



Mentoring and coaching are two words that come up at many mining industry forums. Many mining companies have mentoring and coaching programmes. The Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) encourages candidate engineers to seek out a mentor, and the SAIMM has had mentoring and coaching programmes in the past. What is a mentor? An experienced and trusted advisor is the definition. What is a coach? A private tutor is the definition. While many people will regard the two as being one and the same, they clearly are not and, more importantly, both are vital.

When do we need an advisor? When we have limitations in experience or knowledge and thus need to seek advice. The advice will generally be broad in nature. A good example within a mining industry context would be a young graduate approaching a senior and experienced colleague and asking them for advice around possible career paths in mining. A good mentor will first point out the options, such as production, projects, research and development, technical consulting, and management. Secondly, they will explain what each option entails – the type of work involved, the qualifications needed, and prior experience required. Finally, they will highlight different career path choices together with the personal attributes required.

When it comes to career progression and opportunities arising for promotion, I am sure that most of us have come across the question, 'have you ticked all the boxes?' Without a good mentor you will not know what all the boxes are, nor will you know what combination of boxes you need for the different career paths. I realized early on in my career that I needed broad experience in terms of commodities, unit processes, and work types. And to this day I have not stopped broadening my experience. My advice will always be to gain broad experience, regardless of which career path you choose within the mining industry.

When do we need a coach? When we need to increase our knowledge in a specific area because our work responsibilities require more knowledge than we currently have. This generally entails finding an expert in the specific area. It is often perceived that expert knowledge can be obtained only from someone who is an academic. Although in many instances this is true, expertise is often linked to extensive experience and knowledge, without an academic background. I remember distinctly as a young graduate looking to the more senior individuals for their expertise. And I did not seek out the managers – they were my mentors, not my coaches. I sought senior foremen and consultants as my coaches. They taught me the 'tricks of the trade' that no textbook or lecturer would be able to reveal. Your tertiary qualification will provide your theoretical background, but you will have to seek out your practical knowledge and experience, and this is where the combination of mentors and coaches is a critical success factor.

I would like to end with a good example which has always stuck in my memory. Some years ago I visited a platinum concentrator and the plant manager was my host. One would assume that a plant manager would have sufficient knowledge and experience of flotation, given that it is one of the major unit processes in a platinum concentrator. But as we walked through the plant and went past the flotation cells he asked me, 'as a matter of interest why are there different sizes of bubbles and why are some bubbles dark and others light?' Those of you with a knowledge of flotation will be as astonished as I was as to how this individual became a plant manager! He clearly lacked coaching, and probably mentoring too. So my conclusion is do not underestimate the value of mentoring and coaching, and also appreciate that they are different and both are vital.

This is my last President's Corner, since my term as SAIMM President has come to an end. The last 12 months have flown by, but they were busy. I am pleased to say that despite all the current turmoil in the mining industry, the Institute continues to flourish. Our membership grew by 10 per cent and around 2500 delegates attended our conferences over the last financial year. We are also about to establish a new branch in the Northern Cape. This all confirms that the mining industry regards the SAIMM as an important stakeholder and thus continues to support us. I would like to thank the SAIMM administration team for their fantastic support and hard work. I would also like to thank the office bearers, Council members, and all committee members for their invaluable contributions. It has been an honour to serve the Institute as President, and I have every confidence that the Institute will continue to grow and to serve its members optimally.

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