MENTORING



TRANSEARCH
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"A mentor is a role model who has walked in the shoes of the mentee."

Transearch recently conducted a global culture audit. Many of the responses, such as the apprehension regarding how to measure culture, were anticipated. What was not expected was the heightened need for mentoring. Indeed, its potential impact ranked higher than coaching.

Perhaps, we should not have been surprised. The difficulty of finding top talent, the ever-increasing speed of change, a new (and very different) generational cohort joining the workforce, fear over the implementation of AI, the emerging organization as a team of teams, and the reality that many employees still set hybrid employment as a priority have all served to reinvent the work landscape.

Fortunately, leaders have access to tried and trusted tools to integrate, challenge, grow, and develop leaders. This speaks to four distinct processes – four very different dimensions of leadership capability.

- **Training:** introducing or upgrading skills.
- **Counselling:** addressing dysfunctional behaviour where its causation lies outside of the job.
- **Coaching:** supporting an employee in the quest to reach and maintain peak performance. Unlike mentoring, the coach is not required to have held a role equivalent to that of the coachee.[1] Lack of international experience and/or inability to match the clock speed of the host organization can, however, be problematic.

1 A coach with extensive executive experience, who has coached a number of top CEOs, may well be able to bring a compelling blend of coaching and mentoring to the table.



- **Mentoring:** a mentor is a role model who has walked in the shoes of the mentee (individual being mentored) – a successful executive who shares their "story" with a less experienced and/or struggling leader. The outcome? The mentee is accelerated through the learning curve.

Mentoring is far from new. In past centuries when a young worker[2] was accepted into one of the trades, they joined a community that embodied yesterday's version of the "learning organization." Crude, tough, and brutal though the life of the apprentice may have been at times, the quality and consistency of the learning experience was never allowed to slip. The highest standards were maintained because poor performance by even one individual reflected badly on the guild as a whole.

Mentoring is the modern incarnation of the age-old apprenticeship process. A silent echo of a time when Andrea del Verrocchio mentored Leonardo da Vinci, today's mentor is a proven performer who shares their experience with a manager who is less seasoned. Having interviewed any number of successful executives, one thing



2 Although the vast majority were men, some women did enter the guilds.



invariably surfaces. Every leader who makes it, at some point in their career benefits from working with a mentor.

Mentoring isn't age related. Reverse mentoring – such as a young AI specialist mentoring a senior executive in AI – can be incredibly valuable for both parties. The executive gains insights. The young mentor gets to rub shoulders with a senior leader. Organizations that haven't fully utilised reverse mentoring are overlooking a win-win piece of the leadership puzzle.

The dilemma with mentoring is that although there is wide recognition of its worth, few organizations seem to know how to make it work for them. It stands alongside emotional intelligence, neuro-linguistic programming, and action learning as an invaluable yet largely untapped resource.

Complicating the problem further, mentoring is either confused with coaching or viewed as a form of leadership counselling. The latter, of course, is the domain of a trained therapist.

Organizations would be well advised to upgrade their mentoring capabilities. Mentoring enables a new leader to hit the ground running, results in higher executive retention, positively impacts the speed of learning, and is the engine that drives impactful succession planning.

Testimony from those who have successfully sailed the turbulent waters of executive success suggest that nothing is more valuable than having someone trustworthy to talk to – a reliable partner who enables the mentee to raise the bar, clarify the seemingly unexplainable, who can share their experience regarding the political pitfalls, and who, perhaps above all else, acts as an invaluable confidant.

A number of organizations have been wise enough to develop an effective, company-wide mentoring process. The majority, however, while lauding its value, see mentoring as difficult to deliver – impactful for those with innate skills but out of reach for the typical leader. What follows are suggestions and shared insights on what it means to be an impactful mentor.



Who Benefits from a Mentor?

New to the role? At an early stage of your executive career? Struggling with people issues? On a succession fast track? Recently been appointed as the team's leader? Orchestrating culture change? A private equity firm just acquired a major equity position in your firm? Key changes on the board? A major competitor just reinvented the game? International experience was recently added to the role? Returning to work after an extended period of leave? You need a mentor!

A strong mentor is a masterful communicator who, in particular,goes out of their way to display humility. Sharing experience should never cross the line into being boastful. Success as a mentor is a natural expression of those who view leadership through a serving lens. Effective mentors are not difficult to identify. They display a quiet maturity – the contemplative leader who is seen as an ideal person to bounce ideas off.





It's lonely at the top and continuously raising your game gets way easier if, during perilous moments of hesitation, you've got someone you respect to talk to. In a world of leadership scarcity, outstanding mentors are a golden asset. The best mentoring relationships don't flow; they sing.

Internal or External Mentor?

Three heads are better than two. There is value to having both an internal *and* an external mentor. An internal mentor can unlock the door to work and organization-related challenges. An external mentor can be an invaluable resource in terms of the career journey generally. There can also be topics discussed with an external mentor that would be politically insensitive with an internal resource.

In an organization uncomfortable with the concept of mentoring, going outside of the organization is clearly a safe and effective option. A good external mentor can be a previous colleague, a friend, or a skilled consultant. In the case of a consultant, it is important that they have relevant business experience. The downside of working exclusively with an external mentor is that they may not know enough about the organization's emerging culture to pose insightful questions about strategic issues.

The best internal mentoring relationships are those where the parties come together naturally. Arranged marriages can work but one shouldn't count on it. The gift that a mentor brings to the table is a blend of wisdom and judgement based on personal learning. If the would-be mentor lacks meaningful experience, the input will, of necessity, be based on conjecture and second-hand assumptions. "The blind leading the blind" is a perilous way forward.

In organizations with a formal mentor program, a cadre of trained and suitable mentors will be made available. If not, making the mentor connection is far easier than most would think. Asking someone to provide mentoring is often received as a form of flattery. Drawing meaning from the relationship is obviously a challenge of a different order. The rule is to go slowly! The mentee should develop a level of trust before sharing their deepest confidences. Trust is, of course, the central element in virtually any human interaction.



Fit with a Mentor

Mentoring is not just a matter of finding someone you like, or who is a nice person. In a world where the first year of an engineering program is out of date before the final year is completed, relevance of the mentor's experience is a key consideration.

Ideally, the mentor should have advanced at least **one** career development stage beyond the individual being mentored (see **Figure one**). Although many different mentoring relationships can work, in a rapidly changing world, currency of experience[3] erodes quickly. For that reason, where the mentor has progressed two or more career stages beyond the mentee's position, modest caution is warranted. This flies in the face of much that has historically been written about mentoring, where "the mentor" is invariably described using the sort of terms one might use when talking about a favourite uncle.

Stages of Career Growth

Figure one

Stages of growth (Experience base)	**General mgt.**	**Technology**	**R&D**	**Sales & marketing**	**Admin.**
Learning the ropes (20-27)	Developing an understanding of the business landscape. Watch and learn. Defining success. Establishing standards.				
Finding one's feet (28-33)	Early management roles. Dealing with conflicts. Essential to build a range of management skills. Need to see several business cycles. International experience invaluable.				
Building success (34-44)	Must establish a track record. Move to a role with an extended time span. Exploring risk and moving to the edge of comfort zone equips the individual for later roles.				
Making experience count (45-55)	Putting it all together. The contribution years. Leadership of self. Limited emotional maturity and/or lack of "culture fit" the main reason(s) for derailment.				
Passing the baton (55+)	Family and giving back come to the fore. Leaving a legacy and succession become determinates of leadership success.				

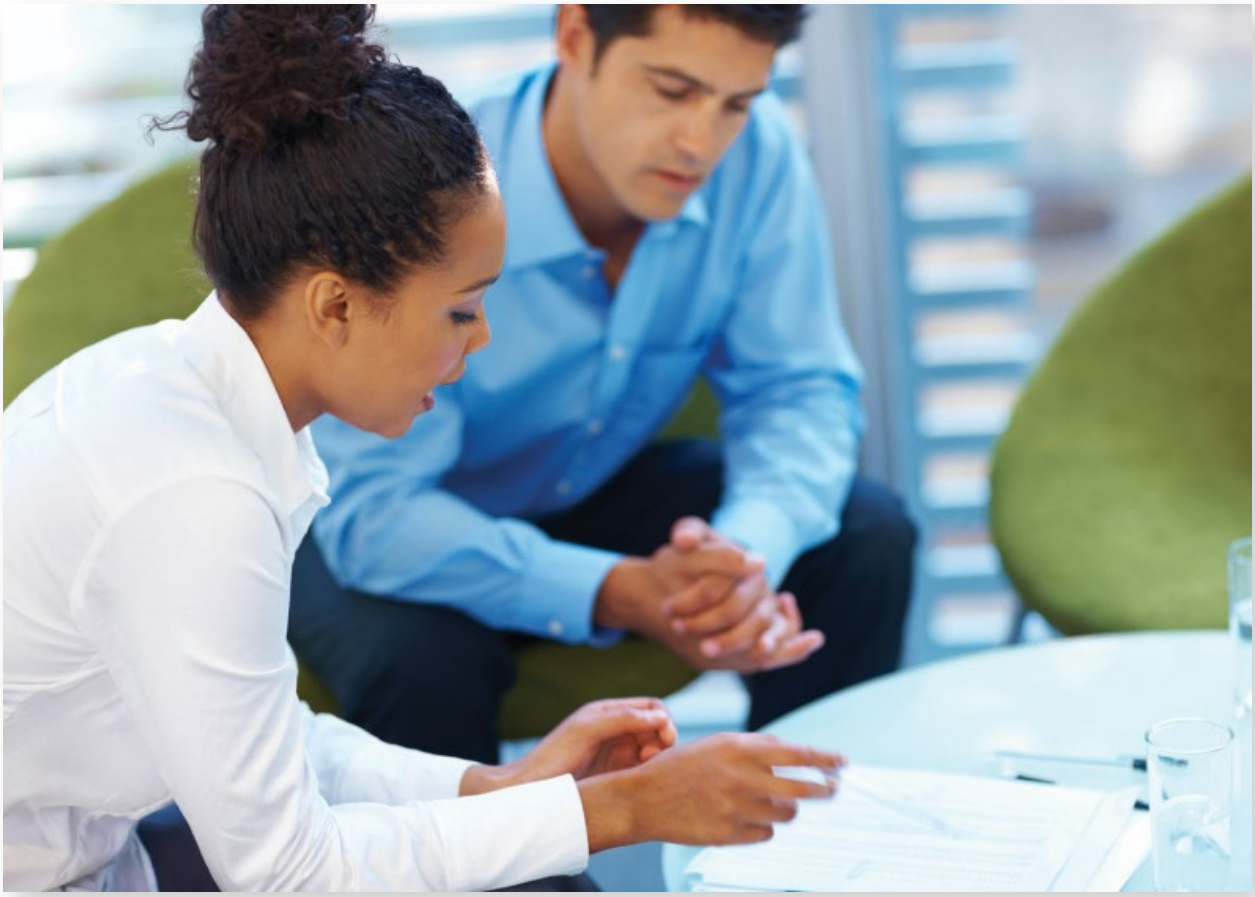
3 The use of AI is a good example.



In the traditional organization, executives build their careers as if they were constructing the letter T. Only at the final stages of their careers, and in very senior roles, do they have responsibility for the total organization. At early stages of the mentee's career, the functional expertise of the mentor is clearly a critical factor. Conversely, as the mentee moves up the organization ladder (see **Figure one** – Making experience count), their experience will start to reach across the organization. We are also describing the need for "helicopter thinking." To that end, an external mentor may well be best equipped to deliver both the breadth of experience and the big picture thinking that is demanded.

What does the mentor get from the arrangement? For an external mentor, it is invariably, fee for service. It doesn't stop there though. A successful mentor gains a good deal of satisfaction through the act of giving back.

For an internal mentor, it means reputation-building and gaining unique insight into a dimension of the organization's culture that would not otherwise be possible.





Mentoring is also a rich learning experience at a purely personal level. Empathetic enquiry allows the mentor to see with new ideas. By posing new questions the mentor is challenging their own mindset. By sharing their story the mentor is learning anew about their own journey. And by acting out what it means to be a servant leader, the mentor is sharpening their own leadership saw.

The Rules of Engagement

The mentoring experience should start with a clear "contract" concerning the behaviour of both parties. As a first step, both should agree on (1) the intended goals (outcomes) of the relationship, and (2) the code of behaviour that will guide the relationship.

The mnemonic **LEARN** outlines the framework for the mentoring code.

Let either side move away from the relationship with grace if either considers that little value is being added. "The no hard feelings clause."

Ensure that the mentoring discussion is balanced between dialogue (sharing experience), exploring suggested actions, and action. "The nothing changes until someone acts clause."

Agree on the timeframe and regularity of meeting for the mentoring support. Meeting regularly is a must. "The 'Are you still there?' clause."

Respect confidences at all cost. "The vault clause."

No disparagement of those whose name happens to come up during the discussion. "The no criticism clause."

When the mentor is from within the organization, the mentee must regularly update their team leader. This doesn't mean compromising the confidentiality of the mentoring discussions, nor does the mentee have to share the focus of the discussions. No less important, the mentee must ensure that none of the mentoring actions being suggested will threaten or undercut the mentee's team leader. It's helpful to share the mentoring code with the mentee's manager-one-level-up.



The Five Steps in a Successful Mentoring Process

As with much in life, the rule in mentoring is to keep it simple. A framework describing the five key steps in successful mentoring is outlined in **Figure two**.

1. Discussions with the mentor should begin by surfacing/defining the issue, problem, question, or opportunity. The most effective mentoring sessions are those where the agenda remains focused on one (possibly two) key issue. The ensuing dialogue should explore both the current situation and the desired future state.
2. Time invested wisely in a mentoring discussion is time devoted to reviewing options. The mentor's role is to listen to and, where needed, challenge/reframe the mentee's way of thinking. By posing new questions the mentor can stimulate creativity, open up new avenues of discussion, and stretch the mentee's perception of what is possible.

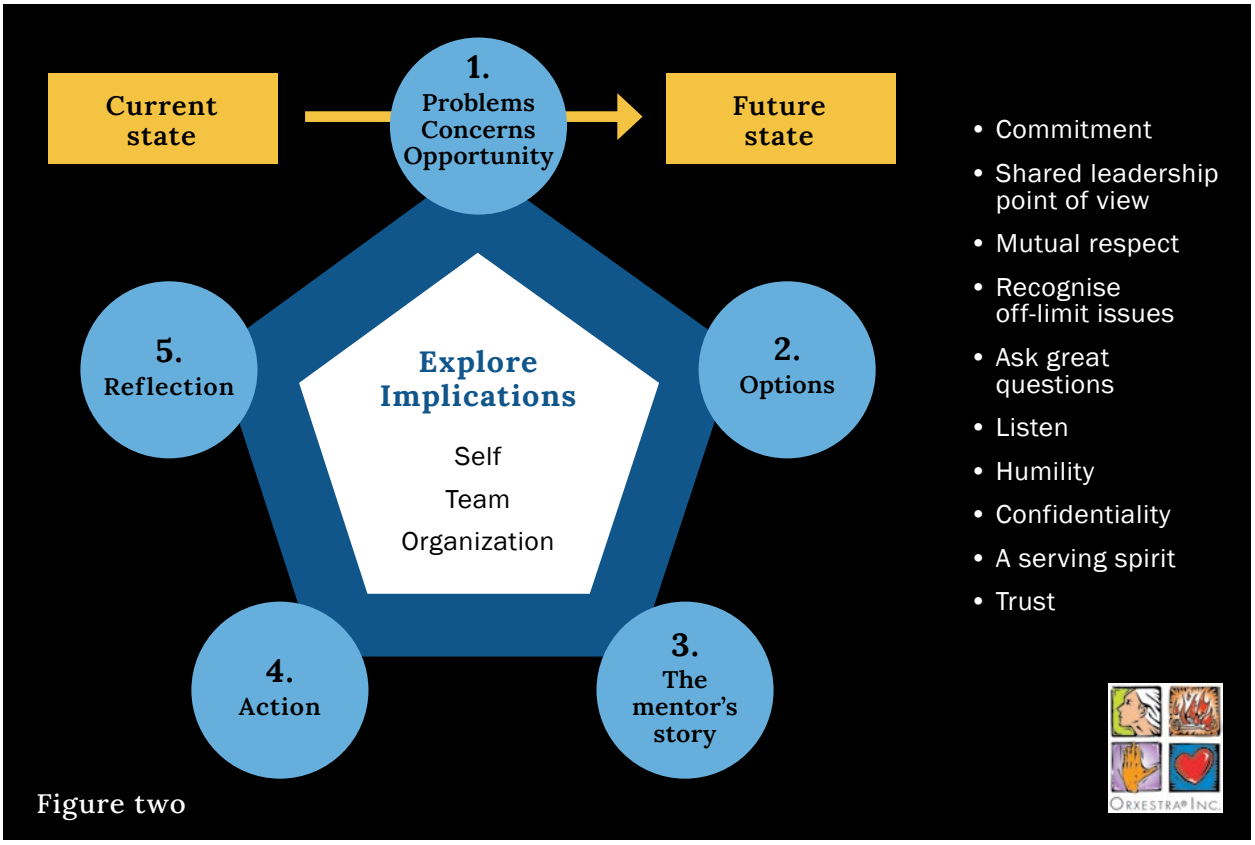


Figure two



It is also important that the mentoring discussion move beyond the mentee's issues and factor in the implications for the wider context. "How do the needs of the team figure in the discussion?" "Is the culture the organization needs to create a relevant issue?" It is essential to introduce the wider context early in the conversation; the wider context should provide the background soundtrack throughout the mentoring dialogue.

3. By sharing their experience (story) the mentor helps the mentee begin to understand the possible way forward, where the pitfalls lie, and how an untapped opportunity can start to unfold. The mentor's story becomes even more impactful when it is supported by relevant best practices from a well-known market leader.

4. It's essential that the mentoring discussion move expeditiously to potential action steps. The mentor must also make it clear that *deciding* on the way forward lies exclusively with the mentee.

   Mentoring is not a form of joint problem-solving. The mentor shares experience, poses new questions, and suggests where the holes in the road may lie, but the mentor is not responsible and should not bear responsibility for what happens next.

   The mentor who intrudes into the decision-making arena is making a serious mistake. Not only are they taking ownership for issues outside of their area of accountability, but should things not unfold as planned, they might well end up as the villain in the story.

5. Without reflection there is no learning. Because time is the enemy of efficiency, reflection is the one element of the mentoring process least likely to receive the necessary attention. The mentee must find time to process what they have learned. They must create the emotional and intellectual space such that new patterns of behaviour can be fully understood. Old habits die all too easily.

   Reflection is the must-have platform for meaningful action. Learning unfolds not when you try harder but **when through your actions you get it right**. No one learned how to ride a bicycle by falling off!



Mentoring Online

Clearly, a good deal of mentoring will be conducted online. It's easier to organize, it saves travel time, and it opens the door to a wider cast of potential mentors. Working online even makes it possible to work with a mentor from a different country.

The problem? Regardless of the bandwidth, when compared to meeting face to face, the current technical capability supporting online interaction stunts an accurate reading of the context, overrides non-verbal clues, inhibits rapport, and makes eye contact less direct, as though it is happening through a cloudy glass. These limitations are compounded by lack of physical presence. Before our kind discovered fire, in-person interaction was a critical component in establishing trust. It all goes downhill from there. Not only does looking endlessly at a square screen strangle attention span but incredibly important olfactory clues are stripped away from the experience. The reality? An online mentoring process is at least 40% less effective than meeting face to face.





The challenge becomes how to make online interaction as effective as possible. The following suggestions will be helpful:

- Have the latest software update.
- Invest in a separate camera.
- If using a laptop, buy a stand.
- Prepare.
- Limit unwarranted background noise.
- Use the first minutes to re-establish rapport.
- Constantly upgrade listening skills.
- Summarise progress.
- Make it visual whenever possible
- Agree on goals moving forward.
- Keep the meeting tight – 45/50 minutes is probably ideal. Going beyond an hour isn't helpful.

Mentoring Topics that Are Offside

The kinds of topics suitable for a mentoring discussion are largely common sense. Clearly, however, some issues would be outside of an appropriate agenda – salary, compensation, bonus and benefits, behaviour that may involve disciplinary action, and/or disagreement between the manger-one-level-up regarding the mentee's performance.

Falling into the grey area of appropriateness are discussions that tend to be people related. Discussing why a company-wide marketing initiative failed might, in some circumstances, be valuable. Conversely, where the dialogue touches on interpersonal friction – especially where the behaviour of the mentee's manager-one-level-up enters the picture – it is essential that the mentor shut the conversation down. The rule? No personal criticism of any of the parties involved. (See the vault clause in the mentoring code, under The Rules of Engagement.)



Mentoring and Story

Ask someone to describe mentoring and “advice” will feature boldly in their description. The problem? There are two very different forms of advice: (1) experienced based and (2) opinion. The former is best expressed as a challenging question or a meaningful story. The latter is ego-driven and devoid of integrity. Even more problematic is when opinion is presented as if it were a fact. To get a sense of what that means listen to your local politician answer a difficult question.

Mentorship is altruism writ large. The mentor should also have the language skills necessary to share their story. This, in particular, involves exploring times of failure, times of inadequate preparation, and times when the mentor could have made a better decision.

The mentor’s “story” lies at the heart of the mentoring experience. The mentor needs to be comfortable enough to step back from their experience and be dispassionately self-critical. Success stories are often inspirational. It’s the mentor’s self-critique that really grabs the mentee’s attention (and trust) though. Those entering the mentor role





ready to recount only their successes are like the sports manager who thinks they can win by only playing offense. A great story embraces five steps:

1. The context
2. The dilemma
3. The hero
4. The struggle
5. The outcome and learning

The expression "role model" used earlier in the text isn't merely a nice sounding term. The mentor's values, language, overall attitude, and personal presentation style **must** be congruent with the story being proffered. How the mentor acts is, ultimately, more important than anything that they might say!

Trust Is Essential

The chemistry between the mentee and the mentor can develop only if there is a solid foundation of trust. Fully describing every aspect of trust is like trying to catch smoke in a railway tunnel. Having said that, there are five fundamental building blocks (see **Figure three**) central to generating and maintaining a high level of mentor-mentee trust.

1. The ability on the part of the mentor to quickly and easily build rapport depends on the mentor's ability to see the world through the eyes of the mentee and the capacity to frame language, metaphor, and experience in terms that the mentee can relate to.
2. A successful mentor has "acted" on a stage where the script being played out was similar to the one faced by the mentee. Indeed, the mentee's respect draws heavily on the assumption that the mentor has "been there." If the mentor attempts to pontificate or draw meaning from a purely conceptual point of view – no matter how well crafted – they do little to build the respect demanded.
3. The mentor must have the capacity to show empathetic understanding. This demands genuine listening skills. The mentor has to be able to listen for both what is said and what is not said.



4. The mentor and the mentee must operate from a shared leadership point of view. If the mentor's experience is rooted in a command-and-control environment, they are unlikely to provide meaningful support to a mentee who operates in a culture dominated by self-managing teams. Similarly, a mentor whose experience has exclusively been domestic is a poor fit with an executive who has an international mandate.
5. The act of mentoring demands a high level of personal commitment to the mentoring process from both parties. More specifically, when the mentee agrees to take a course of action they must do (and be seen to do) all in their power to deliver on that commitment. There is no such thing as 99% commitment!



Figure three



Conclusion

The business community is fully aware that future success will depend as much on responsiveness as it will on the quality of the strategic thinking available. In meeting this demand for agility, a significant investment is being made in AI-based coaching tools.[4] No doubt, a similar investment in mentoring will follow. These interventions, while offering speed and connectability, risk dehumanising the workplace. What's made easy isn't, necessarily, more effective. Let us not forget that over the ages traditional forms of mentoring have been a central feature in building community.

Meanwhile, we can't underestimate the ways in which a global business climate of arbitrary tariffs, organizational turbulence, fear of future job loss, and lack of leadership have contributed to an eroded sense of belonging (community). It is a malady evidenced in Gen Z cynicism, disconnected middle managers, high executive turnover, and an undeniable shift of power from the enterprise to the talent organizations need most.



4 Error prone and open to manipulation, AI in its current form is still at the research stage.



Change, paradoxically, demands both the need to let go and the need for continuity. The challenge? In the eye of the storm there needs to be a meaningful platform for learning. Mentoring reaches back in time to an established pattern of growth and development, one that amid the myriad of quick fixes, organizations have often pushed aside. Ask virtually any successful executive and they will quickly link their success to the mentoring relationships they enjoyed along the way. Resplendent in a top hat and silk gloves, an executive of a past era would have said exactly the same thing.

The rate of change in society makes speed of learning a critical dimension of competitive advantage. Mentoring, when conducted with caring and flair, can do much to accelerate a leader through that learning curve. For even the established executive, having an informed person to talk to isn't just useful – it's a gift that keeps on giving. Mentoring isn't always easy but it does have proven worth. Without it, something vital is missing. With it, leadership is, somehow, made much simpler.

"Every leader who makes it,
at some point in their career
benefits from working with a mentor."



John O. Burdett

" The best mentoring relationships don't flow; they sing."

- John O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

