

When support needs to shift



A set of prompts to help mentors notice when mentoring support needs to pause, shift or be supplemented by other forms of support.

Part of the AUSMASA Trainer and Assessor VET Career Framework

Across consultations, mentors described feeling unsure when support conversations became heavier over time. This tool addresses boundary and emotional load risks by helping mentors recognise when mentoring alone is no longer the right support and how to respond professionally without withdrawing care.

Who the tool is for

Mentors, buddies and organisations supporting mentoring roles.

When to use the tool

Use this tool when mentoring conversations begin to feel heavy, boundaries blur, or issues arise that sit outside the mentoring role.

How to use the tool

Use the prompts to pause, reflect, and name the situation respectfully. The tool supports professional boundary-setting and referral without withdrawing care or unnecessarily escalating.

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1. Early signals to pause and reflect

Mentors should pause and reflect if they notice patterns such as:

- conversations repeatedly centred on distress, exhaustion, or overwhelm
- disclosures that sit beyond role-related or professional scope
- increasing reliance on the mentoring relationship for emotional support
- a sense that the mentor is carrying responsibility, rather than supporting sense-making.

2. Reflective pause

Before responding, mentors can ask themselves:

- Am I supporting understanding, or trying to resolve the situation myself?
- Is this something I can help think through, or does it need wider support?
- What responsibility sits with me, and what does not?

These questions help prevent the gradual slide into the "accidental counsellor" role identified across consultations.

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3. Language for naming the shift

Mentors can use simple, respectful language to acknowledge the moment without escalating unnecessarily. Example prompts:

- "This sounds really heavy, and I want to make sure you're properly supported."
- "Some of this feels bigger than what mentoring alone can hold."
- "I can listen and help you think things through, and it might also help to bring in other support."

The aim is to normalise support-seeking, not to withdraw care.

4. Encouraging next steps

When support needs to shift, the mentor's role is to:

- acknowledge the issue
- encourage appropriate support pathways
- step back from problem-solving while staying respectful

Prompt questions

- "Who else in the organisation is set up to support this?"
- "What support options feel safest or most useful right now?"
- "How can we make that next step easier?"

Clear referral and escalation pathways protect trainers' well-being and improve outcomes, particularly in male-dominated and trade-based contexts where emotional labour is often unspoken.

5. Organisational responsibility

Mentors can only refer confidently when pathways are visible and trusted. Organisations play a critical role by:

- making referral pathways clear and accessible
- ensuring support staff understand training and trade contexts
- reinforcing that referral is professional practice, not failure of care

This tool works best when used alongside organisational guidance.

Learn more about the Trainer and Assessor VET Career Framework

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