



A Culture of Mutual Support: Characteristics of Youth Mentoring Relationships

Reflection Note

As young people enter into the early years of employment, they often encounter challenges and unexpected obstacles to their advancement. Finding a job can be a long and difficult journey, requiring ongoing learning and support.¹ Once landed in a job, a young person's ongoing success in the workplace calls upon a range of social skills and practical abilities. Ongoing mentorship by a more experienced person can be an important way in which young people develop these capacities. The mentorship of youth, therefore, has emerged as a central concept and area of learning within the conversation about youth work and employment.

What are the characteristics of a successful mentorship relationship? What kind of environment or culture allows mentoring programs to take root and develop naturally? How do youth learn the qualities, skills, and attributes needed to advance and grow within the workforce? What kind of support do they need to become protagonists of their future and development? These are some of the questions considered by about 40 participants in a Community of Practice of people working with youth-serving organizations, who met at a gathering convened by the Youth Research and Evaluation Exchange (YouthREX) and the Bahá'í Community of Canada's Office of Public Affairs.

Qualities and Characteristics of Mentorship

In the early stages of searching for work, a young person's focus is often primarily on making themselves employable. For many youth, the courage and effort needed to achieve employment does not give way to relief and comfort, but rather opens up many new questions and opportunities that require further perseverance. When oriented by clear goals and supported by mentors, coworkers, family, and friends, a young person can rise to this challenge and pursue excellence in their work. A formal or informal relationship with a mentor who has substantial experience in a sector or type of work can help youth take a long-term view of their career path, seeing how small steps can lead to distant destinations, transforming barriers into stepping stones for progress. Courage, consistent effort, and openness to reflection on experience are key tools for learning through mentorship.

An effective mentor draws on capacities for honesty and humility to establish a relationship in which the young person feels valued, supported, and encouraged. This leads naturally to a focus on developing "soft skills" and capacities such as resilience, flexibility, adaptability, relationship-building, emotional intelligence, mutual support, and a growth mindset. A mentor is guided not by their own vision of a young person's future – which can lead to an attitude that treats youth as "projects" to be solved or fixed – but by the young person's own vision of their desired future. Indeed, one crucial task of a mentor seems to be helping youth crystallize a long-term vision and identifying steps along the path.

¹ See our previous Reflection Note at https://opa.bahai.ca/en_documents/a-place-to-land-addressing-barriers-to-youth-employment/

Building Successful Mentoring Relationships

A successful mentorship relationship is built within a context that reaches beyond the workplace. Indeed, a mentor is most effective when they are familiar with the experiences of their young friend in their family, neighbourhood, and broader culture and surroundings. They consider how the mentoring relationship can help to reinforce a coherent view of life, recognizing how factors influence and reinforce each other. By learning to focus on strengths, a young person can be helped to remain accountable to their plans and vision, while also anticipating and identifying opportunities and next steps that lead to new heights.

More generally, at the centre of a successful relationship is a view of youth that sees the potential of their contributions to the progress and wellbeing of society. Mentorship provides a space of initiation and opportunity, bridging young people into adulthood and a life of meaningful work. Each generation encounters its own questions and opportunities when considering how the energy and perspective of young people can be best channeled to contribute to the wellbeing of society. Mentors have a critical role in considering these questions and providing opportunities.

Structures and Systems of Employment

One question raised in many mentoring relationships is whether young people are being helped to enter a defective system of employment, or whether they are supported to build capacities that empower them to create new kinds of work that better reflect the reality and aspirations of an upcoming generation. The precarious nature of employment commonly experienced by youth is often reinforced by workplace structures that promote rigid hierarchies, competitive and fear-based motivation strategies, and isolation. The mentoring relationship can promote creative efforts to include young people's voices in the shaping of workplace structures, such as including youth on a board of directors or drawing on alumni of career support services to guide upcoming cohorts of youth. In many cases, identifying the specific barriers facing young people in a particular context as well as the strengths and opportunities available to them can enable youth to overcome both individual and systemic limitations in creative ways. It is worth considering how formal and informal mentoring relationships can aid this approach to youth empowerment.

The culture of mutual support nurtured by mentoring relationships speaks to questions that are the concern of many individuals and their families, the communities around them, and organizations and institutions. How do all of these actors in society engage in a common conversation, knowing that their shared questions affect them all? The learning process involved in advancing this conversation can engage every youth entering the workforce and every mentoring relationship that guides them as they walk that path.

- Prepared by Livia Dittmer, PhD

On 13 June 2019, more than three dozen people from various agencies and organizations concerned with youth and work gathered in Toronto to consider vital questions facing their organizations and the young people they serve. This space was created as a component of the YouthREX communities of practice initiative and was co-organized and hosted by the Bahá'í community. For more information, read: https://news.bahai.ca/en_articles/062712/