

Title: Working with and embracing difference

Jenni Jones is an Associate Professor in Coaching and Mentoring at the University of Wolverhampton Business School. She has worked in a variety of organisations leading, supporting and evaluating coaching and mentoring schemes. She is also a trained and qualified coach and mentor. Here she shares some reflections from her work within the private, public and not for profit sector.

Where did it all start?

I initially started my coaching and mentoring journey as a Youth Support worker supporting young offenders, when they were coming out of prison, towards getting a job. I remember reflecting initially in the training, and in my first few meetings, what could I possibly offer to these young people? I had a job. They didn't. I had a settled home life. They didn't. They had been to prison. I hadn't. But what I did have was energy and enthusiasm to help. It soon became clear that despite our clear differences, I could help. I could listen. I could care. I could offer practical advice about CVs and application forms. I could advise about the job market. I could help. In return, I learnt a huge amount about the challenges that young people face.

So, what did I learn? I learnt that coaching and mentoring is a two-way process; everybody learns.

Over the years, I have been involved in many coaching and mentoring activities aimed at developing confidence and opportunity for under-represented groups; a few that stand out, are introducing a mentoring programme for women (in 3 different UK Police forces), evaluating a leadership coaching programme aimed at under-represented groups (with a Law firm) and more recently mentoring and training (for a charity.)

More learning is gained from difference

I was invited to lead a pilot women-only mentoring programme for the Police and subsequently have worked with 3 different police forces. I did wonder, what could I possibly offer to these Police Officers? I had not worked in the Police. I had not worked with any uniformed professions. I was not part of their organisational culture. But what I did have was knowledge about what worked within mentoring. I knew that encouraging similarity in mentee-mentor pairing, did not create as much learning as matching by difference. So, we set about matching women in uniform with those that were not. This is unusual in the Police as the promotional routes tend to be within the two different strands; Officer and Staff roles. There was resistance at first but soon it became apparent that matching by difference, really did make a difference. So what was the impact? Wider learning was shared. Greater networks were established. It opened up new possibilities. As a result, more women were offered secondment opportunities and more women were promoted.

So, what did I learn? I learnt that this two way process has huge benefits for both parties; everybody gains.

We all have vulnerabilities

By chance I was at an IoD (Institute of Directors) West Midlands event on women leadership and I was approached to evaluate the learning from those being coached within a leadership programme aimed at under-represented groups, within a huge Law firm. I was not a Lawyer. I hadn't run the leadership programme. I was unfamiliar with the subcultures that prevailed. But what I did have was learning to share from previous coaching/mentoring activities, so I was happy to help. Through the evaluation, it became apparent that despite the structural inequalities in the workplace, the coaching support had created a better understanding of self, increased awareness of unconscious biases and

vulnerabilities, and ultimately created greater empathy towards others in the workplace. As a result, more employees from under-represented groups were supported towards career enhancing opportunities and were promoted.

So, what did I learn? I learnt that this two way process where everybody learns and gains, should be open to all.

We are all different but also the same

More recently, I've been involved in mentoring for a charity supporting migrant and refugee women moving to the UK to build their confidence, help them to find work and create an increased sense of belonging within their new communities. I had worked with charities before but I had not worked with migrants or refugees and asked myself, what could I possibly offer? They had come from another country. I was born in the UK. Their first language wasn't English. Mine was. There barriers to work, were not my barriers to work. But it soon become clear that despite our obvious differences, we are very much the same. We are women. We have similar challenges with work-life balance. We are ambitious. This has been a great opportunity for me to use my skills from all the other coaching and mentoring activities and programmes I have been involved with, to put them to good use for a higher purpose. In addition, I was also able to offer some additional mentor training for other mentors at this charity too. I have also supported other mentors mentees with their CV and application forms, with a 100% success rate on getting the job. This has led to me being asked to share some reflections for this magazine (Thanks Seda!).

So, what did I learn? I learnt that through this two way, learning relationship where everybody gains, it is a gift that keeps on giving. The learning I have gained whilst supporting the learning from others, has been immense.

Enriching different lives

Reading through my reflections here, I realise that putting myself in these various unfamiliar different organisations and working with such different people has developed my own confidence and skills to be a better coach, to be a better mentor but also to be a better person. My early reservations have been about questioning what I could offer to support people so different, and in such different environments to mine. However, this journey has reaffirmed to me that being curious, being supportive and being kind as a coach and/or mentor has enriched my own life, and hopefully along the way, others too.