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Where does mentoring come from?

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Where does mentoring come from

The term Mentor comes from Homer's *Odyssey*, where Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, impersonated an old man called Mentor to support both Odysseus and his son Telemachus on their journeys of self-discovery. (Mentor himself was quite useless.) In this and so many epic stories, the hero sets out on a journey – usually unplanned – and has adventures on the way. At some point they are joined by a mentor, who provides either protection (Athena had a cloak of invisibility, called an aegis, under which she hid Odysseus from his enemies) or engages in Socratic dialogue to help the hero draw lessons from his or her experiences. When the hero finally returns home, they are much wiser than when they left – they have experienced a learning journey. This pattern of events was found by Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero's Journey* (on which *Star Wars* was based) to be consistent across most of the sagas and epic tales he analysed.

At the beginning of the 18th century, a French cleric, Fenelon built on Homer's story with his book, *Telemachus*. This focused on Athena's support for Odysseus' son, Telemachus, as he searched for his father. Intended to convince the French king of the need to listen to wise counsellors, the book is essentially a series of dialogues helping Telemachus understand himself and learn how to be true to his core values and virtues. (The king didn't see it that way and Fenelon suffered as a result!)

Mentoring also has roots in the apprenticeship systems, codified in Europe by guilds, in which a young person served a master craftsman as they learned a trade. The essence of apprenticeships was not just acquiring a skill – it also involved maturing as a person. Other examples of this kind of close learning relationship include that between knight and squire (though the reality was probably a lot harsher than we might see it in retrospect).

The first use of the word mentor in anything like a modern sense was in the United States, in the early 1800s and a little later in Europe, apparently quite separately. The concept of mentoring only came into popular use in the 1970s, with the publication of Daniel Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life*. This was built upon in the early 1980s by a Boston academic, Kathy Kram, who studied a small number of informal mentoring relationships and identified common characteristics, or functions in what mentors did.

Formal mentoring programmes began to appear about this time, in both the US and Europe, with substantial differences between the two continents in what was expected within the mentoring relationship. In the US, the primary emphasis was placed on the protection role exemplified by Athena. Hence, the beneficiary of mentoring became known as a *protégé* (literally, someone, who is protected) and the essence of being a mentor lay in minding, or looking after. Giving advice was important, and early definitions of mentoring stemmed from Levinson's "overseeing the career of a young man". In Europe, influenced more by the writings of Fenelon, mentoring was (and still is) seen to be more of a learning dialogue, with the core function of a mentor being to stimulate the thinking of a *mentee* and hence based on Athena's role in helping the learner acquire wisdom.

These two philosophies of mentoring can be found in various forms around the world. Generally speaking, more individualistic cultures that place high value on personal power and achievement tend more towards the concept of mentor as protector (often called sponsorship mentoring) and cultures that value learning and dialogue tend towards what is usually called developmental mentoring. An important question in designing a mentoring programme or embarking on a mentoring relationship is “which of these two approaches is most relevant to the need?”

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