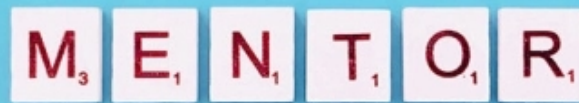


Why Cultural Engagement Matters for Mentorship: Drawing Lessons from Papua New Guinea

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Mentoring is one of the most important aspects of strong workplaces and plays a critical role in ensuring effective succession and employee development. But mentorship fails if it doesn't take into account the cultural context affecting those mentees who need to be developed.

In order to illustrate this point, this article will examine the topic through the eyes of developing nation Papua New Guinea, building on recent statistical [research](#) into mentoring for national workforce development.

Papua New Guinea is divided between urban and rural areas, with much of the population still living an isolated traditional life, and this plays out in the workplace when local staff from remote regions enter the workforce on projects. For the most part, these people have not been exposed to the modern world of work and can struggle to acclimatize to traditionally western work environments. This is where mentoring can be really powerful. The one-on-one experience has a multitude of benefits because it is delivered in a format that fits with their culture: sharing ideas, talking, and practical learning on the job. It's not about lectures or PowerPoint, **its about genuine human connection and learning from one another.**

At its core, mentorship is a relationship-based pursuit. It's about shared humanity. So, we have to take culture seriously, it can't be an afterthought. In order to form the type of relationship that unlocks the power of mentoring, we need to build rapport, communicate clearly, and show the sort of empathy and cultural understanding that shows how much we care. Just the mere act of exchanging pleasantries in the local language is a powerful act that demonstrates that a relationship is forming. *But it must go further than that.*

- To build trust, you have to be open and honest with each other. By being vulnerable and upfront, we affirm each other's humanity and break the barriers that often exist between mentor and mentee.
- **Clear communication.** The core of all relationship building is communication and the better you can get at this, the more impactful the mentoring is going to be. This is especially true when that relationship is cross-cultural. You need to be even more clear and explicit than

usual.

- **Cultural understanding.** If you don't understand the country, culture, people, and living conditions of the people you are mentoring, then your mentorship risks being tone deaf and unhelpful for the people you're trying to help. Until you can deeply understand their challenges and adjust your support accordingly, you will miss each other, and all that potential goes to waste.

For example, a [recent project](#) in Papua New Guinea where initial workplace meetings were being held in English, even though most of the local workforce only had a basic grasp of the language. This meant that a lot of the nuance and important insights that these meetings were trying to convey got lost along the way.

A simple experiment of trialling the meetings in Tok Pisin, the local language, created powerful results almost immediately. All of a sudden, the levels of staff involvement and engagement dramatically increased and this led to much more sustainable mentorship relationships. As a result, course materials and further communications in the local languages and saw staff engagement develop considerably.

Cultural context is more than just language. Building on this momentum, training was redesigned to suit the learning styles and cultural nuances of the local population so that the messaging would suit their existing worldview and resonate with them holistically. A blended approach of one-on-one focused approach as well as larger scale knowledge-sharing sessions was all of a sudden transformed because the cultural nuances were acknowledged and taken into account.

The [research](#) showed that building trust within the team was the most important factor with over 98% of respondents echoing its importance. This was closely followed by cultural understanding – which was buoyed by the fact that transparent staff engagement was overwhelmingly positive. This was rounded out with strong opinions about how important ongoing support and performance management was for the overall process.

This really proves the point: a little cultural engagement goes a long way. We cannot pass on knowledge without effective communication, and we can't communicate well if we can't relate to one another. This effect is exaggerated in developing countries like Papua New Guinea.

The [research](#) showed that the importance of cultural understanding and engagement increases proportionally with the decrease in education and experience in mentees. In addition, city-based mentees expressed a greater interest in the technical expertise of their mentors, rather than the cultural understanding or engagement.

So, while Papua New Guinea is a very complex country, the principles remain the same. The diversity with over eight hundred different cultures and languages is not an obstacle, but rather an opportunity for further connection. Mentors should see cultural nuance as an enabler, rather than a limitation. When they do this, the effectiveness of these sorts of programs will increase because managers' ability to engage staff will be that much better. This then filters down into the workforce and drives results for everyone involved.

It's a rare win-win scenario that can be unlocked with just a little empathy and the willingness to engage with cultural differences, rather than ignore them. It's about more than just the business incentives here. It's about seeing workers as more than just chess pieces on a board. **It's about seeing them for the people they are.**



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Warren has extensive experience in workforce development, localisation and nationalisation in the resource industry throughout Australasia. With a PhD in workforce nationalisation from the University of Notre Dame, Warren has provided advice on policy and programs to multinational and government organisations over many years.