Three Stage Process Model – a questioning and listening framework for mentors

The three-stage process is a model that can be used for mentoring. It is useful because it’s a fluid, straightforward framework as shown by the diagram below.

**Exploration Stage**: begins with opening up the conversation with an open question. It’s about building rapport, paying attention to your mentee and supporting the exploration – be patient; investment in time/care at this stage can pay dividends later. This can be achieved by:
- You taking the lead by listening.
- Paying attention to the relationship and developing it.
- Clarifying the aims and objectives of your mentoring.
- Supporting the exploration.

Things you might say or ask in the Exploration Stage:
- What would you like to talk about?
- Tell me more about that…
- What you seem to be saying is…. (paraphrase/ summarise). Have I got this right?
- Which of these areas would you find most helpful to talk about?

**New Understanding Stage**: this is the turning point in the process. Once your mentee begins to see things differently you need to offer encouragement. Progress can be rapid but again don’t rush your mentee – be patient. If your mentee is resistant, be supportive and sensitive so that when challenged, they are receptive.

This stage also involves challenging your mentee and reflecting back, and helping them understand and make sense of what they are saying. You may help your mentee consolidate their learning by sharing your experiences – but don’t share too soon and risk taking your mentee away from their own agenda. Ways to do this include:
- Continuing to listen.
- Checking out the situation and summarising.
- Encouraging reframing and rethinking of the situation.
- Flagging up key learnings.
- Introducing challenge appropriately.

Things you might ask or say in the New Understanding stage:
• You said that you want to move forward yet you have not taken any action as yet (challenge). What is preventing you from taking that 1st step? (Rather than 'Why aren't you doing anything?')
• That sounds like a useful insight. Does it sound like one to you?
• Now that we are clear about the issue, what do you see as your options?
• What is there to learn?

**Action Planning Stage:** Be aware that first two stages can take a while and may be more than one session, depending on the complexity of the issue/quality of conversation. Not every meeting will end in an 'action plan', and the only action may be to reflect on discussions and meet again. Ensure that your mentee is responsible for their problems and solutions and that you are there to support and guide them if need be. You can help in the Action Planning stage by:
• Helping to make decisions and solve problems.
• Encouraging practical application of options and choices.
• Agreeing action plans.
• Building commitment to action.

Things you might say or ask in the Action Planning stage:
• Let's look at the pros and cons of this option.
• How committed to this are you on a scale of 1-10? (If not 10, what needs to happen to make it 10?)
• When are you going to do this by?
• What do you need to do first?
• Whose help do you need?

The process rarely moves in a straight line from stage one to stage three. More often, in use, the conversation moves about between all the stages. The three stage process can be viewed as a map of mentoring, both a map for a mentoring session and a map for the duration of the relationship. A map shows the way and helps us to plan a route, and it can help us to find where we are when we get lost.

There can be a temptation to get to the Action Planning Stage as quickly as possible but often the quality and the commitment to the action is dependent on the quality of stage one and two. Summarising regularly can help to establish the boundaries between each stage and move the conversation either on, or back into the previous stage. It is helpful to share the process within your relationship so that you both understand what is happening.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the three stage process is that, with practice, it becomes very natural and does not seem like an intrusive technique.
Think about which stage you have reached in your mentoring so far.

How fully did you develop the exploration stage before moving onto the next stages?

How clear are you BOTH about what the mentee is trying to achieve?

Which stages do you need to go back to?