

FEATURE

Ben Gunneberg MICFor, International Sustainability Adviser and Institute Council member, and Pherenice Worsley-Buck MICFor, Woodland Officer (London), Forestry Commission

THE POWER OF MENTORING



The role of mentors is to guide, act as a sounding board, provide challenge, support, encourage, act as a confidant and often open their networks to mentees. These relationships require mutual respect and trust, which can take time to develop, but once you find the right person, it brings numerous benefits to both mentor and mentee. Here, Ben Gunneberg, MICFor and Pherenice Worsley-Buck, MICFor share their experience from the Institute's Emerging Leader Programme mentoring module.



Pherenice:

I had the incredible opportunity to participate in the Institute's Emerging Leader Programme (ELP) last year with 35 other arboriculture and forestry professionals on a six-month programme designed to 'build leadership potential, strengthen networks, and drive social and organisational change'. We attended residentials, undertook online learning modules, Lumina Spark psychometric profiling, professional coaching, as well as working together on peer innovation challenges, all facilitated by Beth Goddard. The programme gave me that precious space to reflect and explore my leadership skills to gain greater self-awareness of my values, purpose, strengths, and areas of growth; it provided me with the knowledge, mindset, and tools to build effective partnerships to influence change in the areas in which I work.

A vital part of this programme was mentoring from an Institute member, and I struck gold by being partnered with Ben. He is very experienced in executive leadership, strategy and project development across Europe, Asia and Latin America. After reading his vast CV, I felt apprehensive ahead of our first meeting, as having contact with a CEO seemed very far removed from my day-to-day work.



Pherenice:

It helped by having a mentoring agreement and a structure identifying our expectations around what we both wanted to gain from the process. My main goal was overcoming my naturally introverted nature to confidently share ideas and present to larger groups of people, alongside expanding my professional network to find more urban foresters to connect with. Ben put me at ease straight away by sharing his failure stories when presentations didn't go well for him or when technology failed.



Ben:

Both parties (mentor and mentee) need to fully understand the parameters so we were lucky to have an initial contract which we referred to regularly to measure progress. A key marker was also an agreement by both sides on 'homework' for the next meeting, so it was not just a talking shop. This could be trying new approaches in situations that arise and exploring the learning points at future sessions. To get the best out of mentoring, both mentees and mentors should ideally undergo training to understand the processes and what is expected.



Ben:

I was delighted and yet a bit nervous when the Institute's Executive Director, Louise Simpson, asked me to act as a mentor for two mentees on the ELP. However, I need not have worried as the Institute provided excellent training materials for some 30+ mentors – both online learning at our own pace, and also some excellent workshops run by Peter Whitfield FICFor who has vast experience in mentoring. In general, mentoring is where someone, usually more senior career-wise and more experienced and knowledgeable, helps to guide individuals based on a mutual desire for professional and personal growth. The individual can often be a new entrant or someone transferring careers and the process is structured and often time-limited. There are advantages of mentors being independent of your employer/line manager as they often provide a more objective perspective on challenges and areas of focus.



Pherenice:

I really appreciated Ben's vulnerability at a human level, as well as his high energy, passion, new ways of thinking, and expertise in the sector. Being widowed in my 30s with two young children completely derailed my career as I switched to survival mode. The mentoring sessions really empowered me to take risks, helped me to align my values and goals, and gave me a stronger sense of purpose.



Pherenice:

Ben does challenge me, and I know he gets satisfaction when I have to stretch into those awkward, uncomfortable areas of growth that I have traditionally tried to avoid. That is how, upon completion of the ELP, I ended up flying to Washington DC to meet and network with 1,200 urban forestry professionals! It has been such a positive experience for both of us that we decided to continue with mentoring even though the programme had formally ended.



Ben:

Not every mentor/mentee relationship will work, for a variety of possible reasons – mismatched personalities, development needs that may not be in the mentor's skills and experience set, differing motivations, and time-commitment issues. Therefore, not everyone had the positive experiences which Pherenice and I are able to report on.

I am personally convinced that mentoring is key to enhancing the knowledge and skill sets of tree professionals across the sector, and believe no one is too experienced or knowledgeable not to benefit from mentoring. I still benefit from my mentors, even today. Members should be delighted that the Institute has set up a task and finish group to examine what other professional institutes are offering in terms of mentoring opportunities, and exploring options for further consideration.



“ If you do only one thing for self-improvement – the number one thing is to get yourself a mentor. ”

Robin Sharma, author

Credit: Art of Mentoring, 2018

