

ADVICE FROM ABOVE

THE MRS HAS LAUNCHED ITS MENTORING SCHEME, WHICH PAIRS MEMBERS WITH MORE SENIOR MENTORS TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE WORK AND CAREER ISSUES.

JANE SIMMS REPORTS

“Getting free impartial advice and coaching from someone in the industry who you can learn from and be inspired by – what’s not to like?” That’s not the blurb on the MRS website about its new mentoring scheme, but the response of a mentee when asked why they got involved. Another said: “I was going through a really tumultuous time at work and needing guidance, when an email about the scheme popped into my inbox. It looked too good to be true, and I looked for the catch – but it’s proved to be the light at the end of the tunnel for me.”

The scheme matches

members – who are looking for support and advice with their work, career and even work-life balance – with experienced senior professionals in the research sector who can help them to grow professionally and personally. It’s open to all MRS members as a free membership benefit, and mentees are paired up with a certified member or fellow whose experience best meets their requirements.

Mentors offer neutral and objective support, and mentees work with them, in confidence, over a period of six to

12 months. But the benefits don’t just flow in one direction.

People typically become mentors in order to ‘give something back’ to the profession. They don’t get paid, but they gain more from the relationship than the satisfaction of seeing their mentees progress and flourish, as Helen Clark, director of research agency Waves, explains: “I’ve been running my own [small] agency for 10 years, so mentoring people in other parts of the industry stops me being insular and keeps me on my toes.

“I have 25 years’ experience on both the agency and client side, but my mentees ask me questions that challenge my own thinking. However experienced we are, we don’t know it all.”

Indeed, another mentor, Keith Bates – who has followed a similar career path and now runs his own small company, Routes to Growth – believes “it’s really important that mentors don’t automatically assume that the way they’ve done things is the right way for this particular person in this particular situation”. He admits he’s been “pleasantly surprised” at just how much he’s learned from the relationship with his mentee.

There have been surprises on the mentees’ part, too. Laura Morris, a director of market research agency Trinity McQueen, says: “I initially wondered if it might be seen as a backward step – that maybe mentoring is for more junior people. But I quickly realised how valuable it can be for people at any age – anyone, at any level, can learn and develop.”

At the point she applied to be a mentee, Morris was starting to think about her career progression and long-term future, and what steps she could take to prepare her for that.

Mentoring can help people at the start of their careers too, as Matthew Langin, research coordinator at education and employer marketing business SMRS, discovered. One

thing that the scheme has revealed to him is that his stereotypical view of a research person as “introverted and difficult to talk to” was flawed. “I was concerned, because I knew I didn’t fit that mould – but when I met my mentor, I realised she didn’t either, which gave me confidence to be who I was,” Langin says.

The MRS helps both parties establish clear rules of engagement, including how often to meet and what the mentee wants to achieve.

“My mentor and I agreed that monthly meetings were too much, mainly because I wanted time to reflect on – and put into practice – what we discussed in one session before moving to the next,” says Morris. So the pair meet every six to eight weeks, which is typical, for between one and half and two hours. They talk over coffee, while others meet for lunch.

The mentees typically prepare an agenda and, afterwards, write up the session, including any action points that are agreed. “It isn’t just about having a nice little chat,” says Clark, adding that the mentee has to “take ownership” of the relationship.

Critically, both sides have to understand that the role of a mentor is not to tell mentees what to do, but to help them work it out for themselves.

“I’m a facilitator,” says Clark. “However, I often find that the individual has worked it out for themselves before I say anything – simply ‘verbalising’ the issue in a safe environment can be beneficial in itself.”

Bates agrees. “The answer is often in the question the individual asks,” he says. However, while non-judgemental listening is very important, “you need to gently challenge too”, he adds.

It’s this challenge that Morris has found particularly helpful. “You can operate in a bubble in your agency, so having someone external ask questions such as ‘Why do you spend so much time on this aspect?’ or ‘How is that helpful?’ really makes you look at what you do.”

Being a mentor is not for everyone; Clark believes that people who don’t have a natural ‘facilitating’ style might find it difficult, and Bates admits: “You do have to bite your tongue sometimes. It would be very easy to jump in with ‘solutions’ – especially if that’s what the mentee is looking for.”

Langin was looking for help because he had just landed his first job in a small insight team when his two managers left, leaving him with a heavy workload, little guidance, big stakeholder personalities to manage and skills gaps that he knew he needed to plug.

Over the past six months his mentor has helped him build his quantitative analytical skills, reassured him that he is asking the right questions in research, advised him on how to manage his stakeholders more effectively, and gently suggested that he should be looking for a promotion by the end of the year. “As a result I feel much more confident and I think people in the agency respect me more,” he says.

Morris believes her mentor has not only helped her focus her thinking about her future career – “I might have drifted otherwise” – but has also prompted her to shift the balance of her activity towards spending more time “at the coalface with clients – so, perhaps, building my own profile as well as that of the agency as a whole”.

Mentors and mentees are overwhelmingly positive about the scheme. Mentees are mindful that their mentor’s time is precious, and only ask for advice between face-to-face sessions when it’s absolutely necessary – and then usually by email. The only potential limitation from the mentees’ perspective is the time constraint; they find mentoring so valuable that they would like the relationship to continue – but, for now, they couldn’t be happier.

“To be honest, the scheme has exceeded my expectations,” says Langin. ■