The lost art of conversation

In our March update we shared a graphic template of the Personal Development Plan that we hope will have given you some ideas about how you can use our resources flexibly, particularly when you are working with younger mentees.

This month we have some more graphic templates to help you get into a range of different conversation topics with your mentees. You will find these here on our Resource Page.

- **What am I like?**; this offers a framework for finding out more about your mentee.
- **Ladder to success**; a way of looking at what your mentee wants to do. Ask your mentee where they are now and get them to work out what the next step on the ladder will be.
- **Big things little things**; a way of exploring what gets in the way of taking action. Ask your mentee to write their goal in the big circle and then ask them to fill in the smaller circles with all the things that might get in their way. Then discuss with them how to stop the “little circles” getting in the way.

Why are we offering graphic templates?

We know people have different learning styles which means they want to take in information in different ways, so something visual may be helpful for your mentee. We covered that in a previous update. What I want to talk about this month might be called the lost art of conversation.

I sat on the train recently and watched a group of young people. They got on, full of end of the day chat, but very quickly settled down with their devices. They laughed as they shared things but were not really in conversation with each other at all. Employers tell me of the difficulties they have in persuading people to pick up the phone to resolve an issue, rather than sending an email. It is common to see couples in restaurants, both on phone, connecting to others not each other. At the same time, loneliness is being described as an epidemic. We want more human connection but what we do limits the possibility of making that connection.

Maybe we, as mentors, can do something here. How often does a young person today sit down with someone who is a stranger with the expectation that they will be in conversation for an hour? Not often, I suspect; this is, therefore, both an opportunity and potentially a challenge for mentors. It’s an opportunity because if we can help a young person feel more comfortable in face to face conversation then we are not only being effective mentors but we are helping them build a vital social skill; so that’s a double duty activity! It is a challenge because it may be an unfamiliar thing to do and, therefore, uncomfortable. How can we make it easier?

What does conversation require? It requires attention and that means listening. It also requires having something to say. Let’s think a bit more about these two dimensions. As those of you who have attended our mentor workshop will remember, **Listening** can be done badly and it can be done well.
Two things get in the way of listening - having your own stuff to say which stops you listening to your mentee and anxiety.

So pay attention to those two things before you begin; your role as a mentor is to hear what your mentee has to say and only share your own stories if they are requested.

Anxiety; that is work for you to do in advance. Ask yourself “What am I feeling anxious about?” Use your emotional intelligence to manage your emotions - what am I feeling and what do I need to do about it?

**Having something to say**

What strategies might be helpful when you find yourself struggling to keep the conversation going?

1. Mentoring is a conversation with a focus. As early as possible find some kind of focus for your first conversations e.g.
   - The goal for the mentoring relationship
   - Getting to know each other (don’t worry if you end up asking most of the questions including “What would you like to know about me?”) Think about the question you might like someone to ask you
   - Understanding more about mentoring
2. Be observant and be curious, pick upon anything at all which might give you a starting point for the conversation; it might be a football sticker on a bag, something you noticed as you came into the room.
3. It might help you to have background information about the school/college, so, for example, you know what is going on at Key Stage 4; that’s the 14-16 age group, so you can ask informed questions.
4. Use one of the graphic templates - ask your mentee to complete it and then talk about it - you are just looking for ways to help them begin to tell them your story.
5. Have a relevant story ready to share; by relevant I mean something that your mentee might be able to identify with.

That’s all for this month.

Thank you for your continuing support and to the Prince’s Trust for allowing us to use their templates.