

WIG Bespoke Mentoring

Case Study - Mike and Colin

At WIG, our mentoring programmes support mentors and mentees to develop fresh perspectives and gain insight from another sector. Since its inception, our mentoring programme has supported over 400 successful mentoring partnerships. Our unique cross-sector approach supports individuals and organisations to develop, collaborate and grow. We work with our diverse membership of public, private and not-for-profit organisations to create mentoring opportunities tailored to individual development needs.

Mike, a Director from an arm's length body and his mentor Colin, a former Chief Executive of a Local Authority reflect on their 12 month mentoring journey, facilitated and coordinated by The Whitehall and Industry Group's Talent Team.

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When Mike started his mentoring journey, he identified the key areas he believed he needed to work on and set goals for himself. His primary goal was to establish a mentoring relationship where he could be open about his weaknesses and develop from them. Additionally, he aimed to increase his confidence, collaborate more effectively with others, and have a clear vision for his team that he could confidently communicate. He also wanted to improve his team's engagement and positivity towards internal changes, and work more effectively externally. Lastly, he wanted to feel more confident and capable of taking on an executive director role if the opportunity presented itself.

At the end of their mentoring journey, we asked both of them to review the process and their subsequent reflections:

What were Colin's initial reflections on the partnership?

The journey of mentoring is one of growth and learning. It requires early trust and rapport between mentor and mentee for it to work. I've seen Mike grow in confidence, particularly in people management and values-based leadership. As we've progressed, I've noticed a shift towards seeking second opinions rather than being guided. It's been a privilege to witness him grow in his self-assurance in making decisions and leading change. When we began the mentoring partnership, I was still only six months into providing support of this having stood down from a full-time senior role. Mike was one of the first mentoring relationships I had formed in this new life I was building. So, I was still learning about the process, but I could not agree more with Mike's statement.

It might be obvious but the most important thing you have to have for this to work is early trust and rapport. If you don't get both, I'm not sure it works and I appreciate not everybody's going to have this same experience with the first person they are matched with, due to different personalities or communication styles.

Our mentoring partnership has been an experience of structured sessions with occasional check-ins, which I believe is essential for maintaining a flowing and supportive relationship. The journey may not always be easy, but the growth and learning that come with it are invaluable.

Mike mentioned that he found their conversations to be hugely helpful, especially when they talked about a specific board meeting he was presenting at. After two or three weeks, Colin followed up with an email to ask how the meeting went and if there was anything he could help with. Mike found this follow-up to be very beneficial, as it allowed him to reflect on his experience and get feedback. Colin has also scheduled catch-ups with Mike in the past to discuss work-related issues, which he found to be helpful. Mike appreciates being able to have unstructured conversations with Colin where he can share his thoughts and get feedback from a trusted colleague.

What were Mike's thoughts on being mentored by someone from a different sector?

I think it was really helpful in that it takes you away from the technical specifics of what you're doing into what the point is of what your difficulty with it is. I think Colin's world was probably close enough to mine that we had some common understanding and shared values and shared approach, but it wasn't the same so we didn't end up talking about the same experiences. It was more on a principles basis, which is much more useful, I think. Also, I think it's helpful having someone from a different sector and a different type of organisation, but one that's not diametrically opposed.

What were Colin's thoughts on mentoring someone from a different sector?

I resonate with Mike's thoughts on the matter. After retiring from my role as a full-time Chief Executive of a Local Authority, I transitioned into coaching and mentoring, which has been a fascinating experience. Being paired with someone from a different sector has allowed me to learn and listen more attentively. Whilst I might have a good understanding of the Civil Service and the stakeholders Mike encounters, his organisation is an arm's length body, so learning about the governance structure and industry has been enlightening.

I have also learned to refrain from offering my opinion and instead ask open-ended questions like, "What do you see as your options? Have you thought of this one?" This approach has worked well with Mike since my background doesn't apply to the same organisational model or professional discipline. Although mixing different backgrounds can sometimes pose challenges, it has been an excellent experience in this case.

I find that I gain a lot of value out of mentoring when I see that the person I'm working with is benefiting and making progress towards their goals. As mentioned before, trust and rapport are also key, and I have enjoyed working with Mike in this way. I have never felt the need to cancel a session or felt it was just a necessary transaction, as I find the motivational benefit of helping someone else to be powerful. If mentoring felt like a commercial transaction, it wouldn't be for me.

What progress does Mike feel he has made in terms of enhancing his leadership presence?

I believe that I have made a lot of progress in this. At the beginning of the mentoring process, I thought there was a technical solution for everything. However, I have learned to trust myself and my instincts and to view things from a values perspective. It's not about having all the answers all the time, but rather understanding my role and what I want to achieve. For instance, during the strike, I gathered my team and talked about the values we should uphold to avoid damaging the team's cohesion. This approach has given me more confidence in my decision-making, and I realised that there is no universal solution. It's all about understanding my role and how I want to do things. In addition to that, Colin helped me recognise that bringing my authentic self to my leadership position is a strength rather than a weakness. The process has helped me embrace authentic leadership rather than rely on a management process that hides who I am. At the start of the process, if you had asked me to highlight on a scale of 1-5 how confident I was in my strategic leadership capabilities, I would say 2.5. Now, I would say I am a solid 4. Similarly, in terms of confidence, I would say it has improved from 3 to 4.

Mike and Colin's reflections on cross-sector collaboration

When you are confident, you can collaborate more effectively because you don't feel the need to show your value-add in every interaction. You can stand back and facilitate, allowing other people to bring their expertise to the table, which is often more directly relevant to what you're collaborating on.

Mike believes that being confident is critical to collaboration, but it's also about recognising what your role is and that you do not have to be the technical expert in everything. You can recognise that expertise in other people and work collaboratively with them to achieve your goal.

In Colin's experience, when people talk about collaboration, they tend to think of working with external partners such as health providers, emergency services, and other external stakeholders. But in his experience in local government, a lot of the collaborative challenges were more internal, not just with peers at the same level, but with the executive cabinet (board equivalent) and other advisers who had a big say in shaping strategy. He had to think long and hard about when to become involved and when not to, when to allow other people to do programme or project management around change and wait for an outcome, and when to influence them quietly rather than directly.

Coordination of the mentoring programme

During the conversation, Mike mentioned that he and Colin were hosted by the mentoring coordinator in WIG's offices for their in-person mentoring meetings, which provided them with a sense of home rather than just a corporate office which may have felt transactional.

Mike appreciated having the option to choose from a variety of mentors at the start of the process. He found this choice helpful in finding someone he was more suited to and could talk to comfortably. Furthermore, he acknowledged that having a choice made him more invested in the process.

Mike also expressed how pleased he was with how the process was organised. He was impressed with how flexible the mentoring coordinator was in accommodating his schedule and allowing him to utilise WIG's office space for additional meetings. Mike even went as far as saying that "everything was perfect".

During the conversation, Mike stressed the importance of having face-to-face meetings for a longer-term relationship. He believed that meeting in person early on could change the dynamic and be really valuable. Mike acknowledged that this may not always be possible, especially if people are located in different areas. However, he still believed that

having an initial face-to-face meeting should be a priority.

Conclusion

Mike attributed his success in overcoming his challenges to the benefits he gained from opening up about his weaknesses. He trusted his mentor, Colin, from the start because of his openness and thoughtfulness. Colin's genuine desire to understand and help people in complex situations helped Mike become more comfortable discussing topics he would not usually share in a work environment.

This has helped Mike become more resilient and values-driven, which has made him a more effective leader for his team, especially during uncertain times. As a result, his team members feel more optimistic about the organisation, and Mike has become more successful in his role.