

Someone in your corner: Musings of a mentor and mentee

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Abstract

What is a modern mentorship, how do you make it work, and what does gardening have to do with it? Let us take you on a tour of the growing garden of our own modern mentorship, showing how we as a medical writer (Lillian Sandø; mentor) and a clinical operations lead for devices, platforms, automation, and data analytics (Bjarke Stokholm Stærkind; mentee) can learn from each other across different functional business areas. Based on our experiences, we describe the structure and some tools that we think are key to making a formal mentorship work, helping both parties develop in a continuous cycle of growth.

In a corner of the garden stands a plant with scraggly leaves and drooping stems. For passers-by, it's hard to tell what kind of plant it is, if they notice it at all. One day, an observant soul sees the plant, recognising its species. Giving the wilting plant some water and fertiliser, this person starts coming by regularly. She loosens the soil around the plant's roots, pulls up weeds, adds mulch. Sometimes she prunes it, learning along the way the best method, figuring out how much and how often the plant needs pruning, water, and fertiliser to thrive – and to blossom.

At some stage in our growth cycle, we all need a gardener. Someone who *sees* us, sees past whatever is holding us back, sees who we can become with the right nurturing and stimulation. Someone who can help us grow and blossom, season after season. We all need to have someone in our corner: a mentor.

But how can we find this mentor; how do they wind up in our corner? What's in it for them? And what are the mentor's equivalents of the gardener's pruning tools and fertiliser? These are some of the questions we will muse on in this article, while exploring our own budding mentorship.

Mentorship structures

Mentorships come in many shapes, and they may form by chance or by design. You may be fortunate enough to cross paths with someone, in your career or in your personal life, who is on the same wavelength as you and takes an interest in helping you fulfil your potential. You might find such an ally in your graduate supervisor, the manager hiring you because they see something special in you, or the medical writer you share an office with. Perhaps your dance coach, or the neighbour who shares your passion for birdwatching, will be that ally. The relationship might be one between peers. It might fine-tune your existing skills and knowledge, or transform you in a more profound way, changing your perception of yourself and others.

But what if your boss is a self-serving tyrant, you don't have any peers in your office, and your neighbour is a lone wolf? Perhaps you admire and click with someone in a different department or area, but it might feel awkward to reach out and ask them to be your mentor. So, relying on serendipity for a mentor relationship to develop organically does not always work.

However, just as a wonderful garden can evolve naturally or be designed by a landscaper,

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so can a mentorship. In a formal mentorship programme, mentors and mentees are assigned to one another by a facilitator within a company or organisation, typically also providing training and tools to the participants. This is the kind of mentorship that we are engaged in and will focus on below.

Pilot programme in LEO Pharma

In 2020, our employer, LEO Pharma, launched a mentorship programme for staff in the R&D functional areas of Medical Sciences and Global Clinical Operations. Organised in collaboration with a consulting firm, a member of the European Mentoring & Coaching Council, the programme is based on the concept of modern mentoring (see inset, *The historical versus the modern mentor*). Rather than being a cloning factory, it aims to accelerate the personal and professional development of mentors and mentees alike. Through a structured learning partnership, mentors and mentees are meant to reach beyond “lean wisdom” or expert knowledge within a specific area, to broad wisdom and even “meta wisdom” – integrating knowledge, understanding, and experience from multiple disciplines, ideas, and contexts.

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Intended to run for eight to ten months, the LEO Pharma pilot programme started in October 2020 with a kick-off meeting for participants, including 25 people at the company headquarters in Denmark plus a handful of staff members in the US, UK, and Germany. Following plenary and breakout discussions, the kick-off culminated in the pairing of mentors and mentees.

Each pair was matched by programme organisers based on the participants’ functional areas, length of employment in the company, experience, expectations, and wishes. The spearhead for the LEO Pharma programme, Mette Theodora Bomhold, says a key tactic was to match employees from different functional areas, focusing on personal development. “We aimed to make each pair as diverse as possible in terms of extrinsic factors such as their department, position, and experience”, she says. “At the same time, we aimed to match their personalities and expectations as best we could, based on their responses to our matching questionnaire”.

Besides Bomhold, two colleagues from Medical Sciences and two from Global Clinical Operations were involved in the matching, also weighing in with any personal knowledge of the applicants. “So far, we have received very positive feedback from our mentor–mentee pairs”, Bomhold says. Pending final evaluation of the pilot, the programme may be rolled out across LEO Pharma R&D.

After the kick-off, mentor–mentee pairs started their collaboration, being advised to meet every three to six weeks. The development of this new “learning alliance” is aided by a workbook packed with guidance and tools. The workbook provides structure for aligning expectations, agreeing on ground rules, setting learning goals, preparing for meetings, documenting actions and experiences, and evaluating progress throughout a cycle of eight to twelve meetings. The book also contains guidance on different situational roles the mentor can adopt, along with various tools to aid

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The historical versus the modern mentor

Named after a character in Homer’s *Odyssey*, a mentor was historically seen as a teacher, or an older person in a senior position, who provides expert guidance to a student or novice.¹ Just as Mentor, king Odysseus’ trusted friend (right), was asked to advise and teach the king’s son Telemachus (left) so “historical” mentoring has been focused on the mentee’s learning. This model does not necessarily provide a high incentive for the mentor. Conversely, “modern” mentoring can be seen as a learning partnership between two people with different levels of experience, where both can achieve new insights and personal growth.

reflection and analysis, for instance SCORE (symptoms, causes, outcomes, resources, and effects) and SWOT (strengths/weaknesses – opportunities/threats) analyses,² and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals.³

At the time of writing this, we are halfway through the programme and soon to participate in a workshop with the other mentors and mentees, aimed at supporting and guiding our partnership. When the formal programme ends, each pair will evaluate their learning and their relationship and will end or redefine it, depending on whether they wish to continue collaborating or prefer to explore new learning opportunities.

Benefits of cross-functional mentorship

Spanning functional business areas within our company, our mentorship is not aimed at



developing role-specific subject matter expertise. Bjarke, who works to establish innovative IT systems and devices for use in clinical trials, does not need mentoring in the nuts and bolts of medical writing. Being relatively new to drug development, however, he can benefit from having a mentor with the diverse experience of the product lifecycle gained through medical writing, from early clinical development planning through trial conduct to marketing application and beyond. Furthermore, the soft skills that a medical writer needs to succeed are transferable to other roles, and vice versa, as is knowledge of the company's structure, culture, and projects.

Thus, we could easily set learning goals for our mentorship that transcend our individual subject matter expertise. Besides this learning, a cross-functional mentorship – by its very nature – brings greater understanding of other departments and roles, along with their deliverables, challenges, and opportunities. Such knowledge will make us better collaborators, and for some it might even inspire a career move.

A cross-functional mentorship also has the advantage that it provides a neutral and “safe” environment for sharing work-related or personal matters with someone who does not have a stake in the matter – an impartial sounding board.

From an organisational perspective, cross-functional mentoring has the added value – besides the participants' own development – of connecting business areas, creating cultural awareness, and helping break down functional silos. This can, at least in theory, promote enterprise thinking – the coveted concept of considering the entire enterprise and aligning plans across all relevant areas before making strategic decisions, supporting a lean, agile, and efficient organisation.

Our mentorship experience

Why we joined the programme

Lillian (mentor): Leading various types of writing teams, which is part of a medical writer's job, often involves coaching of some kind. This can be helping a new medical writer or another colleague who is new to a task or team. Acting and thriving in this role, I appreciate how crucial it is for a high-performing team that the members

lift each other up. I also find it personally meaningful if I can use my strengths to help someone else be their best – or help them find a way to achieve their aspirations, even awaken their subconscious aspirations. I wish to explore and develop my ability to inspire and help unlock people's potential, although without pursuing the people management track. To that end, becoming a mentor is a great learning opportunity.

Bjarke (mentee): I have a profound belief that goal-setting is key to consciously ensuring progress, and I strive to write goals for myself on an ongoing basis. But it can be difficult to set goals that are both achievable and ambitious. To me, a mentorship

was therefore a chance to get support and a sparring partner for both defining my goals and discussing my ensuing development. An added value was to widen my network in LEO Pharma, where I started last year, as the pandemic slimmed my chances of getting to know colleagues across the company.

Lillian: I have received some great mentoring in my career, which I now feel ready to “pay forward”. Besides medical writing, I can help cultivate more general and transferable skills such as stakeholder and project management, handling pressure, and using feedback constructively.

Our expectations

Bjarke: A mentorship to me is a private sharing space, where both parties deposit thoughts, ideas, and feelings. My expectation before entering the programme was to share my thoughts and problems and receive honest and direct feedback. I enjoy a frank approach and I don't take things personally but rather, appreciate any constructive feedback that will help me develop.

Lillian: Ditto! I expected both of us to come with an open mindset and readiness to meet in a sincere way. And we do; our collaboration is very much a two-way street.

Bjarke: Before joining the programme, I had some vague ideas about certain goals and skills

that I wanted to work on. But my three concrete learning goals came to life through my ideas, our conversations, and using the SMART³ method in our meetings. This underlines the value of having a mentor to discuss goal-setting with.

Lillian: I aim to become better at listening and at *seeing* people. I expect that by consciously practicing different mentor roles, such as the coach, adviser, critic, or storyteller, I will become more aware of which role I adopt in which situation and how I can do this deliberately, not just intuitively. I hope to internalise these roles and put them to good use outside this programme as well.

What we are getting out of it (so far)?

Bjarke: I really appreciate our equally dedicated approach to the collaboration and that we both enjoy a structured approach. This structure helps me build actionable tactics to accelerate my personal development, and I can already see some practical and tangible outcomes.

Lillian: For my part, I relish this opportunity to immerse myself in mentoring for a few hours each month. I find it gratifying, especially seeing the great effort you put into achieving your goals. I enjoy hearing about your challenges and your learning, and I learn from trying to home in on what might help you shine your brightest. I'm delighted that you are so open to self-reflection and exploring potential development areas.

Bjarke: I value our open and direct communication and the questions that come up in our conversations. For instance, you typically ask a lot of questions to help clarify my understanding of the problem we are discussing, to help me explore the theme from different perspectives, and to challenge my perceptions.

Lillian: Sometimes, I also give you specific advice or share some knowledge or a story from my own experience. But you give me new perspectives, too, making our conversations reciprocal, inspiring discussions where we bounce ideas off each other.

Bjarke: Besides your advice and stories, I gain

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from the discussion-oriented approach, which supports ideas, thoughts, and counterarguments that I like to test out. In relation to the different mentor roles, a discussion partner and adviser is not the only, or always the best, way to maximise my learning, though. I also benefit from you acting as a critic.

Lillian: Going back to the gardening analogy, I would say that the mentor's role as discussion partner and adviser provides different types of fertiliser, whereas the mentor's role as critic corresponds to the gardener's pruning shears. The latter involves giving constructive feedback that others may find uncomfortable to give and therefore tend to hold back. As a mentor with no personal stake in your behaviour and performance, I can provide feedback from a neutral position. I can represent other people present in a challenging situation, helping to interpret the situation from different angles and explore how it might have been handled better.

Bjarke: The different means of mentoring also present a set of intertwined paths to growth for both parties. For instance, when the mentor uses the "pruning shears", they also put themselves in a challenging situation with development potential: while you want to give constructive feedback, I might be reluctant to receive the feedback if I take it to be misplaced or shared in a wrongful tone. This emphasises the importance

of having a mentoring agreement with ground rules for the collaboration and aligned expectations for the structure and methods of learning together.

Putting it all together

We believe that having sufficient structure, the right tools, and mutual commitment are key to making a formal mentorship work – just as structure, tools, and commitment are key to creating and maintaining a landscaped garden. It's a case of "value in, value out" – a positive spin on the "garbage in, garbage out" principle known from computer science.

Furthermore, we reject the notion of a mentor being some kind of guru. Rather, we see a gardener who, after investing time and effort in nurturing a special plant, is in turn nurtured by the garden's produce. We think this circular nature of mentoring makes a more fluid boundary between the mentor and mentee, helping both parties to transition from one role to the other at the right times during their career, hopefully in a continuous cycle of growth. That way, we should not need to fear being annual plants, blossoming only once – but can

enjoy life as hardy perennials, thriving year after year.

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Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and are not necessarily shared by their employer or EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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