Future of GM Mentoring interviews – October 2024

To share valuable insight with incoming mentors and mentees, to mark National Mentoring Day on 27th October and in the run-up to Future of GM and Future of London's **1,000-Alumni milestone in 2025** (!!!) Executive Director Lisa Taylor interviewed two mentoring pairs, one from GM Leaders Plus Round 4 (2023-24) and one from GM Future Leaders Round 1 (2024). A highlights version is on the website, but here's the full interview from the Leaders Plus pair.

For info on becoming a mentor or joining one of our bespoke place leadership programmes, contact info@futureofgreatermanchester.com.

Mentor Jacqueline Esimaje-Heath – Growth Director, L&Q
Mentee Greig Lees, Head of Development NW, Guinness Partnership
2 October 2024 – interviewed separately via Teams

First, from the mentee perspective…

LT: In general, Greig, what would you say about your mentoring relationship?

I just found the whole experience really positive… it was a very good match personality-wise. I found Jackie really easy to talk to. It was that kind of safe space where you felt you could have an honest and open discussion about challenges I had, or blockers, or how would you deal with this situation and your experience of doing X, Y and Z. I found it really, really helpful.

I was a little apprehensive at the start, because of the potential conflict: I'm with Guinness and Jacqui's with L&Q and when we started, we were looking at potentially bidding for the same site. But we discussed it and quickly agreed that's not something that will be part of our discussions.

Obviously, you talk to friends, colleagues and whatnot about lots of things. But there are certain sorts of thoughts and ideas it's useful to bounce around in a safe space.

LT: Was there anything you took away in terms of your own leadership journey from Jacqui and from mentoring, as opposed to other learning and development channels?

Definitely. I'm a huge advocate for personal professional development. I've reached the end of my formal learning journey. I've got a Master's and don't intend to go back to university.

I also sit on a couple of boards and get a lot out of that process and experience. The thing I really found valuable speaking to Jacqui was that it got me to reflect a lot more on what I do as an individual and as a leader. Sometimes you're really busy and you're just ploughing your own furrow and making sure the team do what they need to do. Jacqui really helped me with making time to sit back and think about the bigger picture.

I always talk to my team about personal development and CPD but sometimes it's just allowing a bit more time for reflection or open, coaching-type questions like: "How does that make you feel?" to think a bit deeper about a

particular question; “What would that look like?” for what scenarios could have been, or “Could you have dealt with that situation differently?” Jackie was very good at asking those and not telling me the answer, but letting me reflect and come up with my own answer, and I’m using some of those with my team.

We paired you with someone of a different gender, as we do sometimes. In your case it was because of qualifications; in others we do it to help people get used to communicating meaningfully across difference. Was there anything that could have worked better if you'd been paired with the same gender, did it make no difference, or was it good?

I didn't feel it made any difference, and I was really interested to speak to Jacqui about lots of things in terms of being a woman in in her position. She's risen to become very senior, very well respected in in the housing sector. I was obviously mindful she would have had to overcome all sorts of barriers, being a woman of colour, and things we talked about included the idea of privilege and lots of things I take for granted as a white man.

I'm a huge feminist. I've got a fantastic wife and two amazing daughters, and I know gender can involve particular challenges. Men of a certain ilk might feel uncomfortable talking about whatever that might be, but I think the people on the course are generally emotionally intelligent.

What might you say to someone who finds it hard to open up no matter what, or who might not trust the process? How might to help them to understand the value and take advantage?

I would say to go in very open-minded. Like with anything, you get out what you put in. Like I said, we spoke early on in terms of what was off the table, professional boundaries and that sort of stuff. It was up to me as the mentee to prepare the agenda, just things I wanted to talk about. We spoke about lots of things: professional and family challenges, the north-south divide or challenges we work with across different regions and organisations.

The mentor is giving their time – I’m not saying they don't get anything back, but there’s more to learn from the mentee perspective. It's down to the individual to have a real think about what types of things they want a challenge around, to learn or to get a feel for.

LT: That's helpful, thanks – we’re adding ‘how to be a mentee’ as a mini-session, partly since people could be offered a mentor elsewhere in their career, and if they don't take advantage, some bosses may perceive that as not choosing to learn. Being a mentee is also a skill.

Is there anything you found different about how mentoring happens with Future of GM?

One of my biggest takeaways from the course was the range of people involved. We're from fairly similar backgrounds in terms of quasi-public sector or built environment but I think you probably get the most from that network – and that network is obviously still in touch, including in informal settings [like the September mentor dinner or Altrincham alumni field trip].

You can also build relationships with people you might not have been exposed to, like Eamonn Boylan – I mean, he was Chief Executive of GMCA and acting Chief Executive of Manchester Council. [Future of GM] brings in those big players, plus that opportunity to have quality time, even though everyone's busy and people have challenging roles. I think that can offer a huge amount.

Mentor Jacqueline Esimaje-Heath – Growth Director, L&Q

LT: Can you tell me about your mentoring relationship?

I think it went really well. It was very relaxed from first meeting. We got on straight away, which was really helpful, and we just cracked on. Greig was quite clear in setting out what he was hoping to get out of it. I was quite clear in setting out what I felt I could offer. And then we kind of agreed to sort of play it by ear: we start off with these objectives, but we'll see how it goes.

We had some really good chats, about everything really, obviously, the work, the course, the presentations they were preparing for, what they were thinking about his work, his organisation, his role, where he could fit, where he saw himself going.

He talked a lot about leadership and what that that looks like, because Greg is a true development person. He's got that technical knowledge, experience and expertise, which is brilliant, but you start to think more about understanding, about your organisation, what's beyond your remit, and what the constraints and challenges and opportunities are for the organisation. We had good discussions about that.

I really enjoyed our meetings. I enjoyed having that chance to just listen to someone and give a perspective from your experience, rather than it being structured through work. It was very discursive, which was nice.

LT: What did you get out of it as a mentor?

For me, it was having a discussion without agenda. There was a freedom to our discussion. There was no pressure. Obviously, there's an outcome you want; want your mentee to gain something from the discussion. But I found it quite freeing, just having a time out to chat about what life can be like at work and how we approach things and how we might do things differently, but not having the context of your job as the as the frame around that picture, it was just very free in that respect.

LT: We sometimes match male mentees with female mentors, for best-match qualifications or to help some get used to openness with senior women. Did it feel like a factor in your mentoring pair?

It didn't come into it, but that's maybe the nature of Greig; he's quite a reflective and mature person. I can think of a couple of people who might not have been as comfortable. I do have a female mentee now, and I notice there are things like imposter syndrome that women can struggle with that come out more when you've got a female mentee-mentor relationship.

LT: Did you run into any challenges?

No, Greg was concerned about conflict of interest at the start but we discussed it and he was reassured. I have a team in Manchester, and if I'd been based there and was operating day-to-day there, he might have felt differently. But I didn't feel close enough for it to be a conflict. We did have a couple of discussions about, "Do you know about this? Did you hear who got that?" but that was it.

LT: We do get mentees not feeling free to speak or not being sure what to discuss. Is there anything you'd say as a mentor to a mentee, or to a pair who might worry about conflict?

If you think there's a conflict of interest, the start is obviously to anonymise things. There could always be some conflicts [as the relationship continues], but you could give a scenario and change the context slightly so you can still have the conversation but you don't feel like you're giving away your trade secrets.

For example, my current mentee might talk about bidding and winning work. That's something I used to do, so it's easy for me to have a conversation about that. Some people might feel uncomfortable if we were in the same space, but I think there's enough room for all of us to learn from each other. Especially as a mentor, you're not giving away competitive advantage, you're just helping develop someone. And that comes back in different ways.

LT: Agreed. If it's really uncomfortable, we will change the match. But if someone's just a bit nervous, set boundaries at the start and see how it goes. It can also feel disloyal to say 'my organisation or role is messed up' to someone from another organisation, but from experience, a mentor can help by saying, 'None of us are perfect. No organisation is perfect. You're not alone.'

Yes, people can also have strong feelings when they think they messed up. When you start to probe that, actually, was it a mistake? Why? What was actually breaking down, what happened, as opposed to just the outcome? What led to that? What might you do differently? If it was your shout, what would you do? And why do you think that wouldn't work? So you can still get things out of it that allow the person to explore more about the situation, rather than just look at it in black and white.

LT: Was there anything you found in mentoring with Greig, your current mentee, or generally that you believe is a critical ingredient to a successful mentoring relationship?

Yes - it's just housekeeping, but Greig did this very well. My current mentee doesn't do as well. Just recognize as a mentee that it's your relationship, we're having the relationship because of what you need. So the mentee needs to take control of that, and understand timing, what is perfect and what is good in terms of being able to meet, because my diary is pretty mad. There were a couple of times where things had to get moved but I'd said to Greig, the more in advance you can set meetings up, even if we move them nearer the time, that's OK. Also be open to where we meet - we met in a café in Trafford, or in central Manchester because it was easy.

Also just being prepared to be open. I think I've been quite lucky in having people who are really open, but I maybe that's why they're on the course; they want to grow in that way. I had a mentoring relationship that didn't last very long, because that person – maybe it was the male female thing as well – but reflecting on it, it felt like this isn't this is doing anything for either of us, because, they didn't want to hear they were kind of perfect already. I did try quite hard to go beyond what they were presenting to see if we had something to open. But in the end, we just had to give up because they weren't very open. And I think maybe they were a bit insecure about having to be in that mentoring relationship, it's like some kind of admission of weakness. It's not.

LT: What would you say to a peer who's considering mentoring with us but might be unsure?

I would say you've got a lot to offer, and you don't realize how much until you start a mentoring conversation. It can be really eye opening in terms of what you've experienced, what you reflect on, and how valuable that is.

I go day-to-day sometimes and just crack on with what I've got to do, but I'm taking more time out now to reflect on things and say, gosh, yeah, I really did get that done. That was just incredible. And then when a mentee says something like 'I work with someone, and I need to come across more like they do', and you think, 'Oh, gosh - No, you don't actually, you need to find your space, how you come across, and then use that', because there's nothing worse than being inauthentic.

Listening to the challenges people come up with or the things they want to work on, I think as a mentor, you'll find you've had that experience or a similar experience and can apply those things. You dig deep into your sort of experience memory bank and looking back you might think I would approach that differently – or that was the only way to do it, and it was really hard, and this is how I felt. But, you know, I came out the other side. That fear of failure can be a really good area to talk about with a mentee..

LT: Do you believe mentoring is an important aspect of making better places?

It is really important for me. It's the way to quickly understand the bigger picture, to understand context, strategy, particularly, maybe more for Future Leaders, but it gives you that access, that exposure, that you might not get in your day job, and it helps you start thinking in that way. At the different levels in my team, I really see where I need to get people more exposure, just to understanding how people think at this level, so they can work towards better communication with senior levels. For instance providing a one-page summary of a scheme to board – it's exactly what they've done, but it's information that's useless to that particular audience. Mentoring is a good way to get that perspective, because suddenly you're talking to someone who's operating at that level. And having conversations about what's important as I rise, what do I need to know?

['Tighter writing' recommendation from Jacqui: https://www.narrativemagazine.com/]

LT: One thing that's different is that because you're working with Future of GM, it's not just you and the person. We can say, 'Hey, we've spotted this behaviour, or they're not speaking up in session. Could you raise that?' Or you could say, 'There's an issue with the family; could you be aware of that?'

Yes, obviously it's always driven by the mentee, but sometimes that external observation is really valuable, saying 'This might be something you might want to explore in your in your discussions.'

The other good thing is the network you develop when we talk about why it's good for the built environment. Everything is about relationships, I think particularly in Manchester. The network you develop through this group is really, really valuable. It is in London as well; it's just in that London, you could be with all the people on Greenwich Peninsula or whatever, and that's just one part of London. Whereas for Manchester, it's like you're in the same room with the transport people, the Combined Authority, from health, and it's all Manchester. I think that's good. Networking is invaluable.