

Improving mentoring progress

This article examines typical blocks to progress with training under agreement on an Institution of Civil Engineers approved training scheme. It explores the role of the mentor and trainee in moving things forward.

Blocks can arise for a variety of reasons and can creep up on the unsuspecting mentor. Left unchecked, they can escalate into a much bigger problem which becomes progressively difficult to resolve. It can be helpful to step back and review what's going on before jumping in with *your* solution to the problem. This problem solving can be done with the trainee, which will engage them in the process and is more likely to gain their commitment to action.

Problems often stem from:

- Process
- Understanding
- Motivation

Process

A common observation by mentors when a graduate's progress slows is that they are not seizing their opportunities. The graduate is perceived to be in "receive" mode rather than "transmit" and awaits instructions on what to do next. The mentor, keen for them to "transmit", holds back and progress falters.

The training process often involves writing Development Reports and companies, more often than not, shy away from providing templates to encourage trainees to develop and own their individual format. This desire to help them learn by developing a format can cause stagnation as they fret about what to include. As trainees seek to perfect their first report, the law of diminishing returns can start to dominate and progress grinds to a halt.

Understanding

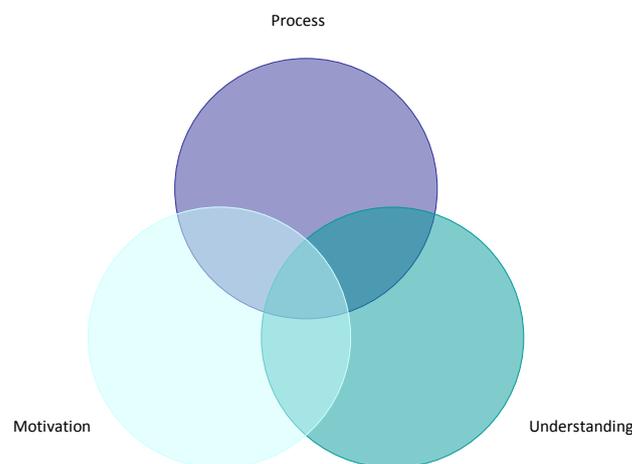
At the early stages in their careers graduates have a lot to take on board in making the transition from student to working life: student debt, earning a living, developing new sleeping habits, learning about how their company works and, perhaps, moving to a new town. This can contribute to information overload. Adding a training scheme into the mix can further complicate matters. Are they making an informed decision? Have you checked that they understand what they are committing to?

Motivation

Motivation plays a big part in progress. Questions like “Why am I doing this?”, “What’s in it for me?” and “What will happen if I don’t do this?” help people decide what to do and when. Do you know why they want to do this and the timescale? How engaging is the prospect and how does it compare with the other commitments in their life?

Suggestions and tactics

- Step back to view the problem: is it related to process, understanding or motivation?



- If their Development Report is late find out what you can do to help nurture understanding and produce a quick result. Often, advice about limiting the time spent writing and accepting that reports will develop with experience, is all that is needed.
- Establish if the trainee has gone into this with their eyes open. If they haven’t, consider revisiting this with them. Check that everyone has understood the learning “contract”.
- Talk to the trainee about what fires them up and gets them going. How can you tap into this for their training?
- Have regular mentoring meetings. A discussion about what’s hindering progress is far more productive than failing to meet. Holding out for a Development Report before meeting with a trainee can be the straw that breaks the camel’s back.

Ultimately the mentor/learner interaction is reliant on the quality of the relationship. By helping the learner solve their own problems you can develop understanding, fostering richer and more productive learning for everyone.