Using knowledge of ‘Learning Styles’ to optimise Mentoring

There are various frameworks and theories which mentors can use to better understand their mentees. It is crucial that frameworks are used sensitively. The purpose of having a theory is to help us understand what is happening, so that we can make good choices about what to do next. Shared use requires both parties to know the model in use and to jointly work out how it applies.

The Learning Cycle notion suggests that although ideally we need to complete the circle for maximum learning, most of us have a tendency to dwell more in only one or two segments. Thus, we may be restricted in the ways in which we ‘accept’ learning – and hence mentoring.

ACTIVISTS learn through activity. These are the individuals who just get on and do something. Their learning appears to emerge from the doing, without any conscious attempt to understand or analyse what is happening.

REFLECTORS learn through assimilation. They take time to reflect on what has happened. They like to question others about their experiences, to discuss what has happened or what might happen, to consider a range of points of view.

THEORISTS learn via abstraction. These are the people who pull out the rules and generalisations. In this way they arrive at theories which will guide their future actions. They will also use theories put forward by others provided these stand up to challenge.
PRAGMATISTS are more interested in application. They want to know if something will work. They like to be given practical suggestions, hints and tips. They also prefer to learn from someone who is already expert at doing the job in question.

There are several ways in which an awareness of learning styles can contribute to the effectiveness of mentoring. It will:

- provide clues about the most effective behaviour for the mentor to use
- explain why different mentees seem to respond differently to various stages of the development alliance
- serve as a guide to selection of development activities.
- remind mentor and mentee of the need sometimes to focus on the neglected aspects of the cycle, so that the mentoring also becomes a process of ‘learning how to learn’.
ACTIVISTS

Activists will value most a mentor who encourages them to try things out. They need an atmosphere in which mistakes are accepted as a valuable part of learning. The mentor may have to build in appropriate protection by challenging them if they start to take too many risks. They will also benefit from a mentor who insists they take time afterwards to reflect, pull out the lessons and translate these into practical ideas.

Activist mentees may well be the people least likely to come to a mentoring session. They will want to take action, so their first choice will be application and not a session with a mentor at all.

However they will tolerate the action planning stage in order to:

- work out how to create an environment in which they can safely try out their ideas
- have the mentor play devil’s advocate to help them select the best options
- break down larger goals into smaller objectives which can be quickly implemented

The danger with activists is that they may:

- be too impatient to consider the wisdom of their choices
- make mistakes which could affect their future careers
- experiment with too many options at once
- make no attempt to understand the mentoring process.
REFLECTORS

Reflectors want time to review. They will appreciate a patient mentor, who accepts their need to check things out thoroughly before taking any action. (These are learners who read the entire instructions manual before trying to build a piece of IKEA furniture – unlike the Activists who try to build the furniture first and only refer to the manual in desperation when they end up with a three-legged desk!)

Reflectors are likely to keep learning logs and will be keen to review the process of mentoring. They may need to be pushed to try out new ideas, to experiment with different ways of learning and to accept that a good theory can save many hours of careful consideration of options.

Unlike activists, reflectors will probably be very enthusiastic about mentoring. They will be most comfortable at the stage of mentoring where they review their challenges, looking at the current situation and describing their current circumstances. They will appreciate:

- talking about themselves and their experiences
- answering questions in detail
- having the mentor paraphrase their comments
- anecdotes and reflections by the mentor

Their second choice may well be the choices stage of mentoring, when again they will enjoy:

- taking time to review many options

The potential problems when mentoring reflectors will be that:

- they want to spend too much time assessing instead of moving on to analysis
- they consider so many alternatives that they cannot choose between them
- they get overly interested in the experiences of the mentor
- they bring the opinions of their friends to the mentoring sessions.
THEORISTS

Theorists will want to discuss the theory of mentoring. They will also challenge any assumptions – not to be difficult, but to check that any theory takes account of all possibilities. Their mentor will need the confidence and intellect to engage in what may seem like academic debates. Theorists also like an assurance that any theories are respectable and reputable, with a degree of references. They will not accept a mentor’s home-grown frameworks.

Theorists may need prompting to pay more attention to practicalities. They may also have to learn to value the general opinion of others, even though these are not presented as theories. They may need encouragement to experiment without first insisting on theorizing.

These mentees will prefer the analysis stage, where they will be happy to:

- use theories to understand their past experiences
- learn new frameworks from the mentor
- teach the mentor the models they know
- apply models such as a SWOT analysis
- identify trends and make patterns with information

They will also enjoy the process of reviewing the mentoring itself, when they will:

- apply as many models as possible to understanding the interactions between them and the mentor
- be comfortable about giving and receiving feedback based on theoretical frameworks

Difficulties which may arise are that theorist mentees may:

- suffer from ‘paralysis through analysis’
- reject the theories offered by the mentor as not being academically respectable
- spend too much time reviewing the process
- use the theories to criticise the mentor.
PRAGMATISTS

Pragmatists are focused firmly on whether something will work or not. They are likely to dismiss any mentor who has not also done the job – a difficult requirement to meet in these days of rapid change where a job or task may not actually have existed before. In some ways, pragmatists may be the most difficult people to mentor. They may be so keen to pick up ideas for immediate, practical use that they forget to plan for the future. They will also be the ones most likely to lure the mentor into giving advice.

Mentees who are pragmatists will probably prefer the creative solutions stage, when they can:

- concentrate on solutions to problems
- generate plenty of practical ideas
- identify different ways to succeed at work

The risks are that they may:

- disregard a mentor who is not an ‘expert’ in the work arena
- shun a mentor who admits to still learning how to be a mentor
- want the mentor to tell them what to do
- lack interest in reviewing the mentoring process
- skip the action planning stage and use only ideas which are easily applicable.

A mentor who can identify and appreciate the dominant learning style of their mentee, and can share a discussion about these traits, has the opportunity to allow transformational learning to take place, that is, mentees change perspective with an awareness of the process by which they are doing so. They play an equal part in analysing what is happening so that mentor and mentee work in partnership to increase the mentee’s openness to learning.

Sharing information regarding respective learning styles builds camaraderie, rapport and trust.

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