

Mentoring - the ultimate New Year's resolution

Eat less, exercise more, work harder, take more time off, become a volunteer. Ever notice how your New Year's resolutions stay the same year after year, yet you never actually turn your end-of-year determination into the life-changing habits and career growth you envisioned?



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This year, it might be worth looking at your vision for the future from a different angle, and pay it forward in a way that will also bring personal growth and career advancement, an education expert says.

Hard to sustain

"There are many reasons why New Year's resolutions don't become habits and this is true even of those who are altruistic and service-oriented. While many of us feel we should be doing more for the community, most of us find it really hard to sustain our commitment to volunteer," says Dr Felicity Coughlan, Director of The Independent Institute of Education.

But she says a decision to become a mentor will tick all the boxes and ensure this year's resolutions make a personal and societal difference well into the future.

Pay it forward

"Mentoring is the ultimate New Year's resolution - a gift that keeps giving, that pays it forward, that does not involve a huge amount of time if you leverage technology to help you do it, and that enriches you too," she says.

Coughlan notes that a mentor is any person who has a relationship with a less experienced person focused on the development of the skills, contribution and job satisfaction of that person.

"It is a guiding and modelling process in which the mentor and the less experienced person discuss the work (and work life balance) of the mentee and generate solutions and strategies for success. It is not training - it is about helping the person develop insights into how best to manage their careers; how their actions impact on their success and how to leverage the things they are good at."

Peer-to-peer mentoring

She says anyone can be a mentor - regardless of their current position - as there will always be someone who is less experienced or just starting out who may look for guidance.

"Some training is valuable, but most of what you need to know you can find using the services of Dr Google. From an experience point of view, you do not need more than a few years' experience and you do not have to be in a senior or management position. Some of the most effective mentoring is peer-to-peer."

Coughlan says that the following points are critical to the success of the mentoring relationship - for the mentor and mentee:

1. Determine when.

How much time can you commit? Be honest with yourself - choose a number in your head and halve it.

2. Determine who, what and where.

You can mentor someone in your current workplace either as part of a formal programme, as an initiative of your own or with a team, or you can join a mentoring programme for tertiary students. You can also volunteer to mentor a young person from your community or extended family.

3. Get organised.

A good mentor must be organised. Not only does this help you to show the person how to use organisation skills to succeed, but you will find the time commitment of mentoring easier to handle if it becomes part of your daily planning.

4. Be process-oriented.

Mentors understand how and why things work and are consistent in their approach to work.

5. Be curious and respectful.

Ask questions from the mentee and lead them to their own conclusions. A good mentor observes behaviours and their consequences and helps a mentee to link the two objectively.

6. Deal with your own issues outside of the mentoring relationship.

The best mentors can really focus on the career needs of the mentee and not try to mould them to succeed where they did not, or push them into following their own path. A good mentor can separate him or herself from the mentee and enjoy being part of a different world view.

7. Be patient but firm and objective.

Express opinions and help brainstorm options, but let the mentee find his or her own way (mistakes and all). Do not become judgmental. If a mentee fears judgement or disappointing the mentor they will lie or under-report and this makes the whole process useless.

8. Be realistic.

Know when the impact you are having is too low to justify the time commitment or when you are in fact holding someone back.

"This list may read as daunting, but we have found with our mentors that a conscious attention to these areas of their own functioning has had the really big positive impact of also improving their own performance and satisfaction at work.

"Mentoring really is the best resolution you can take as you start your new year, because you will make an important difference to someone else while at the same time refining some of your own personal and work habits for the benefit of your own career. That is hard to beat as a way to get ahead in 2016."

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