MENTORS WITHIN THE ADVOCACY TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Introduction

As a result of the recent Review into Veterans’ Advocacy undertaken by the late Brig. Rolfe AO (Ret’d.), a working party was formed from ESO, TIP and DVA nominations to progress the development and implementation of a veterans’ advocacy training model. The outcome of this working party was the development and implementation of an Advocacy Training and Development Programme (ATDP).

‘The vision of the Advocacy Training & Development Programme is to train and develop selected practitioners to provide high quality advocacy services to current and former ADF members and their dependants, where advocacy services cover rehabilitation, compensation, appeals and welfare.’

A vital factor in the success of the ATDP will be the mentors who are selected at the regional level to assist with the training and ongoing development of welfare and compensation officers and advocates (practitioners).

Why have mentors?

It is a fact that formal classroom teaching, or e-learning, give only about 20% of the knowledge effective practitioners need.

The rest of the skills necessary for effective practice have to be gained outside the classroom; through experience and on-the-job learning.

Whether they are just out of training, or experienced campaigners, a good practitioner never truly stops learning. The environment in which they work evolves continuously over time.

Practitioners need someone who can guide and encourage them through this ongoing developmental process. That someone is their mentor.

The mentor is there to ensure that practitioners develop and maintain the knowledge and skills required to effectively meet their client’s needs.

What is ‘Mentoring’?

‘Mentoring’ is a training system under which a senior or more experienced practitioner (the mentor) is assigned to act as an advisor, counsellor, or guide to a more junior practitioner. The mentor is responsible for providing support to, and feedback on, the individual in his or her charge. It is a relationship between two individuals based on a mutual desire for development towards goals and objectives to achieve the best possible outcomes for client’s needs.
Where will the ADTP mentors come from?

There are many talented and experienced practitioners already in the ‘system’ who would be ideal mentors.

Mentoring is a very responsible job: one which is both challenging yet very rewarding. It is expected that ESOs or Veteran Support Centres (VSCs), which are currently providing welfare, compensation or advocacy services, will nominate those practitioners they believe would make good mentors.

The relevant Local Administrative Group (LAG) will review nominations and will be responsible for appointing mentors. Successful completion of a training program may be required before an appointment is confirmed.

Mentors will not be restricted to working in the organisation which nominated them. Mentors will be required to operate on a regional level.

Effective mentors have a strong commitment to ethics, embrace workplace diversity and vigorously pursue their own professional development.

The Mentoring relationship.

If the terms of the relationship, including limits on confidentiality, are clear at the start there will be fewer problems later. Don’t forget that Mentoring goes up as well as down so make sure that your potential mentors have access to a sounding board with whom to discuss any difficult issues in the mentoring relationship (external networks are available should this capability not exist within an ESO).

Although mentor and practitioner need to agree how they’re going to work together, it is usually the mentor who takes responsibility for ensuring the process has been discussed and agreed. This will include setting out a contract and agreeing a process for review. A standard ESO outline is appropriate for this purpose.

The contract between mentor and learner may be more or less formal within the ESO requirements with flexibility for mentor/practitioner to agree. Regardless of format, the following points should be included in discussion;

- How long they will work together (whether a time period, or until a goal is achieved).
- Initial goals, which may include the development of long-term goals for the relationship.
- The practical arrangements such as how often to will meet, where to meet (in the office or elsewhere, for example), as well as whether cancelling meetings is acceptable and, if so, under what circumstances.
• The process for reviewing the relationship. This should include end-of-session reviews to discuss the process and learning from each session, and periodic reviews of progress towards goals.

Part of contracting is clarifying the objectives and goals of the mentoring in the early stage and helping the practitioner to identify their own learning goals. The provision of a record of competency attainment is being developed in book/electronic form to maintain a permanent record of the practitioner’s progress.

It should be understood that any mentoring relationship will change over time and that different skills are important at different stages in order to retain the viability of the relationship. The basic requirement of a good mentor is a belief in the potential of the learner.

What are some of the attributes of a successful Mentor?

Characteristics and skills needed in the mentor role include;

• Sound knowledge of the role of a mentor,
• Specific and extensive experience in the role being mentored,
• The ability to impart knowledge utilizing good communication skills,
• Capacity to develop a suitable rapport with the practitioner,
• A realistic understanding of the demands being placed on the practitioner,
• A commitment to the development of the practitioner,
• Realistic understanding of the essential time commitment to the practitioner,
• The ability not to overwhelm the practitioner with information beyond his/her capability,
• An ability to delegate duties in accordance with the practitioner’s displayed development,
• An awareness of the practitioner’s capacity to absorb and retain the knowledge being imparted and to adjust advancement accordingly,
• An ability to provide a graduated learning environment relative to ESO needs,
• An ability to produce an atmosphere conducive to the passage of knowledge,
• An ability to share experience and personal learning to assist practitioner develop confidence in ability to succeed,
• An ability to provide professional friendship,
• An ability to build rapport with less experienced practitioners,
• An ability to be a sounding board for the practitioner,
• A capability to provide insight through reflection,
• An interest in developing the practitioner to a high level of expertise,
• A willingness to display professionalism at all times, and
• Must have the time available to undertake the Mentoring role and to provide OJT in the normal course of duties
Conclusion

Providing effective welfare, compensation and advocacy services to serving and former ADF members and their families can only be achieved through a strong cooperative effort between ESOs, VSCs, DVA, Defence and the ADTP.

The lynchpin in this matrix will be the mentors. It is they who will ultimately ensure that practitioners provide the best possible service to those who seek their assistance.