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The Seven Layers of Mentoring

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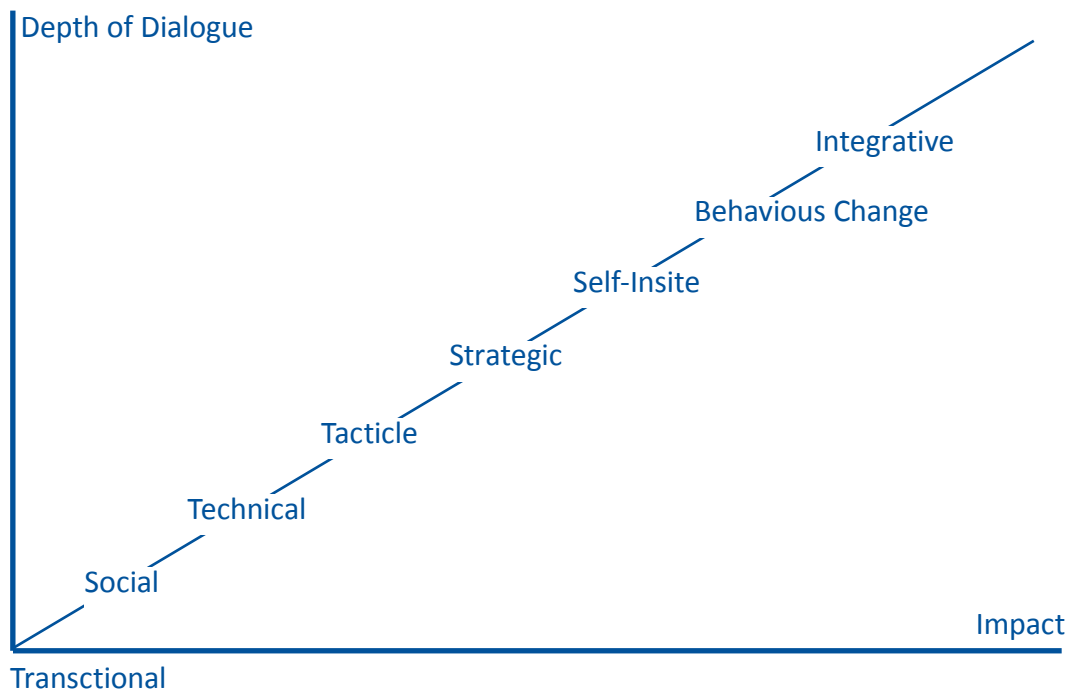
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The Seven Layers of Mentoring

Dialogue in mentoring, and in related disciplines such as coaching, can be regarded as having seven layers of increasing depth and impact. This short paper provides some guidelines on how to develop the skills of dialogue at each level.



Transactional conversations are not really dialogue at all. They are, for example, the kind of conversation we might have with a shop assistant in a dry cleaners – a formalised exchange that is polite but confined to very specific intentions.

Social dialogue is about developing friendship and providing support/encouragement

How to develop social dialogue

- Demonstrate interest in the other person, in learning about them
- Actively seek points of common interest
- Accept the other person for who they are – virtues and faults, strengths and weaknesses
- Be open in talking about your own interests and concerns.

Technical dialogue meets the mentee's needs for learning about work processes, policies and systems

How to develop technical dialogue:

- Clarify the task and the learner's current level of knowledge
- Be available when needed (just in time advice is always best)
- Be precise
- Explain the how as well as the why
- Check understanding.

Tactical dialogue helps the mentee work out practical ways of dealing with issues in their work or personal life (for example, managing time or dealing with a difficult colleague)

How to develop tactical dialogue:

- Clarify the situation (what do and don't we know?)
- Clarify the desired and undesirable outcomes
- Identify barriers and drivers/potential sources of help
- Establish fall-back positions
- Provide a sounding board
- Be clear about the first and subsequent steps (develop a plan, with timeline and milestones)

Strategic dialogue takes the broader perspective, helping the mentee to put problems, opportunities and ambitions into context (e.g. putting together a career development plan) and envision what they want to achieve through the relationship and through their own endeavours.

How to develop strategic dialogue

The mentor uses the same skills as for tactical dialogue plus:

- Clarify the broader context (e.g. who are the other players in this issue?)
- Assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
- Explore a variety of scenarios (what would happen if..?)
- Link decisions and plans closely to long-term goals and fundamental values
- Consider radical alternatives that might change the game (e.g. could you achieve faster career growth by taking a sideways move into a completely different function?)

Dialogue for self-insight enables the mentee to understand their own drives, ambitions, fears and thinking patterns.

How to develop dialogue for self-insight:

- Ensure the mentee is willing to be open and honest with himself/herself
- Remember it is the mentee's journey of discovery – the mentor merely opens doors
- Give time and space for the mentee to think through and come to terms with each item of self-knowledge
- Be aware of and follow up vague statements or descriptions – help the mentee be rigorous in his/her analysis
- Explore the reasons behind statements – wherever possible, help the mentee establish the link between what they say/do and the underlying values/needs
- Introduce tools for self-discovery – for example, self-diagnostics on learning styles, communication styles, emotional intelligence or personality type
- Challenge constructively – “Help me to understand how/why...”
- Give feedback from your own impressions, where it will help the mentee reflect on how s/he is seen by others
- Helping the mentee interpret and internalise feedback from other people (e.g. 360 appraisals).

Dialogue for behavioural change allows the mentee to meld insight, strategy and tactics into a coherent programme of personal adaptation

How to develop dialogue for behavioural change

All the skills above, plus:

- Help the mentee to envision outcomes – both intellectually and emotionally
- Clarify and reinforce why the change is important to the mentee and to other stakeholders
- Establish how the mentee will know they are making progress
- Assess commitment to change (and, if appropriate, be the person to whom the mentee makes the commitment)
- Encourage, support and express belief in his/her ability to achieve what s/he has committed to.

Integrative dialogue helps the mentee develop a clearer sense of who they are, what they contribute and how they fit in. It enables the mentee to gain a clearer sense of self and the world around them; to develop greater balance in his or her life, and to resolve inner conflict. It explores personal meaning and a holistic approach to living.

How to develop integrative dialogue

More than any other form of dialogue, this is usefully characterised as a dance, in which both partners take the lead in turns, often exchanging rapidly. It involves:

- Exploring multiple, often radically different perspectives
- Shifting frequently from the big picture to the immediate issue and back again
- Asking and answering both profound and naïve questions (often it is difficult to distinguish between them!)
- Encouraging the mentee to build a broader and more complex picture of himself or herself, through word, picture and analogy
- Helping them write their story – past, present and future
- Analysing issues together to identify common strands and connections
- Identifying anomalies between values, what is important to the mentee and how the mentee behaves
- Making choices about what to hang on to and what to let go
- Helping the mentee develop an understanding of and make use of inner restlessness, and/or helping him/her become more content with who and what s/he is

While these are not seven steps to mentoring heaven, they do represent increasing depth of reflection on the part of the mentee and a corresponding need for skills on the part of the mentor. A single mentoring session might delve into several layers. In general, establishing dialogue at the social level assists dialogue at the technical level; technical dialogue can evolve into strategic – and so on up the ladder.

The most effective mentors and coaches invest considerable time and effort in building their repertoire of skills, so they can both recognise the right level of dialogue to apply at a particular point and engage the mentee appropriately. Very often, the mentee has little or no experience of operating at the deeper levels of dialogue and the mentor has to work with them to establish successive layers of competence, one by one. In some cases – for example, alienated teenage criminals with poor education and low self-esteem – even social dialogue is a struggle. It may take many sessions of building trust and practicing dialogue, before the mentor can even begin to explore deeper issues with the mentee. This is one argument for extending the length of such relationships, so that there is time to build the mentee's skills of dialogue. It also suggests that providing additional help through discussion groups, where mentees can learn the basic skills of dialogue in a more structured, formal manner, should be an element of mentoring programmes for such groups.

As structured mentoring matures as a helping discipline, it is important that the emphasis shifts from how we put people together to how we improve the quality and impact of the dialogue, in which they engage. The concept of the seven layers has proven very helpful in directing attention to developing the necessary skills amongst professional mentors; it should also have considerable relevance for mentoring within organisations.