MENTORING

Mentoring is a relationship-based process between colleagues in similar professional roles. It typically involves an experienced individual (the mentor) who provides guidance to a person who is less experienced or new to a profession (the mentee). Mentoring differs from coaching in that it is broadly focused on overall professional development rather than attainment of specific skills.

Mentors have two primary functions:

- Career development—the mentor provides advice intended to enhance the mentee's professional performance and growth
- Psychosocial support—the mentor serves as a role model and support person within the organization or network in which both he or she and the mentee work (e.g., two teachers in a school or two technical assistance providers in the deaf-blind TA network)

Mentoring relationships exist on a continuum from formal to informal. *Formal mentoring* takes place within organizational structures and involves established processes designed to promote and maintain mentoring relationships. *Informal mentoring* typically evolves spontaneously as a result of professional or social interactions and is not managed by a larger organization.

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring has been shown to have many positive effects in a variety of professions and disciplines, including:

- Job satisfaction
- Retention of professionals within a field
- Leadership development
- Knowledge transfer
- Alignment of professional and organizational (or, in our case, network) goals
- Opportunities for reverse mentoring (e.g., mentees contribute new knowledge to their mentors, too)

Mentoring and Technical Assistance

State deaf-blind projects don't typically use mentoring as a direct technical assistance strategy. This is because relationships between TA providers and TA recipients in early intervention or educational settings are more formal than mentor–mentee relationships and also because TA relationships are not usually between people who have the same professional role. TA providers may, however, *facilitate* mentor–mentee relationships among their TA recipients—for example, between teachers of the visually impaired who work with students who are deaf-blind or between parents. In addition, in some state projects family specialists may serve as mentors to families.

Benefits of Mentoring Within the Deaf-Blind TA Network

For years, the deaf-blind TA network has consisted of a tight-knit group of professionals with long-standing relationships. This is a significant strength that has made us a cohesive community, but may also make it difficult to integrate and retain TA providers who have recently joined or assumed responsibility for state deaf-blind projects. Pairing new staff members with mentors can help them feel welcome, fit in, and be successful in their new positions.

Activities that mentors and mentees might engage in include:
- Developing a project's overall TA delivery system
- Project management and TA tracking, including reviewing processes and forms
- Discussing successful adult learning practices and strategies that promote educator engagement in professional development activities
- Developing relationships with TA recipients
- Getting involved in professional organizations or other activities within the broader special education and sensory impairment fields
- Exploring opportunities for career advancement

There may also be times when multiple people have the same needs and it makes sense to form mentoring groups around specific topics. Although mentoring is traditionally viewed as a one-to-one relationship, distance technology offers ways to create virtual communities where people can seek mentoring from multiple colleagues.

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