Reviewing the mentor's motivations towards the mentee

In every mentoring or coaching relationship, patterns gradually become established in how you work with the learner. We fall into roles, which may not be obvious. Reviewing these from time to time helps keep us balanced and prevents those roles becoming "fixed".

One useful model is the triangle of *Protect – Exploit – Equate.* Protect refers to the instinct to shield the learner from pain and/or to intervene on the learner's behalf. It has much in common with the parent-child dimension of transactional analysis. In this mode, we are part-parent and part-hero. We give advice, rather than help the learner work things out for themselves. It taps into all our deep instincts of protecting the vulnerable but can easily lead to being overprotective.

Exploit is the dark side. It is the instinct to manipulate others to our own ends and/or to take advantage of their weaknesses. We don't like to acknowledge this side of ourselves, but it comes to light in many, often subtle, ways – for example, when the mentor steers the mentee along a path that they wish they had taken. Mentors can sometimes create dependency in their mentees, not recognising that this is a by-product of their own needs for recognition and approbation.

Equate is where we achieve an appropriate equilibrium. It is not that we don't have the instincts to protect and exploit; they are still there, often both at the same time. The skill of equating lies in being fully aware of them and managing them. Once we get used to acknowledging these instincts, we can put them to better use. For example, if we observe an inclination to exploit, it may lead us to wonder whether other people have similar reactions to the mentee and what the implications might be for the mentee. What is there in their behaviour that makes others view them as exploitable? Similarly, awareness of our own urge to protect might stimulate a stronger focus on helping the mentee achieve greater self-confidence and self-belief.