



Strengthening mentoring through continuous improvement

How a regional RTO revised its model to build trust, capability and confidence

Focus

Exploring how a small regional Registered Training Organisation (RTO) improved its mentoring approach after recognising that new educators needed more than operational support. This case study highlights the importance of trust, role clarity, mentor preparation, and structured conversations in supporting new educators in developing confidence in their teaching practice.

Scenario

Action Training is a small RTO based in rural Queensland, delivering apprenticeship training in the mining and automotive sectors. The organisation employed five new educators this year, all with strong industry backgrounds but varying levels of teaching and assessment experience. All new educators were employed on sessional contracts while still working in the industry. They were all keen to maintain their roles in a competitive, regional RTO learning environment.

To support educator capability and meet compliance expectations, Action Training introduced a mentoring program. The program's intention was to provide guidance, strengthen teaching practice, and support new automotive and mining educators in navigating the challenges of training cohorts with diverse experience and needs.

It was decided that operational managers, some of whom had not taught for a long time, would be assigned as mentors in the new program. The managers would indicate when they had time for mentoring sessions, depending on the operational needs of their roles. In addition it was decided that no induction for mentors was necessary as all managers were experienced with a variety of staff under their care.

The challenges

The mentoring program appeared to be running smoothly, though in reality, the mentoring sessions were held monthly at best due to ongoing interruptions for the managers.

As time progressed, several underlying issues emerged. New mining and automotive educators were reluctant to openly discuss gaps in their teaching practice, particularly in areas such as learner engagement and unit documentation requirements. Concerned about job security, they often presented as confident and capable, even when they were in fact struggling with their classes and the expectations of them in their new roles. They saw the managers as their bosses, which they were, and as a result, they were guarded about what they shared.



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During this time, mentors, who were also busy managers, assumed that the absence of reported issues meant that everything was progressing well. Mentoring conversations tended to focus on operational updates rather than reflective and shared dialogue about teaching practice. This dual role created a power dynamic that limited honest communication. A number of managers reported that they were time-poor and felt ill-equipped to run the type of conversations they believed were warranted. Operational issues such as completing rolls and recording assessment results became the norm in the mentoring sessions.

As a result, important development needs remained largely hidden. Some new automotive and mining educators were informally "getting by," relying on past learning materials or seeking snippets of ideas from other educators, rather than developing strong, sustainable teaching practices of their own.

Continuous improvement in the mentoring program

Recognising inconsistencies in training quality and feedback from apprentices and new educators, Action Training reviewed its mentoring approach after the first semester. At this point, an educational consultant was invited to work with Action Training.

The following changes were made:

- The mentoring roles were re-allocated to three experienced educators who volunteered for the positions as part of their annual professional learning with a weekly time allocation.
- Professional learning sessions were organised for the mentors and run over a 2-day period. In these sessions, the purpose of mentoring sessions was clarified, and the mentors had the opportunity to practice their approach and mentoring conversations with each other before interacting with their mentees
- Mentoring guidelines were provided for the mentors, explaining how to facilitate reflective conversations. The resource contained lots of conversation starters and active listening tools
- A focus of the mentoring sessions shifted to conversations around challenges, possible approaches, confidence and areas for growth in teaching practice
- Action Training also provided a monthly meeting for all new educators online, to increase peer support and informal sharing. This proved to be extremely popular, and there is a future plan to develop this into a more formal approach where new teaching strategies are taught and shared.



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Outcomes of the revised program

Over time, new educators began to engage more openly in mentoring conversations with their new mentors. They reported feeling more supported and less concerned about admitting what they did not know. Mentors developed a deeper understanding of the real challenges new educators were facing, particularly in translating industry expertise into effective teaching practice.

Action Training observed improvements in:

- Educator confidence
- Student engagement in classes
- Inclusion approaches
- Collaboration between staff
- Varied learner experiences in both practical and theoretical sessions
- Educator connectivity.

Importantly, the mentoring program evolved into a more authentic and trusted process that supported both capability development and workplace wellbeing.



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Questions for reflection – Action Learning mentoring program

1. What were the key factors in the original mentoring model that limited its effectiveness?
2. How did these initial factors impact both new automotive and mining educators and managers?
3. How did the change from manager-mentors to experienced educator-mentors influence the quality and honesty of mentoring conversations?
4. Which elements of the revised mentoring program (e.g. training, structured conversations, time allocation, peer support) do you think had the greatest impact, and why?
5. In what ways did improving mentoring practices contribute to both educator wellbeing and organisational outcomes at Action Training?
6. What future Action Training plans sound most interesting?
7. What lessons from this case study could you apply in your own context to strengthen mentoring, particularly in building trust, consistency and reflective practice?

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