



FREE RESOURCE · MENTORSHIP

GUIDE

A Mentor's Conversation Guide

How to make an hour count, for mentors and mentees.

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A Mentor's Conversation Guide

A practical guide for mentors and mentees: what mentoring is and is not, how to prepare, a simple four-part structure for each conversation, forty questions, honest feedback, safeguarding basics and a session log.

Use it in schools, churches, community programmes, workplaces or informal one-to-one relationships.

PLEASE NOTE

This guide offers general good practice. If you mentor through an organisation, its policies take priority. Safeguarding requirements differ between countries and states; check the rules that apply where you live.

CREDITS

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USE

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Why the hour matters

Some of the most important hours in my life have looked unremarkable from the outside: a coffee, a phone call, a conversation in a car park after a meeting, where someone a little further along took my question seriously. I have also sat on the other side of the table, and I have learnt that good intentions are not enough to make that hour useful.

Mentoring works best when both people come prepared, when the conversation has a shape, and when there is a clear next step at the end. Without those three things, even a warm relationship can drift into pleasant catch-ups that change very little.

This guide is for mentors and mentees alike. It covers what mentoring is and is not, how to prepare, a simple structure for each conversation, forty questions worth asking, how to give honest feedback without crushing someone, and the boundaries that keep everyone safe, especially when the mentee is young.

Use it as a reference, not a script. The best conversations wander a little. The structure is there so that, after the wandering, you still arrive somewhere.



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Mentees

What mentoring is, and is not

MENTORING IS

- A relationship in which one person shares experience to help another grow
- Mostly listening, with occasional advice
- Focused on the mentee's goals, not the mentor's
- Regular enough to build trust, with an agreed rhythm and an end date to review
- Honest, including about the mentor's own mistakes
- Aimed at making the mentee more capable, not more dependent

MENTORING IS NOT

- Therapy or counselling
- A promise of a job, a reference, a visa sponsor or an introduction
- The mentor solving the mentee's problems for them
- A platform for the mentor's ego, recruiting or selling
- Unlimited access at any hour
- Secret

Mentor, coach or counsellor?

Mentor

Shares experience and perspective across a broad range of questions. Usually voluntary and relational.

Coach

Works on specific goals or skills through structured questioning. Often paid and time-limited.

Counsellor or psychologist

Trained and registered to support mental health. If a mentee needs this, help them find it rather than trying to be it.

SIGNS IT IS WORKING

- The mentee arrives with their own agenda
- Next steps are being taken, not just discussed
- Both people can be honest without strain
- The mentee is making better decisions on their own

SIGNS IT NEEDS A RESET

- Meetings keep being moved or cancelled
- The mentor does most of the talking
- The same problem returns every month unchanged
- Either person feels uneasy about a boundary

The simplest test of a good mentoring relationship: over time, the mentee needs the mentor a little less.

Before the first meeting

Most mentoring relationships that fade do so because nobody said out loud what they were for. Twenty minutes of preparation on both sides prevents months of drift.

FOR THE MENTEE

- ☐ Write down one or two things you want help with. Be specific.
- ☐ Think about what a good outcome from this relationship would be in six months.
- ☐ Be ready to share some context: where you are, what you have tried.
- ☐ Decide how you prefer to receive feedback, and say so.
- ☐ Arrive on time, with a notebook.

FOR THE MENTOR

- ☐ Read anything the mentee has sent ahead of time.
- ☐ Recall what it felt like to be at their stage. It is easy to forget.
- ☐ Decide what you can genuinely offer, and what you cannot.
- ☐ If the mentee is under 18, confirm the organisation's arrangements first (see section six).
- ☐ Clear your phone and your mind for the hour.

AGREE TOGETHER, AND WRITE IT DOWN

How often

e.g. monthly, for an hour

Where

an appropriate, agreed setting

For how long

e.g. six months, then review

Contact between meetings

which channels, and when

Confidentiality and its limits

safety always comes first

If it isn't working

either person can end it, kindly

A shape for every conversation

Sixty minutes, four movements. The timings are a guide, not a rule; the order matters more than the minutes.

1

10 MIN

Check-in

Arrive as people before you arrive as a project. Ask how they are, and listen to the answer. Follow up on last time's next step without judgement.

"How have the last few weeks been, honestly?" "What happened with the step you chose last time?"

2

20 MIN

The real question

The first topic raised is often not the real one. Keep asking until you reach what actually matters to the mentee. Resist the urge to solve too early.

"What is the real challenge here for you?" "What makes this hard?" "What else?"

3

20 MIN

Options

Help the mentee generate possibilities before evaluating them. Offer your experience as one option among several, clearly labelled as yours.

"What could you do?" "What would you tell a friend?" "When I faced something similar, I tried..."

4

10 MIN

One next step

End with a single, concrete action the mentee chooses, with a date. The mentee says it aloud and writes it down. Agree when you will next meet.

"What will you do before we next meet?" "What might get in the way?"

AFTER THE HOUR

The mentee sends a short note within two days: what they took from the conversation and the next step they chose. It takes five minutes, and it is often where the learning settles.

Forty good questions

A good question does more work than good advice. Choose one or two per conversation; you will not need them all. The faith questions are for mentees who want to go there, and only then.

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

- 01 What are you hoping to get from our time together?
- 02 What has shaped you most in the last few years?
- 03 Who do you admire, and what specifically do you admire about them?
- 04 What are you proud of that most people don't know about?
- 05 How do you prefer to receive feedback?

WORK AND STUDY

- 11 What part of your work energises you, and what drains you?
- 12 Which skill would make the biggest difference if you improved it?
- 13 Who could open a door for you, and what would you ask them?
- 14 What did your last setback teach you?
- 15 How will you know when it is time to move on?

DIRECTION AND PURPOSE

- 06 If things go well, what will be different in a year?
- 07 What kind of work makes you lose track of time?
- 08 What would you like to be known for?
- 09 Which of your goals are truly yours, and which have you inherited?
- 10 What would you attempt if you knew you would be supported?

DECISIONS

- 16 What are all the options, including the ones you have dismissed?
- 17 What would you advise a friend in your position to do?
- 18 What is the cost of waiting?
- 19 What information would change your mind?
- 20 Which choice fits the values you care about most?

CHARACTER AND HABITS

- 21 Where are you most tempted to cut corners?
- 22 Which habit, kept for a year, would change the most?
- 23 How do you handle being wrong?
- 24 What does real rest look like for you?
- 25 Who holds you accountable, and how?

RELATIONSHIPS

- 26 Who are the three people you rely on most?
- 27 Is there a conversation you are avoiding?
- 28 How do you show people they matter?
- 29 Where do you need to ask for help?
- 30 Who are you helping along the way?

FAITH AND MEANING

- 31 What gives your life meaning outside your work?
- 32 Where do you find hope when things are hard?
- 33 What practices keep you grounded?
- 34 How do your convictions shape your decisions?
- 35 What questions about purpose are you carrying right now?

REFLECTION AND REVIEW

- 36 What has changed since we last met?
- 37 What did you try, and what happened?
- 38 What surprised you?
- 39 What do you want to focus on next time?
- 40 How could these conversations be more useful to you?

THREE QUESTIONS THAT WORK ALMOST EVERY TIME

“What else?” · “What is the real challenge here for you?” · “What would make this hour worth it?”

QUESTIONS OF MY OWN

The ones you find yourself asking, or wish someone had asked you.

Honest feedback, kindly given

Kindness without honesty is flattery. Honesty without kindness is often just impatience. A mentor owes the mentee both.

1 Ask first

“Would some honest feedback on that be useful?” Permission turns criticism into help.

2 Be specific

Describe what you saw or heard, and its effect. “Your email ran to four paragraphs before the request” is useful. “You’re disorganised” is not.

3 Address the work, not the worth

Comment on actions and choices, never on who the person is.

4 One thing at a time

Choose the change that would make the biggest difference. A list of ten is a list of none.

5 End with belief and a step

Say why you think they can do it, then agree what they will try.

WHAT I NOTICED

“In the last two meetings you’ve mentioned the course, but it hasn’t been started.”

WHY IT MATTERS

“You told me it’s the main thing standing between you and the role you want.”

WHAT MIGHT HELP

“What would make it possible to start this week, even for thirty minutes?”

FOR MENTEES: RECEIVING FEEDBACK

- Listen to the end before responding. Write it down.
- Ask one clarifying question: “Can you give me an example?”
- Say thank you, even when it stings. It took courage to say.
- Decide later what to do with it. You don’t have to agree on the spot.

Boundaries and safeguarding

Mentoring involves trust, and trust must be protected. Good boundaries keep the mentee safe first, and protect the mentor too.

WITH EVERY MENTEE

- Meet at agreed times and places, and keep the relationship within its agreed purpose.
- No money, loans, expensive gifts or business dealings between mentor and mentee.
- Keep what is shared confidential, except where someone's safety is at risk.
- Know your limits. Refer to qualified professionals for mental-health, legal or financial matters.
- If the relationship becomes uncomfortable for either person, raise it early or end it kindly.

WITH YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER 18

- Work through an organisation, such as a school, church, club or programme, and follow its child safe policies.
- Hold the screening required where you live, such as a Working With Children Check in Australia, or the local equivalent.
- Involve parents or guardians. They should know who you are, when and where you meet, and how you communicate.
- Meet in open, appropriate settings: a café, a library, a church hall during activities, an office with the door open. Avoid being alone behind closed doors, and don't give lifts alone unless the organisation and parents have agreed.
- Communicate transparently. Use channels the organisation approves and copy in a parent or coordinator. No private social-media messaging and no disappearing messages.
- Never secrecy. Don't ask a young person to keep a secret, and don't promise to keep one. Explain at the start that if you are worried about their safety, you will have to tell someone.

IF A YOUNG PERSON TELLS YOU THEY ARE BEING HARMED

Stay calm and listen. Don't investigate or ask leading questions. Tell them they were right to tell you. Write down what was said, in their words, as soon as you can. Report it promptly to the organisation's safeguarding lead and the relevant authorities. If anyone is in immediate danger, call emergency services (000 in Australia).

This page is a basic summary. It is not a substitute for safeguarding training or for the laws and policies that apply where you live.

Session log

Print as many copies as you need. The mentee usually keeps the log; the mentor may keep a brief note of dates and any safeguarding concerns, as the organisation requires.

DATE

SESSION NO.

WHERE

DURATION

1 · CHECK-IN: HOW THINGS ARE, PROGRESS ON LAST STEP

2 · THE REAL QUESTION

3 · OPTIONS EXPLORED

4 · ONE NEXT STEP

WHAT

WHO

BY WHEN

REFLECTIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

NEXT MEETING

ANYTHING TO RAISE WITH THE ORGANISATION?



Ideas should inspire. Inspiration should lead to action. Action should improve lives.

The best thanks a mentor can receive is a mentee who goes on to mentor someone else. More essays and free resources are on the website.

IDEAS · PURPOSE · PROGRESS
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