

PODCAST MINISERIES BY: RTC AND TDR GLOBAL LAC
**Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development and Strengthening
Health Research Networks**

EPISODE 2: STARTING A MENTORING PROCESS

Karen Linares (KL): Hello everyone. It's a pleasure to welcome you to this second episode of our podcast series, in which we try to explore some of the basic concepts related to mentoring as a tool to promote professional and institutional development and to strengthen research networks.

In the first episode, we talked about how mentors can inspire mentees with their experience, and foster skills such as leadership and critical thinking. This dynamic of circulating scientific-technical knowledge and soft skills allows the formation of new generations of researchers, capable of meeting the challenges of a scientific career.

Today, we will focus on some key issues to consider when starting a mentoring program. To start this episode, our guest and expert Antoinette Oglethorpe gives us some recommendations on how to get the most out of mentoring.

Antoinette Oglethorpe (AO): I think the key thing is being clear about what they want out of the mentoring relationship. Now, a lot of that will depend on whether they have chosen their mentor or whether they've been assigned a mentor, but in choosing a mentor, essentially, we're looking for somebody who has the experience that we're looking to gain.

So if, for example, my particular challenge at the moment was managing Generation Z something that's very kind of on the agenda at the moment, I might actually want to get a mentor who is Generation Z, because they have the experience of working through the dilemmas and might help me understand.

There's no point in me being mentored by another manager or leader who has even more years experience than me, because while they might be a very experienced leader or manager, they haven't got experience of managing Generation Z. So, I either want someone who has successfully managed Generation Z or who is Generation Z themselves.

And so having identified what it is that you're looking to gain that's how you can be clear with your mentor that this is what you want to focus on you want to get better in this contest. You want to develop your confidence in public speaking you want to build your network so that you raise your profile in your industry, whatever your specific development area is, I think it's about being really clear about that and then, you know, being proactive about when they come to meetings being prepared to share what progress they've made since they've last met what specific questions they have for this mentoring conversation what feedback they would like to get from the mentor and what experience they'd like to hear about so really being prepared.

KL: Taking into account what Antoniette has said, we see that mentoring is based on assertive communication and collaborative work. Remember that the mentor is not necessarily a boss, but rather an associate, a partner, a colleague with experience in the area we want to strengthen.

Therefore, it is very important that both parties are on the same page before the start of a mentoring relationship, so:

- Set clear goals from the beginning.
- Define each other's roles and expectations.
- Encourage ongoing feedback and
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the mentor-mentee relationship on a regular basis.

KL: Now, we will learn about two tools that Antoinette recommends in her *Mentoring for Success* workshop, to empower and guide mentees when they face problems that arise in their career development. When we need to address a problem, we can do so with a problem-focused approach or with a solution-focused approach. But what's the difference?

With a problem-focused approach, our attention is focused on the obstacles and limitations that cause it. We try to understand its complexity before looking for a solution. This approach is useful and widely used in scientific and analytical scenarios, where a rigorous understanding of the problem is necessary before implementing actions to achieve results.

On the other hand, when we focus on finding solutions, we're trying to create or develop a strategy to solve a problem. This requires us to project ourselves onto what we want to accomplish, and to seek a quick and effective way of getting it done. At this point, it is important to emphasize that neither approach is better or more correct than the other, but that their application occurs in different scenarios. The *Mentoring for Success* guide states: "For 'linear' problems, such as fixing a puncture on a bicycle, a broken leg or even an aeroplane, the problem focused approach works really well. Find the cause of the problem, fix that cause, and the problem goes away. But when working with people, teams or organisations, the problem focused approach is less effective. For example, when two people are having an argument, they're both really sure where the cause of the problem lies – it's with the other person! But, as we've seen time and time again, that doesn't help – it just makes the argument worse. In a complex, stuck situation, involving multiple interactions, the Solutions Focused approach opens up more possibilities – and can be a whole lot more fun!"

KL: This approach offers greater advantages for mentoring and career development, since these are processes in which the human factor plays a fundamental role. Its application will lead to a change in the mentee's mindset, making them active and dynamic in the search for solutions that will allow them to progress. This search involves changing habits that may be limiting, considering alternatives, and exploring new paths.

If you are a mentor, be sure to ask questions and observe, taking into account the mentee's strengths, skills, and positive attributes; this will increase the mentee's confidence in his or her abilities, and he or she will be able to make greater use of them.

A second concept for working with mentees is called the "circle of influence". Think of problems as a big circle and you are in the middle, inside the circle of influence. It represents the things we can control and solve with our skills and knowledge. We can expand our circle of influence by focusing our efforts on actions that contribute and have a positive impact.

If you are a mentee, before you worry, ask yourself "What depends on me?" Remember that focusing our attention on problems limits us, causes frustration, and makes it harder to move forward in our careers. Antoinette, in your experience as a mentor, what are some of the most common challenges you have faced in mentoring? And how do you best overcome them?

AO: So, I think one of the main challenges is about a mismatch of expectations. Sometimes mentees can think that they're going to their mentors, and their mentors are going to have all the answers and tell them what to do, and as we've just discussed, that isn't the way it is. So, mentees need to have a clear understanding of what mentoring is and that it's about putting them in the driving seat of their own development and making the decisions and taking action based on their own thoughts and ideas, but also the wisdom and experience that the mentor shares.

I think the other challenge that happens is to do with time, so mentoring is rarely on anybody's primary agenda, it is a development initiative and that means that it's over and above people's performance objectives and that means that both the mentor and the mentee need to be committed to making time for this because otherwise it just won't happen and if either of those parties isn't committed then it will fall down.

And then I think the third area is around communication and obviously mentoring is all about the relationship and the communication and that means adapting to different communication styles so a mentee might prefer a style that is a little gentler and a little more supportive. Some other mentees might like something a little bit more challenging and the mentor has to adapt their communication style based on what will get the best from that mentee and if that mismatch happens, then that can cause some tensions in that relationship.

KL: As we come to the end of this episode, we thank Antoinette for joining us and sharing her experience as a mentor. Before we say goodbye, a last message:

- For mentoring to be successful, the mentee needs to be a 'customer for change'. In other words, they must want something to be different and be prepared to do something about it.
- Look at strengths and build on them.
- Focus on what is going well (expand your circle of influence).
- Build on success. When you find something that works, do more of it!

In the next episode, we will go a little deeper into professional development using a solution-focused approach. Don't miss it, we look forward to seeing you.