

What is it like to have a mentorship 10,000 miles apart?

Establishing a long-distance mentor/mentee relationship

A think piece by Beatrice Balfour and James Underwood

In this article, we talk about our experiences as mentor and mentee, and how we established a mentorship 10,000 miles apart. In our work, we discovered that contemporary technologies used carefully enabled us to develop and maintain a strong mentorship relationship. Intuitively, one may think that mentorship is something that requires an in person relationship. However, we have found that there are ways to construct a mentorship relationship when living in different continents through contemporary technologies. This mentoring relationship is also a way to conduct reflective research on the nature of leadership and of mentorship. In what follows, we are going to describe how we structured our relationship. We are going to divide this short article in two sections, one section is written from the “Mentee’s Perspective” - that is, Beatrice’s perspective. The second is written from the “Mentor’s Perspective” - that is, James’s perspective. We expect to publish further in coming months on this topic.

I. The Mentee’s Perspective

James and I met as colleagues at the University of Cambridge. We collaborated in a few events and kept in touch as colleagues. In early 2018, I started in a new position as a school Director. This was my first experience in leading a school. Leading a school can be challenging and I felt I needed a mentor outside of my work circle that could give me unbiased advices. James currently works as a Principal Lecturer at the University of Northampton, U.K., in the Faculty of Education and Humanities. Previously, he had been a school leader in the U.K. In September 2018, James and I decided to establish a mentorship relationship. James and I live 10,000 miles away as the school that I run is based in Berkeley, California.

Establishing a mentor/mentee relationship when living 10,000 miles away required us to be ingenious in the use of contemporary technologies. We used three different methods: an online text chat, a work diary, and video calls. These methods also enabled us to gather data for research on the nature of



leadership and mentorship. We will describe each one of these methods and their strengths. It is important to note that for us, these methods are integral and go hand-in-hand.

1. *Online Text Chat:*

For our chat, we use Facebook. This is a place where I ask questions to James that cannot wait until our monthly chat. These questions normally entail dilemmas or issues that come up in the day to day operations of the school and that I am unsure how to address. A large part of my role is to run the day to day operations of the school, and so to ensure that I take the right decisions in these day to day operations is very important. For example, sometimes I have to hold a meeting where I have to have a difficult conversation with a staff member. If I am unsure of how to have that conversation, I run it through with James on the online chat. The online chat is only for brief and simple questions that need immediate answers. I try to stick to no more than a question a day. James is quick at replying, and provides me with simple, short and clear answers. Overall, this chat makes me feel much more intentional and reflexive about the decisions I take on a day to day basis.

2. *Work Diary:*

Directing a school can bring up a lot of feelings for the Director. Often leaders are expected not to show feelings within the work context, but we still feel and have a lot of responsibilities to carry. The work diary is a place to let these feelings flow, a place where I can express them, and also a place to reflect upon some experiences at length. For example, in the diary, I might talk about the challenges I dealt with when addressing a certain issue in the school and how that made me feel; or I might talk about how inspirational a talk that I attended was and how I feel that it would and should inspire my work and my career. I created a word document that I shared with James. James occasionally reads this diary in the shared document, and comments on it. One of the advantages of this diary is that my big feelings are not carried into the chat and do not take over my everyday activities. However, by writing them in the diary, I still give these feelings a space and a time, which is limited to a few minutes a day (or every other day) when I write my diary. This also helps me to keep the chat short and the discussions on it brief and factual without overwhelming James with writing too much or continuously on the chat.



3. *Monthly Video Calls:*

The chat and diary are useful, but leaders in order to feel empowered also need to build a bigger vision. The monthly calls that James and I have are mainly occasions to construct and discuss that bigger vision. For example, we might talk about where I want to take the school in the next couple of years. Or, we might talk about what my career path is. Or, we might talk about the school staff and what I hope for their professional growth. These are wider, bigger and deeper conversations that are difficult to have on a chat, that require time and a proper back and forth extended dialogue. Therefore, we reserve these conversations for our monthly calls. These conversations are important as they inform and inspire my day to day operations, and the future of the school. Also, they make the mentor/mentee relationship 'real', and not just virtual. In this way, James' professional role involves being more than just a few words in a chat, but a person that I can see and hear. This contributes to strengthening our relationship and therefore our work.

II. The Mentor's Perspective

Our process of long-distance mentoring has been a fascinating professional experience. It has also been a way for both of us to engage in

reflective research on the process of mentoring. First, as Beatrice has written above, the need to find strategies to work at a distance has revealed an interesting combination of different methods of online communication. These are as follows: an experienced mentor providing advice regarding specific issues (online text chat); a reader to whom to express the stresses and challenges of leadership (online diary); an experienced peer with whom to converse with regarding long term strategies (online video conversation). Interestingly, each method we have devised is suitable for one of these roles, but would not be for the others. Each one of these methods also provide us with a record of written data that can be compared, and that we can use to create research about the nature of leadership.

Second, as a long-distance mentor, my only perception of Beatrice's context (school and community) is her accounts. Our conversations therefore exist within the paradigm of her subjective perception. We found this to be extremely positive and it led rapidly to building a rapport whereby conversations were deep and open very quickly. The pressure on leaders to work with multiple viewpoints is intense. Similarly, sensitivity to differing perceptions is a vital leadership skill. However, it is important



as a leader to be able to have conversations that are rich, critical and exploratory in order to make thoughtful decisions and to build a long term vision. There are many colleagues, locally based, that a school leader has, who will provide balance through multiple viewpoints. Having one mentor, however, who is focused solely on your perception, is an important addition that can help a school leader to be reflexive and to build resilience.

Distance for us is far from being an obstacle, instead through a careful use of modern technology, it has enabled us to establish a positive and strong relationship. A next stage in our mentor/mentee relationship will be using our understanding of long-distance mentoring to inform mentoring in a local context too.

