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 Future Leaders pair.

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

Mentee Ryan Tracey – Work & Skills Specialist, Manchester City Council

Mentor Debra Cooper – Banking & Finance Partner, Hill Dickinson LLP
Paired in GM Future Leaders Round 1, 2024.

Lisa Taylor interview (as a pair) 2 Oct 2024. See also the GM Leaders Plus interview.

LT: What were you expecting when you got started, Ryan? You showed up with this fantastic notebook of questions pretty much on Day 0 when we launched Future Leaders.

Ryan: I thought I was going to get paired up with someone from local government and I was thinking, "That's right in my comfort zone". Then you emailed to say "Actually, I've got this woman for you. She's a dynamo. She's from a completely different sector and stage of her career. But I think it could work well." And I thought, "Yeah, embrace that," because obviously the whole programme is about challenging your ideas as a leader and I was well up for it. I was a little nervous, but straight away when I met Deb, that just melted away, because she was really easy to talk to and connect with.

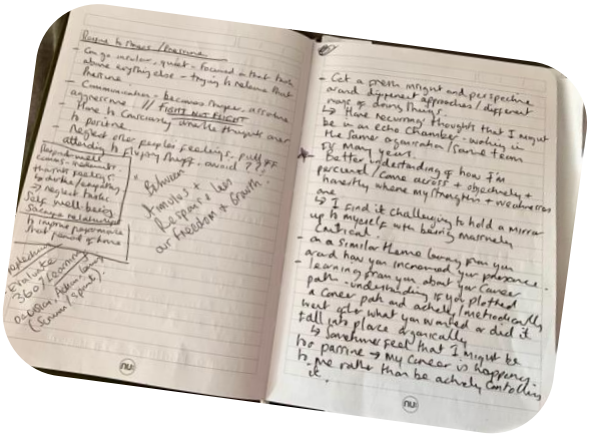
LT: Debra, how did you make him feel at ease in that first meeting?

Debra: I think I make most people feel at ease but I could also see a lot of myself in Ryan. Looking back, I would have sat there with a list and been ready to work out what I wanted to get out of speaking to somebody else. So I thought, "I just need to break you out of your comfort zone." In effect, that's what I've been doing in the 7-8 years since I made partner – all of it's a learning curve.

It wasn't your typical structured mentoring. We spoke about everything, including personal life. Mentoring isn't just looking at the nine to five; it's everything that goes around that too. Ryan's got one young kid and one that landed in the middle of the course and wasn't straightforward. That plays a massive role. And again, I've been there and done it. I wanted to pass that on, because I think there's still lack of that [whole-life recognition] in the working world.

LT: You talked about getting Ryan out of his comfort zone. What did you do or discuss?

Debra: We reflected on the past five years, acknowledging: "What you've done is good and where you are is good, but if you don't do anything different, how will you feel?" I made him write a five-year plan, basically "Do you want to be where you are now in five years? If you want to change things, what are we going to do to get there?"



Ryan: I did start with all my notes and questions and I did bring that notebook the first few sessions, but Deb was really good at working through that as part of our conversation. For instance, we went on a three-mile walk for one session, which was brilliant, because you're walking around, you get the blood flowing and you talk about everything. I think I referred to my notebook twice, and when I got back and reviewed it, all my questions had been answered naturally.

Deb was also really good at being conversational, but right in the middle of it being challenging and direct, like, "Well, why do you think that? Why won't you do that?" I was so in my comfort zone, because I've been at Manchester Council for 20 years; it was good to think beyond that.

Debra: There is a bit of that cross-sector piece. If you said, "In my in my world, in order to progress, you stay here and you do this", in my world, you progress by bringing something extra. I think it was a bit of that mindset switch for you – and switching that mindset from people-pleaser to taking care of yourself.

Ryan: We also talked about what I offer at home, like more spontaneous trips and stuff like that. I'd sort of curated a professional world separate from the private, but in my five-year plan, there was a lot about personal stuff. It took a lot for me to share that, but we got to a point where I felt at ease doing that, and got great feedback.

LT: What do you think the ingredients are for working with a different gender, sector or level?

Debra: I think you both need to be open-minded and genuine. I assumed that people have signed up to the programme because they know if nothing changes… nothing changes. I've come across mentors – not at Future of GM – who say: "This is how I did and this is what you need to do. I'll see you in six months." I'm more genuinely interested to see what your career does and how it fits into the built environment. It's about being curious.

Ryan: Learning from someone in the private sector was always going to be beneficial for me. On the gender thing, I've worked with women like our director, Angela, who's hard-working, inspiring and leads by example. Women don't actually lead with a hammer; you want to follow them because of the results.

LT: Did you find it different to mentor alongside the Future Leaders programme?

Debra: When I've been mentored, it's been a role model allocated to me in same industry. So another lawyer, another female, with kids. What I like about this programme is it's so broad. That's what I like about the built environment too: you could think "My world doesn't touch your world" if you look at it superficially. But I could have acted for the funder on a scheme Gary Neville is doing, which all ties into placemaking around the city centre. That's also what I love about things Future of GM does like the mentor dinner: it's the variety of people in that room and the variety of brains you can pick, the varied conversations around the table. It gives a holistic view.

Ryan: I agree. When I've been a mentor or a mentee before, it's always been really structured, and designed around a specific timeframe, a specific role, or whatever. This gets back to the heart of the Future Leaders programme, doesn't it? You provide the framework, and each learning session can raise questions for your next mentoring session, but it's up to us make what we want of that. You set your own agenda. If you're all in, it'll go where it needs to go, and you'll get benefit from it.

LT: If you ran into someone who's just joined the course and said, I don't need mentoring, or want it, or I'm not sure what to do… what would you say to them?

Ryan: I'd think there must be something missing if someone's not all in. Maybe, "have you been pushed onto the course, and see mentoring as time-consuming hassle on the side?" It's all about intent, isn't it?

Debra: I agree. No matter how senior you are, you should always be trying to develop. If you're offered somebody who will challenge you, give you a view on where you are now and where you could get to – and help you get there – I don't understand why you wouldn't embrace that.

What would you say to someone who's considering mentoring, or why would you want to get someone involved with us as a mentor?

Debra: I'd say do it, but before you commit, why do you want to be a mentor? Is it an ego trip? In which case, no. Is it about making your CV look good? That's a no. You genuinely need to want to do it and to learn about people. You also need to be pretty sure of yourself, because occasionally your mentee will throw something back at you and you think, "Right, I can definitely do more on that!"

LT: We ask pairs to meet away from the mentor's office, since that can put mentees on a psychological back foot: "I'm in your space; you probably have somewhere to be".

I hadn't thought about that until the mentoring guidance, which maybe goes back to feeling I'm 'down with the kids' but really needing a bit of self-awareness and understanding of their experience. Ryan and I were both spectacularly busy, but we always found a time and a place. We went for a walk-and-talk. We had breakfast in a café to mix it up and get different thoughts flowing; it all makes a difference.

LT: What part do you think mentoring plays in terms of delivering better places (as opposed to other kinds of learning)?

Ryan: I'm all for it. We need more people to climb the ladder then open doors for others. Mentoring can support that. We'll probably have to stop recruiting for a few years depending on budgets, so you work with what you've got, and you have to develop talent and be inclusive.

LT: That's an interesting dimension. Debra, what do you think?

Debra: Every sector has its own way of doing things, so it's good to hear different views, to understand the different challenges people face and to share how to overcome them. Networking is also part of mentoring with Future of GM; it's part and parcel of placemaking, and provides that hive mind I don't think you necessarily get in other ways. You also get different public-private conversations, because people are a bit more vulnerable and bit more real.

I think mentoring – especially face to face – is also important to counter the effect Covid had on a lot of people, especially juniors who trained in that time. They could be three years into their career and be unable to pick up the phone and have a conversation.

Ryan: [Following Covid] and with zero carbon targets, there's a basic conflict where corporate priorities are to move everything online but we're saying, "Well, actually no, we work better when we meet personally." We also had conversations about how Covid affected me; I thought I stalled.

Debra: I did challenge you on that: You didn't retreat as much as you thought you had, and you'd done positive things and showed leadership behaviours during Covid, but you didn't remember it that way, did you?"

Ryan: No. That was one of the things you were really good at: listening, then challenging what I'd just said, which put me on the back foot in a good way, like "Think about what you just said there."

LT: Those are coaching approaches, a really useful way to develop your thinking.

Ryan: Yeah, a running theme for us was core values. I'd thought about it but never listed them. Obviously, family, ambition, integrity, stuff like that, which lets me say "How does that decision match up to my values?" In the end, I built them into my five-year plan.

Debra: If you haven't got values, you'll be a crap leader, because you'll just lead based on whoever's paying you at that point or whoever you're trying to impress. For me, leadership is being authentic and true.