult to work with – clients, that is. Learning how to conduct myself in an assertive manner while remaining cordial helped me both professionally and personally."*



Most mentorship stories, particularly those framed by the idea of ‘leading by example’ tell of older, more experienced mentors working with younger, developing leaders, although there were a few stories of younger or peer mentors in the context of mentorship relationships.

*“I have had the privilege of having several mentors in my life. This particular experience I am sharing occurred while working with a colleague who is almost a decade younger than myself. We were working many long hours to expand an innovative and community-based education program. We shared the same work ethic and educational and ecological values that were needed to grow the program in our first year together. The next year I was given the permission and trust to lead the program.*

***My mentor encouraged me and created opportunities for me to try things on my own and yet always had the time to brainstorm possibilities together or work through challenges as they appeared. He recognized my leadership abilities through not only praise, but also through challenging me to think differently and to clearly share my thoughts with others.***

*I was able to watch him in action during difficult conversations with others, and we were also able to maintain our trust and belief in one another through many difficult conversations of our own! The relationship has always been more important than the ideas or disagreements.”*



## 2. Instructing and Creating Opportunities for Learning and Growth

Many of the stories shared demonstrated the power of providing indelible instruction and creating opportunities for learning and growth throughout someone's life.

By creating opportunities to talk through ideas mentors can foster growth in thinking and in approaches to problem solving.

*"I have had many mentors over my life. Some official, some unofficial, and others I didn't know were mentors until reflecting upon it later. Mentors to me are individuals that inspire us to be true to ourselves and follow our dreams. They remind us of our worth, help us build resilience, and support us when we need it."*

*"The first time I had a mentor came when I joined my first company. I was a new process engineer in an established team, in a new industry that I knew little about and in a role that was different from my last 9 years of experience. My mentor helped me fathom the right way to navigate all the issues, in some cases being very specific around a course of action, in others being more open and encouraging me to explore the options. The most powerful thing though, was that he used our time to teach me about people and our individual impact on others with every conversation we have. He basically taught me how to work with others which has been the cornerstone of the rest of my career."*

*"I would share my frustration with attempts to acquire a mentor many times over the 10 years of my leadership development. The key challenges have been 1) the lack of true commitment to the process by a mentor who loosely agreed to take on this role but was never really all that 'available' and 2) the lack of mentors who aligned with my areas of focus within my organization, and the challenge with getting someone outside of my own organization to engage in that relationship, and 3) my own hesitations with negotiating the right level of mentorship support."*

### 3. Offering Advice and Guidance

Giving advice and guidance is a core component of mentorship. Mentors draw on their knowledge, expertise, and experiences to provide valuable insights and direction to their mentees. They offer advice on various topics such as career development, skill enhancement, decision-making, and problem-solving.

*"After my new boss began working with me, there was an immediate shift - not only did she quickly establish rapport and start asking questions to uncover how I could do my best work, but she also expressed to me that she believed in my creative vision. I felt empowered. Since that day, she encouraged me to seek opportunities to improve myself. Her door was always open if I needed*

*guidance or support, but only if I required it. Now that I am a 'leader' in my organisation, I often ask myself what my former mentor would do, and we still check in with each other on a regular basis. A great mentor goes from someone you want to emulate, to a valued colleague."*

Through advice and guidance mentors pass on valuable lessons learned from their own experiences, helping mentees avoid common pitfalls, navigate challenges, and make informed decisions, empowering mentees to make informed choices.

*"He taught me to summarise and to argue with him, which were key skills I needed at the time I started working with him. He gave me tasks above my competence level, which would often occur by him calling me by my last name to come over across the hall to talk with him about projects that he was given that he didn't have time to accomplish. He has also advised me on*

*how to succeed and given me a lot of freedom to balance work and personal life (including allowing me to work virtually from around the world), which has made an incredibly important impact on my life. Finally, he has a very engaging, humorous, wise style that is very inclusive and supportive, which makes him easy to approach at times when I need advice."*

The underlying theme of supportive relationships emerged from all the advice and guidance stories that were collected.

*"The relationship felt less like top-down management, and more like he was the rigging in my acrobatic performance - invisible, but very present in the background, helping to guide me, helping me fall safely, helping me get back up again."*

## 4. Coaching: Balancing Inquiry and Feedback

Mentors tend to have a capability and at times, a personal system for coaching mentees which they can draw on when needed. Coaching stories were a common way of sharing reflections on key moments of mentorship. Asking good questions, and asking the right question at the right time can create opportunities for discovery and growth.

*"They were always there inviting me to think through problems and come up with multiple different solutions. We would then discuss the challenge, the solutions I had thought of and discuss the various attributes of the solution. Often, at the end of the discussion, the solution I landed upon was a hybrid of my earlier thoughts. What helped most is that there was never a discussion of right or wrong, just what might work better. There was no judgement of my thought process, so I felt entirely safe being totally honest about what I thought and what I didn't know."*

*A recent experience was when I decided to shift to full time consulting, a significant change from the last few years in my company with my partner. I was worried they wouldn't think it was a good idea, but they were incredibly supportive, asked interesting and thoughtful questions about my plans and things to consider going forward, and reinforced how clearly this shift aligned with our values."*

In taking a coaching approach, mentors are able to create the space for thoughtful reflection that can bring clarity to decision-making while providing a structured approach to exploring challenges, opportunities and next steps. A coaching approach also is able to provide someone with highly specific feedback to learn from experience.

*"To this day, I still go to this mentor for advice, encouragement and support. Feedback has always been honest, constructive and a realization of what I need to work on personally and in my career. Because of this mentor, I uncovered why I love what I do and sometimes there are roadblocks/challenges but to find the positives in every situation."*

## 5. Recognizing Potential and Championing Emerging Leaders

While mentorship focuses on nurturing and developing the individual through guidance and support, championing is about actively advocating for their success and creating opportunities for them to excel.

In some cases, mentors may also serve as champions for their mentees, leveraging their influence and networks to promote their protégés' interests and career progression. A number of stories highlighted the dual role of mentor-as-champion, particularly in the context of career development.

*"I had an ex-manager who continued to meet with me as I stepped into his role. It was a time in my life when I really felt like someone was in my court, rooting for me, and helping me to be successful.*

*What she does better than anyone I know is look at people and see beyond how they're behaving to recognize their potential. She held her players to a very high standard, and they met it."*





This research has informed “Quiet Champions: A Way Forward for Mentors in Turbulent Times” published by Page Two Publishing (to be released November 2025).

## Become the kind of mentor who naturally connects and builds community.

In a time when connections are fractured, patterns are complex, and sage guidance is even rarer, mentorship has never mattered more. *Quiet Champions* is a practical and insightful guide for experienced professionals who want to step up together for the next generation. Drawing on perspectives gathered through the innovative Sensemaker® research tool and over three decades of executive coaching and leadership development, Ian Chisholm helps you turn everyday interactions into powerful acts of presence, accompaniment, and support that serve the greater good and bring more significance to your own career and life.

Being a mentor, Chisholm argues, isn’t about the wealth of your experience or an impressive track record—it’s about showing up with intention. Through strategic frameworks, vivid anecdotes, and reflective prompts, he challenges the myth that leadership is innate and instead reveals it as a practiced, purposeful choice. You’ll learn tactics such as “Ascending to the LOFT,” which invites you to ready and steady your mindset before important interactions; “Converting Encouragement to Information” shows you how to shift from offering generic help to contributing actionable insight; and “Including a Third Chair” helps you help mentees deepen their ability to see challenges from multiple perspectives. Each chapter invites readers to reflect on their motivations, build their mentorship style, and nurture growth in uncertain times.

Whether you’re approaching the later stages of your career or craving a renewed sense of purpose, *Quiet Champions* offers a mindset and methodology to lead with empathy and intention. Ian Chisholm redefines the role of a mentor as one of today’s most essential—and overlooked—sources of community resilience. Because the greatest mentors make the seemingly impossible workable, and they get us on our way.

# Conclusion

The research emphasizes the profound impact of mentorship as a catalyst for individual growth and a strategy for organizational performance, learning, engagement and succession. By nurturing talent, fostering collaboration, and championing emerging leaders, mentorship cultivates a culture of learning and innovation that drives sustainable development. Structured approaches, shared language and frameworks, and resources are essential in strengthening mentorship practices and leadership development, empowering individuals to thrive in an ever-changing world.

Roy Group's belief that the word 'mentor' is a gift word, something that one cannot call themselves, sits paradoxically with our enthusiasm for leaders to do the things that mentors can do to earn the word.

In essence, mentors provide their mentees with the confidence to practice leadership and to learn more from their experience, as it emerges. This will become an increasingly critical role in our communities, as our next generation of leaders face increasingly complex challenges, where no one person can make sense of the surrounding context on their own.

It would seem that what Athena had – that Mentor did not – was:

- + an honorable motivation to have the finest self of someone else make their finest contribution.
- + a paradoxical combination of high self-awareness and the ability to focus one's attention on the experience of others.
- + a desire to make themselves accessible to colleagues and the next generation.
- + an ability to carefully balance structure, tools and methods with space for conversation.
- + flexibility and a growth mindset with a desire to continue one's own learning from experience.
- + a discerning sense of what it is time for in any given conversation (example, instruction, advice or coaching).

**Working with you  
to develop your next  
generation of leaders.**



\* by developing you as our next generation of mentors.







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