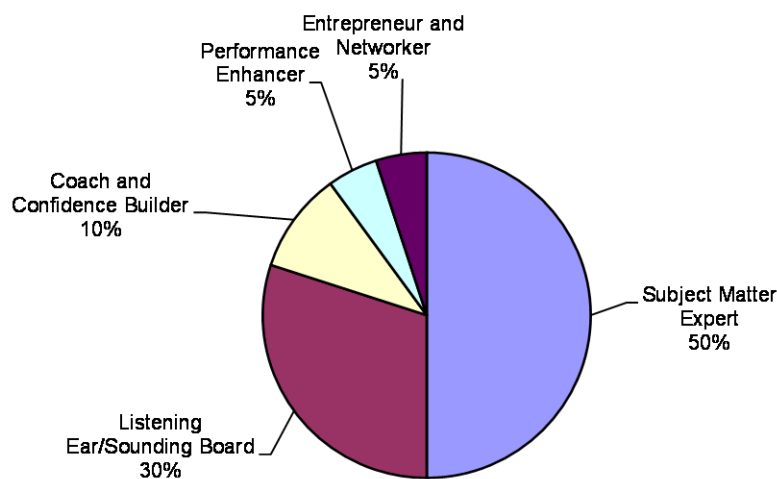


How to Mentor Any Student: 5 Mentoring Roles Explained (lightsaber optional)

By Lyndsay Swinton

Obi Wan Kenobi knows how to mentor a student. He tutors Jedi novice Luke Skywalker in the ways of the Force, a mysterious energy field harnessed by the Jedi. Here are 5 mentoring roles explained – you decide about the light saber, or the brown hooded cloak for that matter!



The 5 mentoring roles...

First of, 2 of the roles are about knowing your stuff, inside out – subject matter expert and listening ear/sounding board. And of course, this applies to mentors in the workplace or at school, as knowing the company and how it works is just as valid as knowing course content. So, about 80% of being a mentor is about knowing your stuff. Or just a bit more stuff than your mentee knows – if there are any gaps in your knowledge or experience, then brush up quick.



How to mentor with a light saber

Subject Matter Expert – 50% of the time

A "subject matter expert" is knowledgeable about a particular topic or range of topics and able to share knowledge thoughtfully and targeted to other's needs.

As a subject matter expert, your main concern is to ensure that the mentee is getting a good understanding of the basic information and skills to become effective. You are less concerned about their confidence, or enthusiasm as their main need at this point is to know what they are doing.

A subject matter expert is not a know-it-all bore, indiscriminately lecturing all who pass within earshot, satisfying their own attention needs and neglecting those of the mentee.

Listening Ear/Sounding Board – 30% of the time

Being a listening ear or sounding board is about providing a safe audience for testing out ideas and theories of an enthusiastic, under skilled student.

As the mentee progresses, they are taught the basic skills to become effective. As they go through this learning journey, there are times when their confidence will outstrip their knowledge. Students need to be able to make mistakes and have mis-understandings without advertising this to the world.

The listening ear or sounding board role is different to the subject matter expert in that you address both skill and will needs of the mentee.

A listening ear or sounding board is not an agony aunt, prepared to take on all the worries and woes of the student. Be prepared to get stuck in and correct basic mistakes in understanding.

Coach and Confidence Builder – 10% of the time

A coach and confidence builder looks after a student's emotional needs, after, and only after, the student has gained a solid grounding in the basic skills.

The coach and confidence builder role is key around examination time or a critical point in a project. It may have been years since students undertook formal exams, and for some, this is a trying time. Even able students can forget everything when exam stress makes their minds go blank. It is the coach's role to nurture the student and provide additional support as required.

Able people come unstuck for three principal reasons; security, confidence, and motivation. As skilled mentors you will recognise these and be able to address them effectively.

Security is about perception of risk of failure. If something is both important to you and has an [uncertain outcome](#), you are likely to perceive the risk of failure as high and be anxious. The mentor's role is to talk through the "what if" scenarios and plan to minimise the risk of failure for example, go through previous exam papers together, brush up on tricky subjects, do additional practice sessions and so on.

Confidence plays a large part in being an effective student or mentor or any role for that matter! The mentor can [build confidence](#) by working on the specific areas the student is under-confident in, building confidence through successful experience.

Motivation is about the desire and incentive to succeed. [Motivation](#) may waver when practical considerations get in the way. For example, a mentor can help motivation by future pacing the student to when they have completed the course, and uncovering what they did to overcome obstacles en route.

A coach and confidence builder is not a cheerleader, giving fluffy, trite platitudes.

Performance Enhancer – 5% of the time

Performance enhancer is the tougher, bigger brother of the listening ear/sounding board role.

When a student's perception of their own ability does not match reality, the mentor steps in to enhance their performance by providing specific, [constructive feedback](#) to change behaviour.

The performance enhancer role may be required after a student receives critical feedback. The goal is to get the student to thoroughly understand the feedback and figure out what they did wrong or badly and what they can do differently next time. This allows for straight talking without confrontational "I'm right, you're wrong" conversations.

A performance enhancer is not a sergeant major shouting orders to "shape up or ship off".

Entrepreneur and Networker – 5% of the time

The entrepreneur and networker provide ideas, encouragement and contacts when the student is ready to go it alone in the “real world”.

This role is entirely driven by the student and dependant on their aspirations. The mentor will share experiences, ideas or suggest resources on how to market services, set up in business, make contact with relevant networks and so on.

The entrepreneur and networker is not a business guru with secret knowledge of how to get rich quick.

So, with or without a light saber, you now know how to mentor effectively! May the force be with you.

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