MaSatori

Mentoring Across Difference

How experience, authority and different ways of knowing shape what gets heard, learned and acted on

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Before The Mentoring Question

Even in diverse senior teams that span different generations, backgrounds, and areas of expertise, decision-making often relies on the same few dominant voices.

Leaders may invite challenge, yet organisations frequently revert back into familiar patterns.

Similarly, succession plans may be in place, but core judgement remains concentrated in a single trusted figure when high-stakes decisions arise.

These may look like leadership, inclusion, talent or communication problems, and often they are.

Increasingly though, my own reflections have been shifting towards wondering how do these different kinds of knowledge become integrated rather than merely present?

My current vantage point is professional business mentoring, although many of the relational and systemic dynamics explored here travel well beyond that context.

The question that first sent me into this inquiry (or rabbit hole as I like to view them) seemed fairly simple at first. I then explored the question further with the ABM Fellow Mentors community, whose generosity sharpened and challenged my thinking.

The question we explored was:

How can we be effective mentors across cultures and genders, generations and communication styles?

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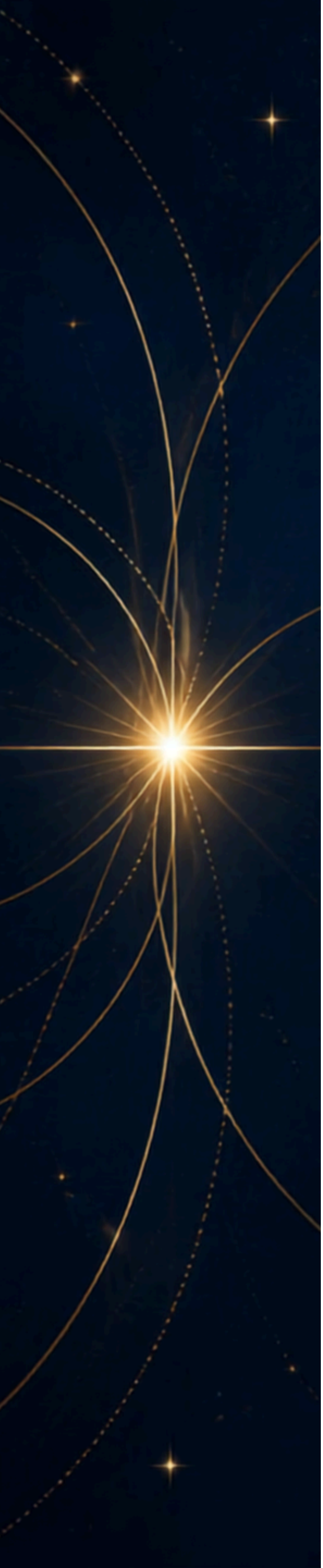

How can we be effective mentors across cultures and genders, generations and communication styles?

It is the sort of question that naturally sends us towards knowledge.

We can learn more about cultural norms, understand the conditions under which different generations enter working life, examine how gender and identity affect organisational experience, and become more flexible around communication preferences. We should do those things, particularly where our own understanding is thin.

The more I explored the question, however, the less convinced I became that effectiveness across difference could principally be solved by becoming more knowledgeable about it. I tried to imagine the vast and varied categories that are representative of our interconnected world.

And failed.

And if I could imagine gathering all the knowledge, what value would that bring to my work, how much knowledge is enough? More importantly, for me, what amount of knowledge about a group/culture/gender etc. would tell me who is sitting in front of me?

Knowledge alone cannot tell us what culture means to the person who lived in it, how gender has shaped their particular experience, whether generation is relevant to the situation they are describing, or what lies beneath an apparent communication preference.

It can't tell us what silence means between two people, whether challenge will feel respectful or threatening, or why a request for advice carries a meaning the mentor did not expect.

Most importantly, knowledge about categories cannot tell us what happens when the experience of one person meets the experience of another.

My emerging proposition is therefore that mentoring across difference is less about mastering categories and more about how we use our experience, authority and curiosity now we know our own knowledge map is incurably incomplete.

For the mentor, that is a question of professional practice. For the person being mentored, it is a question of whether the relationship helps them think more freely without requiring them to become more like the mentor.

The organisational implications matter too, and they begin here, in the quality of a developmental relationship in which two people are trying to make sense of something neither can see completely from the other's position.

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The Conversation

The mentor asks a question and waits. The silence is deliberate because they are resisting the temptation to fill the space, demonstrate expertise or rescue the other person from uncertainty. They believe the pause communicates confidence:

I trust you to think.

The person sitting opposite experiences something else. They are unsure whether the mentor expects a particular answer, so the silence feels less like trust than assessment. Perhaps authority has rarely gone quiet around them without consequence; perhaps respect, in their experience, is demonstrated through active guidance rather than restraint; perhaps the question itself sounded more personal than the mentor realised.

I need to be careful how I answer.

Eventually the client offers a cautious response. The mentor hears hesitation and wonders whether greater challenge is needed, while the client notices the mentor's expression and becomes more careful still. Nothing dramatic happens and the conversation remains entirely polite, yet both people leave with the sense that something nearly surfaced, and then didn't.

The mentor may conclude that the client was reluctant to engage, while the client decides that the mentor lacked interest, clarity or useful experience. Neither interpretation is wrong since each makes sense from the position in which it was formed.

This is where mentoring across difference often lives, not in obvious conflict but in the space between intention and experience. Silence could communicate reflection, respect, uncertainty, disagreement, status or withdrawal.

Directness might feel like refreshing clarity or unnecessary aggression. A personal question may come across as genuine care or a failure to respect boundaries, while frequent feedback creates security for one person and feels intrusive to another.

The behaviour has not changed, but its meaning has, because meaning is shaped by far more than individual preference.

Between any two people, a rich tapestry of complexity is co-created. Culture, gender, generation, class, profession, organisational position, language, neurotype, family history and previous encounters with authority.

Their individual history is present too, alongside something easier to overlook - their current state. The person sitting in front of us today may be more tired, anxious or distracted than the person we met a month ago, or they may arrive with more confidence and readiness than before.

Professional mentors are trained in managing their state in service of their clients and they must remain responsive to the presenting state of the human being who arrives in that moment.

This shifts the work from knowing about difference towards discovering what difference means here.

Knowledge prepares us to notice possibilities, this discovery requires us to remain interested in what those possibilities mean for this person, in this relationship, at this moment.

> "This is where mentoring across difference often lives: not in obvious conflict, but in the space between intention and experience."



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Categories and their limits



Categories are useful because human beings need ways to make sense of complexity. Culture can alert us to differences in how hierarchy, privacy, time, disagreement or collective responsibility are understood. Gender can help us notice that the same behaviour attracts different consequences depending on who displays it.

Generational context can illuminate the economic and social conditions under which people entered work, while communication frameworks remind us that directness, pace or visible participation do not carry universal meanings. These are valuable lenses, but the danger comes when the lens begins to substitute for the encounter.

Cultural knowledge, for example, can harden from a useful heuristic into a stereotype. A mentor who knows that a particular culture tends to place greater emphasis on hierarchy might interpret a client's caution as cultural deference, when that person is actually responding to uncertainty about confidentiality, the commissioning relationship or a previous experience in which candour carried a cost.

A younger employee asking for frequent feedback may be labelled dependent when they are working inside a system where expectations move quickly and feedback arrives only once something has gone wrong.

A woman who does not claim an achievement loudly may be read as lacking confidence when she has learned, in that environment, that visible self-promotion carries a different social cost for her than for some colleagues.

Someone described as an indirect communicator may genuinely prefer a more contextual, relational route to meaning. They may also have learned that direct disagreement is unsafe, be speaking in a second language, or simply need longer to decide what they think.

Visible differences can easily attract so much explanatory weight that we miss what is less obvious. The person's values, current circumstances, experience of power or professional identity may explain far more than the category we noticed first.

Awareness of difference is therefore most useful when it widens the possibilities we consider rather than narrowing the individual into the explanation we recognise. The category may contain useful information, but it does not contain the person.

That distinction becomes more important as our experience grows, because pattern recognition is one of the genuine gifts of experienced mentoring. We have heard many stories, we know that the presenting problem may be carrying something deeper, and we can sometimes sense a familiar dynamic before the other person has found language for it. That capacity is valuable right up to the point where recognition arrives before encounter.

The mentor might rely on a framework or tool to match the pattern they recognise rather than the person who is actually in front of them. As their practice evolves, they are faced with a growing and uncomfortable tension. They must develop enough confidence to bring what they know into the relationship, and enough humility to keep that knowledge provisional.

Surfacing this tension becomes key to the relationship and might sound something like: “This reminds me of something I have encountered before. Would it be useful if I shared what I am noticing, and you can help me understand where the comparison fits and where it doesn't?”

Experience is then offered as material for thought rather than proof that the mentor's interpretation is correct. It sounds like a small distinction, but it changes the distribution of authority in the conversation.

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What lives in us, between us and around us

Self

Our experience shapes what we notice and what feels like a competent response.

Directness may feel honest because it has served us well, silence can seem generous because it has created room for us to think, and visible emotion draws us closer or makes us instinctively create more distance.

None of these responses is neutral, even when it feels entirely natural. A client takes the long route into an issue, offering history, context and several details that seem, at first, to have nothing to do with anything. I notice impatience rising. It would be easy to decide they are circling a decision they would rather not face, and sometimes that is exactly right. It is also true that I like pace, and that arriving at the point is one of the things I feel good about being good at.

The impatience is telling me something. It is not always telling me about the client.

In another conversation, someone describes an experience of discrimination and I feel protective. That response comes from genuine empathy and ethical concern. It also creates an urge to rescue, to advise, to take hold of a decision that still belongs to them. The pull can be subtler still: admiration for a senior leader's certainty, or an immediate sense of affinity with someone whose background resembles my own, creates assumptions the relationship has not earned.

Self-awareness is not about treating every instinct with suspicion, and it certainly does not require the mentoring conversation to become an examination of the mentor. Its purpose is to notice what has entered the room with us so that we gain a little more space between reaction and action. Not everything we notice needs to become material for the client conversation.

Some of it belongs to our own reflection and may be processed more usefully in professional supervision.

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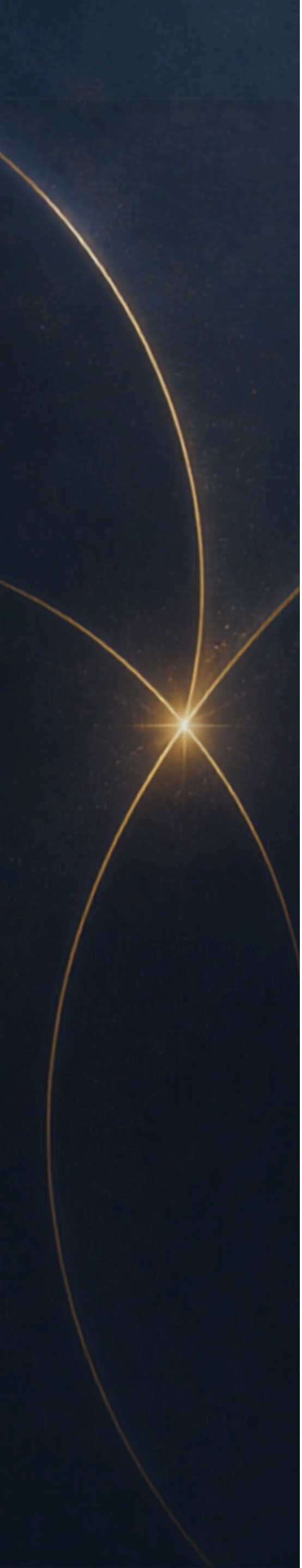

Others

Difference becomes more tangible in relationship.

We see it through pace, trust, humour, interruption, hesitation, challenge and what each person believes can be safely surfaced. The mentoring relationship is therefore not simply a channel through which developmental work passes, it is part of the work itself.

Let's return to the silence in the opening conversation. The relationship changes when the mentor stops privately deciding what the hesitation means and instead makes the experience discussable:

> "I'm aware that I've left quite a lot of space after my questions. I intend that as room for you to think, but I'm wondering how you are experiencing it."

The client may appreciate the space, want more active challenge or say that the relationship still feels evaluative because the organisation selected and funded the mentor. They may simply be searching for words, or deciding how much context can be understood without a long explanation.

What this approach helps to become possible is a relationship in which meaning does not have to travel in only one direction. We will misunderstand one another, use language that lands badly or move too quickly, and no amount of professional experience removes that risk.

The more important question is what happens when the misunderstanding becomes visible? Do we defend what we meant, or can we become interested in what was experienced?

This sounds more like:

> "I think I interpreted that through my own experience and moved too quickly. Can we go back?"

Repair is not evidence that the relationship has failed.

In fact, if done well, it becomes evidence that the relationship is strong enough to carry difference without either person having to hide it.

For someone being mentored, a relationship that invites challenge only in theory will eventually teach the client to accommodate the mentor, whereas a relationship that survives genuine disagreement creates something much more valuable.

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System

No mentoring conversation takes place outside a wider world.

Even in a private room, the organisation is present through the structures, histories and expectations that shape what the client has learned to notice, what they believe is possible and how much risk sits inside a particular choice.

A person may arrive wanting to become more influential, which involves a genuine developmental stretch towards clearer communication or a more deliberate use of authority. Influence, however, does not operate on a level field. Confidence is admired in one person and judged as aggression in another, while an accent, age, gender or style of expression affects whose contribution is treated as immediately credible and whose requires more explanation.

If mentoring sees only the individual, it can quickly become an exercise in helping people adapt more successfully to every condition around them.

Sometimes adaptation is exactly what the client needs, because people require agency within the world as it exists, not just an analysis of how the world ought to be. It is simply not always the whole story. An older employee is struggling with unfamiliar technology. They may genuinely need practice, support and a willingness to tolerate being a beginner again. They may also be working inside an organisation that decided some time ago that older employees are less interested or less capable, and has given them correspondingly less access to training and experimentation.

The personal learning edge does not make the systemic pattern disappear, just as the systemic pattern does not remove the individual's responsibility for what they choose to do next. Seeing all three layers helps us locate responsibility more accurately by asking what belongs to the individual, what has been created between people and what is being produced or reinforced by the environment around them.

More than one answer will usually be true.



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When Pattern Reaches The Team

Although the mentoring relationship remains the main unit of inquiry here, the same questions become visible at team level.

A senior team may contain people with genuinely different information and interpretations while status, history and confidence determine which perspectives actually carry weight. The team can look highly participative and still organise itself around a narrow source of authority.

This diversity of membership does not automatically create diversity of thought, and diversity of thought is of limited value if the relational patterns around a table prevent some forms of knowing from influencing what happens next.

A leader who repeatedly receives agreement may therefore need to ask more than whether people have been invited to contribute: whose disagreement is safe, whose uncertainty is tolerated, whose experience is treated as evidence and whose requires further proof?

The same Self, Others, System lens helps here without turning the mentoring inquiry into a theory of teams. A leader's relationship with authority lives partly in Self; patterns of challenge and deference emerge between people in Others; and the structures reinforcing those patterns sit within System.

The point is not that mentoring should solve all three levels, but that a mentor who can see only the individual will miss an important part of what the client is trying to navigate.

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When Experience Belongs to More Than One Generation

In many organisations, people whose working lives began before email became routine are now working alongside colleagues whose first professional years have unfolded in a world of hybrid work and generative AI. I use the multigenerational workplace as an extended pressure-test because it makes the relationship between experience, authority and emerging knowledge unusually visible.

Working lives have also extended, which means age diversity at work is not simply the result of younger generations arriving. The number of people aged 65 and over in employment has increased substantially over recent decades, creating workplaces in which people shaped by very different economic and social histories are increasingly likely to work alongside one another.[1]

Generational labels deserve caution because they are not psychological types, and the dates used to define them vary by source. For me, the conditions under which people enter work are far more interesting.

Some began their careers when information travelled largely through hierarchy and established relationships; others have rarely experienced a world in which information itself was scarce. Expectations of security, advancement and what employers and employees owe one another have also shifted considerably.

These histories do not determine individuals, but they do influence the meanings attached to apparently ordinary workplace language. Loyalty may mean staying through difficulty and protecting the institution, while another person hears the same word and wonders whether loyalty runs both ways.

Professionalism may mean restraint and separating personal concerns from work, while somebody else associates it with honesty and being able to speak openly about what affects performance. Feedback may be understood as formal and periodic, or as information that helps somebody adjust while there is still time to do so.

The same word can carry a different history, which is why generational descriptions are most useful when they open an inquiry rather than complete it. A younger worker may value stability and hierarchy; an older colleague may seek reinvention or technological experimentation. Career stage, culture, profession and personal history often explain considerably more than age.

For mentoring, the interesting question appears when age, experience and authority become entangled. The more experienced person may hold knowledge accumulated over decades while the person sitting opposite sees a technology, customer behaviour or social reality from much closer range. What appears to one as caution can look to the other like resistance, while enthusiasm is interpreted as insight or as insufficient understanding depending on who is speaking and who is listening.

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Caution May Contain History

Neither side holds the whole map, which is why a multigenerational mentoring relationship cannot safely rely on a simple model of wisdom flowing from the older or more senior person towards the younger one.

Experience itself is plural. OECD research suggests that age diversity creates potential rather than automatic advantage. Younger and older workers bring complementary knowledge and experience, but the benefits depend on whether they are able to work together, share knowledge and learn from one another.[2]

Where that does not happen, institutional memory stays locked inside people approaching retirement, while emerging technical or cultural insight stays with people who lack the standing to make it count.

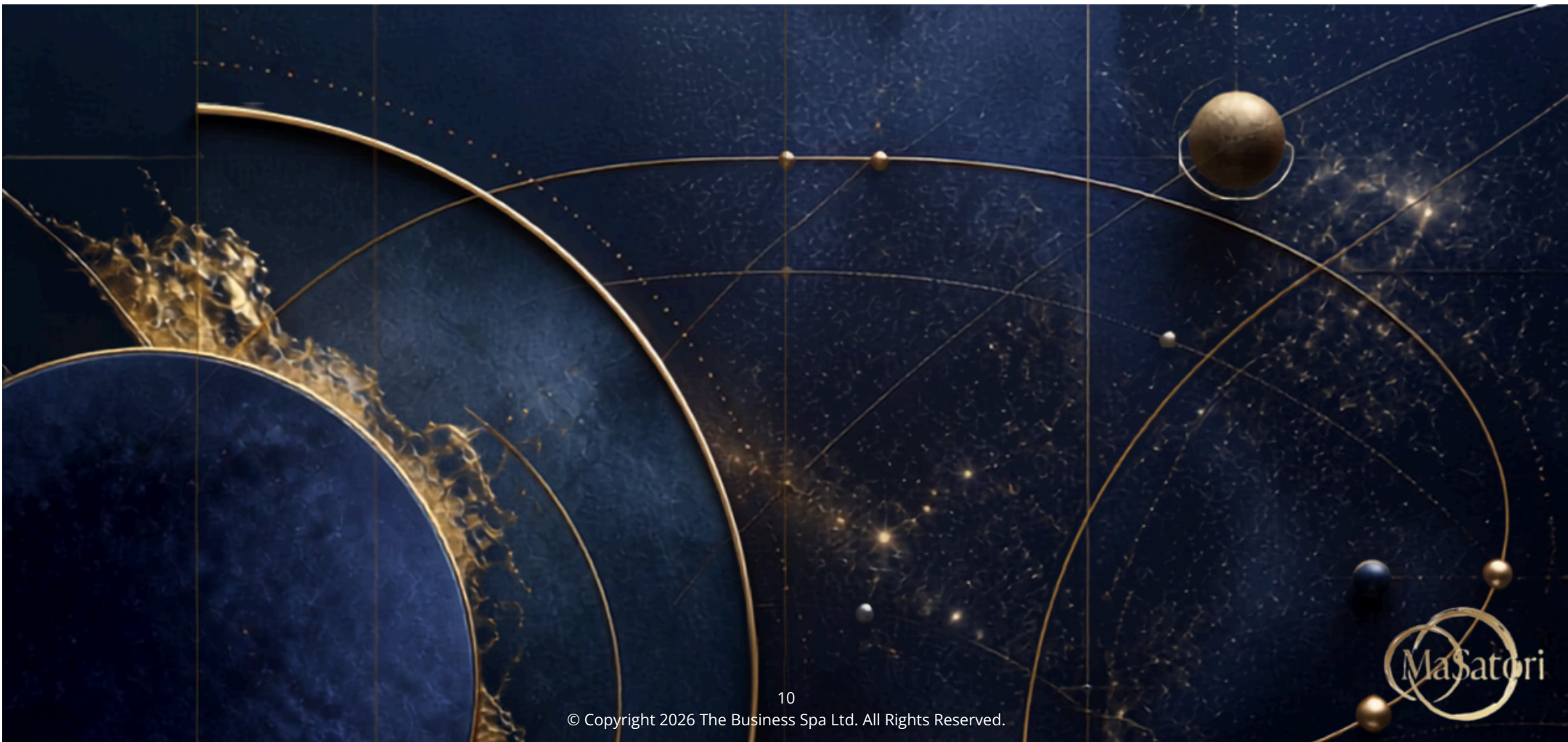
The organisation can look diverse while continuing to think through a narrow channel. Mentoring can provide one of the spaces in which different forms of knowing meet, but only if the relationship allows knowledge to travel in more than one direction.

Reciprocal and reverse mentoring are obvious examples, although neither removes power. A younger employee invited to challenge a senior leader still knows who controls resources, progression and reputation, which means they may be asked to speak candidly while carrying much of the risk created by their candour.

They may also find themselves burdened with representing an entire generation.

Reciprocal mentoring becomes extractive when senior people seek access to emerging perspectives without changing the conditions that keep those perspectives peripheral. A useful conversation followed by unchanged patterns teaches people that listening was symbolic.

Learning becomes credible when it leaves a trace.



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Power, Translation and the Right to be Understood

Professional mentoring creates unusual intimacy because people disclose doubts they do not voice elsewhere, and the collaborative, informal quality of the relationship makes it surprisingly easy to underestimate the power inside it.

The mentor may hold professional status, age, experience or perceived access to the sponsoring organisation, all of which give their interpretations weight. A question can alter how somebody understands themselves, while a strong challenge can be remembered long after the mentor has forgotten delivering it.

A client may hesitate to say that a comment felt stereotypical, or that the approach does not fit, because they assume the mentor knows best, or because they fear confirming a negative expectation about their culture, gender, age or identity by appearing resistant or disrespectful.

The mentor may sincerely say, “Please challenge me,” but it is the client who must decide whether that invitation is credible. Warmth and informality do not make power disappear; they change the way it is experienced, leaving the professional with a continuing responsibility to use it consciously and well.

This is why contracting cannot be treated as something completed during the opening meeting. The ABM Code requires mentors to ensure clients understand the terms of the mentoring agreement, including confidentiality, and to be transparent about methods and process. Its Core Competencies also emphasise healthy rapport within clear boundaries, permission to explore and the importance of feedback.[3][4]

Permission has to remain credible as the relationship develops, which means the client needs to be able to question the process, decline an inquiry, request a different form of challenge or say when something has landed badly. False openness damages trust more than honest authority.

> “False openness damages trust more than honest authority.”

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Power, Translation and the Right to be Understood

Power also shapes the burden of translation.

People who sit outside a dominant organisational norm are often required to explain their experience in language that those with greater power find reasonable, which can mean providing evidence, softening emotion or reassuring listeners of good intent before the problem itself has been fully accepted.

A mentoring conversation can unintentionally reproduce the same burden when the mentor asks the client to explain their culture, the expectations placed on their gender or what “people of their generation” want.

Curiosity may be genuine, but the client quickly becomes both participant and tutor.

They can speak from the specificity of their own experience, but they cannot be required to explain everyone presumed to share their identity.

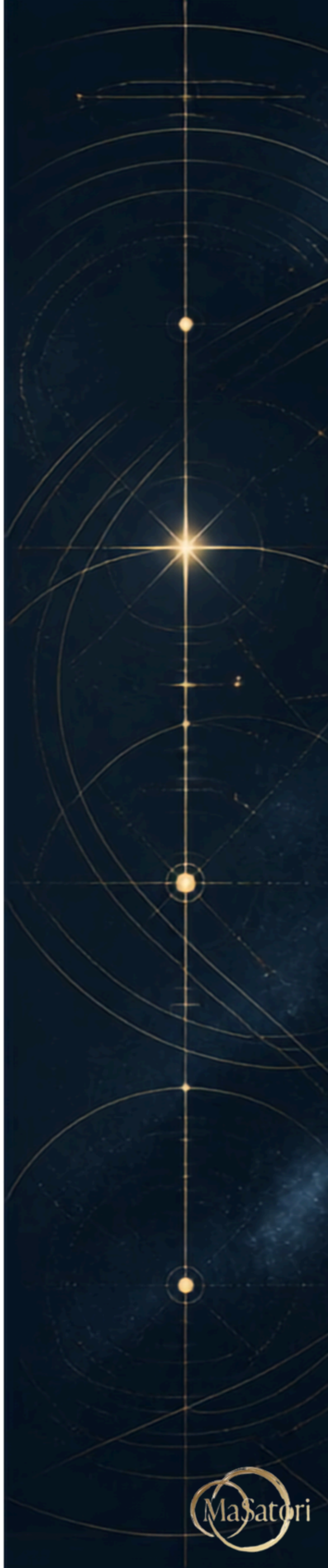
The mentor has responsibility for their own learning.

That does not mean becoming afraid to ask about difference, because thoughtful curiosity is often exactly what allows something important to become visible.

It means distinguishing curiosity from entitlement and remembering that the other person may choose to explain, redirect the inquiry or leave something private.

The Global Code of Ethics explicitly recognises that practitioners bring their own beliefs into relationships across difference, and describes ethical practice as requiring continuing self-awareness and lasting self-work.[5]

Becoming a more experienced mentor should not mean becoming more certain that we understand people.



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What should good mentoring produce?

A rich mentoring conversation can create powerful insight by helping somebody recognise an assumption, understand a pattern or see how their experience is shaping a choice.

These conversations feel deeply meaningful, but what happens afterwards matters at least as much as what happened in the room.

Private insight has value and not every realisation should produce immediate visible action.

People sometimes need time to understand an experience before deciding what it asks of them. Yet learning that repeatedly leaves relationships, choices and conditions untouched becomes a sophisticated form of stasis.

The client becomes increasingly articulate about the problem without becoming more able to act; a leader repeatedly explores their relationship with control while decisions continue to accumulate around them; or a mentor helps somebody become more resilient inside an environment that remains fundamentally unchanged.

The conversation may be excellent while the pattern lives on.

Mentoring reaches further when insight begins to travel. A senior leader recognises that the person they have been encouraging needs actual authority rather than another supportive conversation about confidence.

An experienced employee begins sharing the judgement behind decisions instead of simply documenting procedures.

Several apparently individual communication problems are eventually recognised as symptoms of unclear decision rights or competing objectives.

The trace may be modest: a different conversation, a changed decision or a clearer boundary. Its significance lies in the capacity it begins to release.

A mentoring relationship can be deeply supportive without making the mentor increasingly central, and professional standards are explicit that client independence, self-reliance and empowerment are intended outcomes of good practice.[3][5]

Good mentoring should strengthen the client's capacity to make sense of what they are facing and make increasingly sound judgements for themselves.

That does not mean development culminates in needing nobody, nor does a long mentoring relationship necessarily indicate dependence.

The relationship is not successful simply because the mentor has become indispensable.

Over time, the person should possess more range and greater confidence in their own judgement when the next unfamiliar problem arrives.

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If You Are Considering Working With A Mentor

Experience, qualifications, sector knowledge and approach all matter, but this inquiry suggests some less obvious questions may be useful too.

- Can I disagree with this person without damaging the relationship, and have they created enough safety for me to discover that in practice rather than merely promise it?
- Do they make their experience available in a way that expands my thinking, or does their interpretation quickly become the answer I am expected to adopt?
- Are they curious about my context without assuming that age, culture, gender, personality or any other framework tells them who I am?
- Over time, am I becoming more capable of making difficult judgements for myself, even when the situation is new and there is no obvious answer?

Good mentoring does not need to feel relentlessly comfortable. It may involve challenge, disagreement and uncertainty, including moments when something we would prefer not to see becomes difficult to avoid.

What it should not require is for the person being mentored to become smaller, more familiar or more like the mentor in order for the relationship to work.

> “Does experience expand the person's thinking or replace it?”



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Beyond the mentoring room

There is a limit to what a mentoring conversation can reach, and holding that limit honestly is part of the work rather than a failure of ambition. I am not anyone's line manager.

I cannot redesign an organisation on a client's behalf, and I should be wary of taking responsibility for a system I do not lead and will never have to live inside.

Even so, individual mentoring reveals patterns whose significance extends beyond the individual.

The recurring confidence issue may partly reflect a wider question about whose authority is recognised; repeated difficulty in delegating may expose that decisions are structured around one person; what first appears to be a communication problem may be reinforced by competing objectives, unclear roles or a culture in which candour carries uneven risk.

The mentor's role is not to turn every conversation into an organisational diagnosis. It is to help the client see enough of the terrain to make more intelligent choices about what belongs to them, what belongs between people and what may require attention elsewhere.

A leader can also adopt a mentoring orientation by using experience and inquiry in ways that increase the judgement and agency around them, although this is not the same as professional mentoring.

Leaders retain formal authority and responsibility for performance; internal mentors, peer mentors and external professionals each bring different possibilities and constraints.

No single developmental relationship can carry the whole load. Professional mentoring cannot indefinitely compensate for leaders who create dependence, while systemic change cannot be sustained if the people expected to inhabit it have not developed the capacity to respond differently.

The ambition does not need to be that mentoring fixes the organisation.

It is enough that good mentoring increases the quality of judgement that people carry back into it.

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The Work Returns To Us

It is easier to see this in somebody else.

The mentor who imposes their values, the leader whose experience has become a bottleneck, the organisation that treats systemic exclusion as an individual confidence problem. None of those is hard to spot.

Turning the same attention on our own practice is a different matter. I never set out to make anyone dependent on me. I have three kids who play those roles well enough. I do want to put all my knowledge, experience, training and thinking to greater use. This polarity requires me to maintain professional boundaries and be aware of the impact of the work.

We become influential precisely because we are attentive and experienced, because we recognise patterns and find language for things the other person has not yet been able to name. That is the work.

It is also where the trouble starts, because the question is never whether we are useful. It is what our usefulness produces over time.

Responsibility can become control, care can become rescue, and experience can harden into certainty. Support can also protect another person from the very struggle through which their own capability might develop.

A mentor who has worked hard to become culturally informed can become so confident in that knowledge that the person disappears inside a sophisticated interpretation, while somebody with a strong systemic orientation can see the wider pattern so quickly that the individual becomes almost incidental to it.

Expertise is not the problem. Our attachment to being the expert can be.

We all carry some internal story about what makes us valuable, whether that value comes from knowing, being dependable, seeing what others miss or offering challenge. Those identities are usually built through genuine contribution, yet they become constraining when we cannot imagine being valuable without continuing to enact them in the same way.

Development often begins where a valued identity meets its limit. That limit may first appear through another person who does not respond as expected, an intervention that no longer works or a conversation that generates elegant insight and almost no change.

The encounter interrupts the story of ourselves as capable helpers while also revealing the next edge of our own development.



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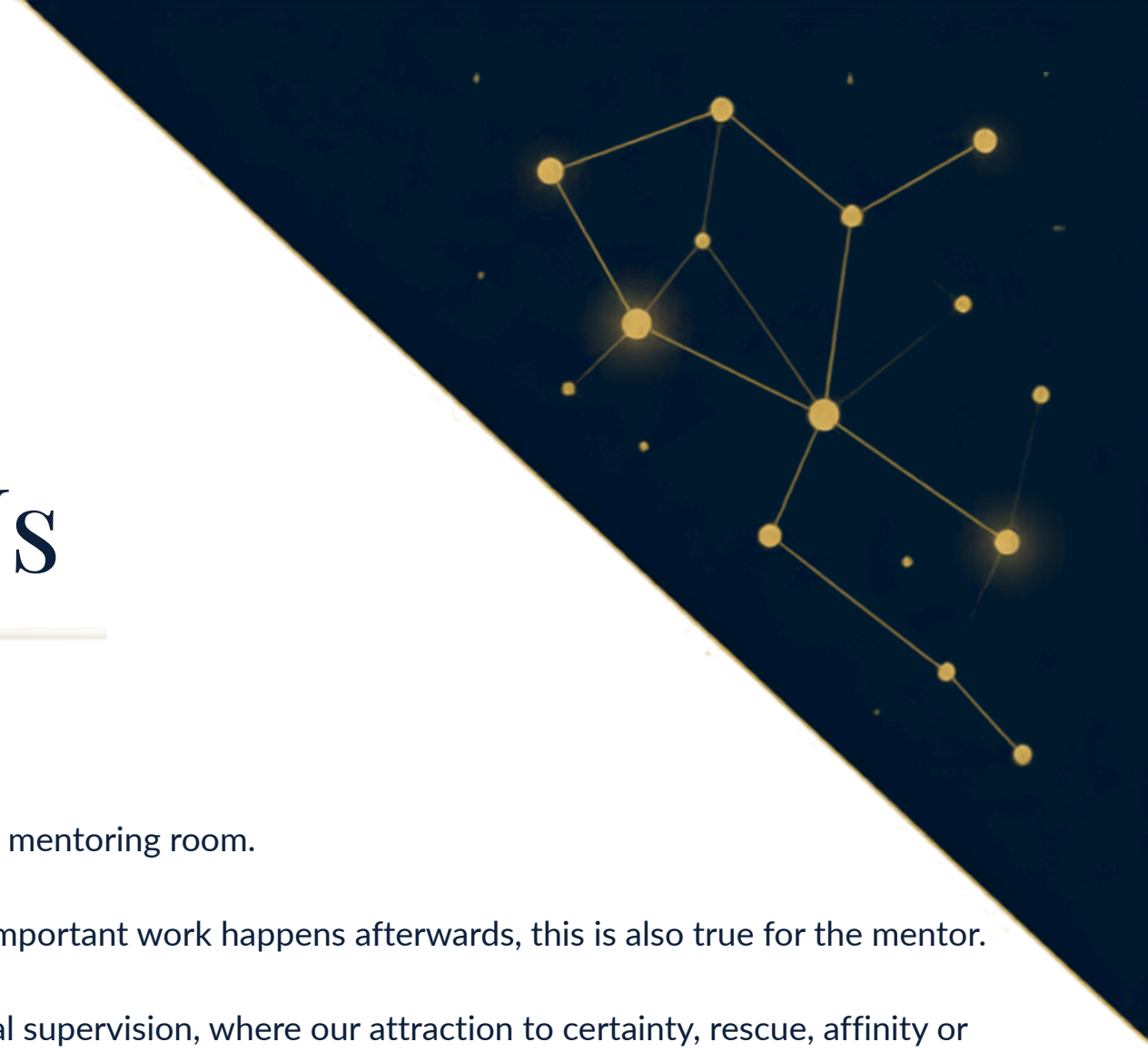

The Work Returns To Us

This level of reflection does not belong in the mentoring room.

Just as we hope for the client that the most important work happens afterwards, this is also true for the mentor.

Through deliberate reflection and professional supervision, where our attraction to certainty, rescue, affinity or irritation can be explored, our own developmental edge is made visible.

As with all good inquiries, this has opened up several questions for me:

- When does skilful adaptation to difference become another form of categorisation?

There is surely a point at which trying very hard to respond appropriately to someone's presumed culture or generation prevents us from meeting the person as they show up, in that moment.

- How do we distinguish productive discomfort from a mentoring relationship that is simply a poor fit?

Good mentoring is not synonymous with comfort, but challenge cannot become the explanation for every mismatch.

- How do we know whether a good conversation has become good mentoring?

Changed judgement may precede visible action by some time, and a satisfying conversation cannot be allowed to become its own evidence of impact.

- At what point does an apparently individual mentoring issue reveal work that belongs elsewhere?

The mentor still has to protect confidentiality and resist appropriating a system they do not lead.

These are not loose ends I am eager to close.

They are part of what keeps the inquiry alive, and they remind me that professional maturity may have less to do with finally possessing the right map than with becoming increasingly capable of noticing where any map has reached its edge.

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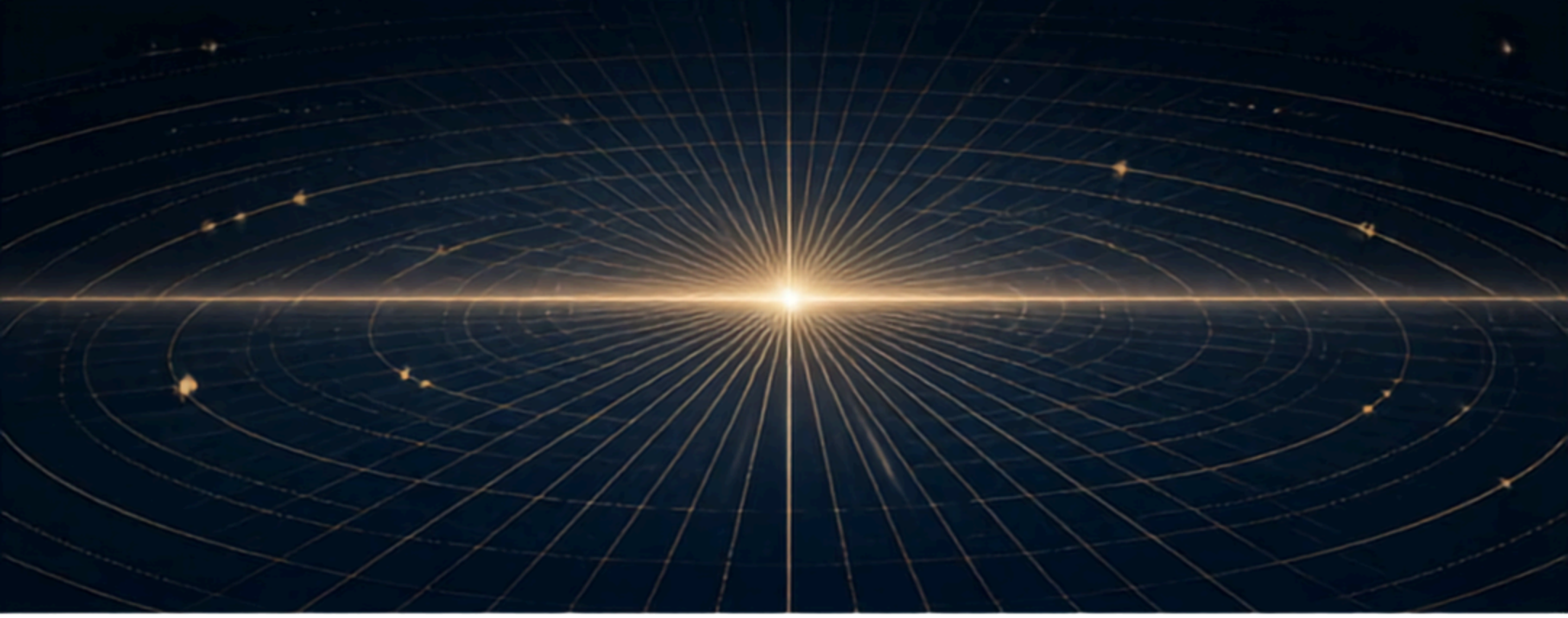

What Continues After Us

Mentoring carries a natural desire for our contribution to matter, and we want the work to bear traces of our judgement, care and experience.

Yet some of its deepest value is found in what no longer requires our presence.

A mentoring relationship ends and the person carries forward more than remembered advice. They have developed a stronger relationship with their own judgement, can recognise assumptions more readily and are better able to remain with uncertainty long enough to decide what it asks of them.

The mentor's voice may still be remembered, but it is no longer needed to authorise movement.

One person may hold greater experience of what has already happened; the other may see something closer to what is only beginning to emerge. The work is to create enough trust and curiosity for what one person knows to change what the other can see, allowing the future to become neither a replica of the past nor a rejection of it, but something formed through the meeting of what has been learned and what is still arriving.

Perhaps that is one of the deeper possibilities of mentoring across difference.

We do not need to erase the distance between our maps, nor pretend that greater expertise will eventually make either map complete.

What we need are relationships capable of making that incompleteness discussable, so that difference becomes less something to overcome and more one of the ways learning enters the room.

One thing seems clear to me. Neither of us can safely inherit the future alone.

And, if the learning travels far enough, it may become one of the ways the organisation learns too.

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About the author

Sharon Strickland-Clark is an ICF PCC executive coach, ILM Level 7 qualified executive coach and business mentor; an ABM Fellow and systemic team coaching senior practitioner.

Through MaSatori, she works with senior leaders and teams navigating complexity, change and cross-boundary collaboration, drawing particularly on systemic and vertical development, professional mentoring and organisational learning.

Her wider work explores how development lives in us, between us and around us, and how organisations can become better able to use the experience and difference they already contain.



The Celestial Blueprint

The visual language of this booklet draws on celestial navigation, the ancient art of calculating one's position using reference points across an uncharted expanse rather than following a static, rigid map. Just as early navigators used constellations to determine orientation without altering the stars themselves, effective mentoring across difference relies on curiosity, authority, and perspective to navigate complex human relationships where our own knowledge map is incurably incomplete. Celestial navigation reads stars in relation to one another; their usefulness comes from the patterns and reference points they create for the navigator.

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Evidence & Professional Grounding

Evidence

1. Office for National Statistics (ONS). Employment level 65+ People: 000s, Labour market statistics time series, Series LFK4. Accessed 20 August 2026. The series is used here to indicate the long-run trend in employment among people aged 65 and over; ONS currently advises caution with short-term Labour Force Survey comparisons.
2. OECD. Promoting an Age-Inclusive Workforce: Living, Learning and Earning Longer. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2020. DOI: 10.1787/59752153-en.

Professional Standards

1. Association of Business Mentors. ABM Code of Conduct, updated November 2025.
2. Association of Business Mentors. ABM's Core Competencies, Version 4, November 2025.
3. Global Code of Ethics for Coaches, Mentors and Supervisors. Version 4, updated December 2025.

Origins & Peer Dialogue

This inquiry was enhanced by the wisdom and generosity of the ABM Fellow Mentors community, where an earlier draft was discussed and challenged. Their collective reflections are being developed separately; the interpretations and propositions in this Field Note are my own.

I remain incredibly grateful for their contributions and their willingness to dive into the rabbit hole with me!

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