

Guiding THE WAY

In today's fast-paced business world, the significance of mentorship has never been more pronounced. When industry leaders gathered at this year's FutureScape event, the topic of mentoring emerged as a key theme, emphasising its role in shaping the future of our industry.

I had the privilege of participating in a lively speaker panel alongside some of the most influential voices in our industry – Alistair Bayford, Andrew Fisher Tomlin and Mark Gregory – where we shared our personal mentoring journeys, reflecting on how we have sought guidance from mentors throughout our careers and how we find it rewarding to mentor others. Our audience of 30 Under 30: The Next Generation award winners engaged with some thoughtful questions and our host Ross Conquest did a fantastic job of keeping us all on track!

In this piece, I will share my own insights and personal experience of mentoring (both as mentor and mentee), highlighting how effective mentorship accelerates personal development and also creates a culture of teamwork and self-direction.

Whether you're a seasoned leader or in the early years of your career, the power of mentoring can be a great catalyst for your learning and growth.

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Mentoring has a wealth of benefits for those receiving it, but also for the mentors themselves, explains James Scott

How I view mentoring

Mentoring is a process where a more experienced person offers advice and guidance to another, aimed at helping them with their learning and development. It's akin to providing a shortcut, drawing on personal experiences – sharing not only what worked well for the mentor in the past, but also what didn't, and the lessons learned along the way.

Looking back on my own journey of establishing a business over 30 years ago, I often found myself hitting a 'wall' every time I tried to elevate my company. I wish I had possessed the insights I have now! I did get advice and guidance from various people throughout my career, which helped a great deal – and also made me appreciate the role that mentoring can

play. I strongly believe that it accelerates a person's progression, especially where leadership roles are concerned.

I began mentoring people several years into my role as an owner-manager, linked to developing other leaders within The Garden Company. I needed my team leaders to grow their confidence and competence so that they could run larger projects independently. Mentoring was a vitally important tool I used to achieve this.

I think it's useful to note that mentoring doesn't need to be formal, although it can be. People can be mentored as part of an everyday work conversation or discussion with industry colleagues. They might not recognise these interactions as mentoring, but the benefits are still apparent.

The relationship between mentoring and leadership

Mentoring and leadership are closely linked, though leadership is a broader term; it is about letting people know what is expected of them and how they are performing against that expectation. It's also about being a role model; for example, addressing substandard practices straightaway rather than letting them become the 'new norm'.

In my view, mentoring is a leadership tool to grow people's capabilities (alongside coaching, training and instructing). It's more personalised than general leadership, being tailored to the specific needs of the mentee. For it to be effective, it must consider the mentee's willingness and ability to grow. It's also a two-way thing; both parties need to be genuinely invested in the process and aiming for a positive outcome.

Mentoring in-house

As soon as new starters join The Garden Company, we focus on getting them up to speed with our ways of working. This includes guiding them through our Standard Operating Procedures and – importantly – immersing them in all aspects of the job. This is how I approach onboarding a new team leader and it is how I expect my team leaders to approach onboarding new team members. We may not always refer to this as mentoring, but my team leaders know they need to dedicate time into sharing their expertise with their team members – it's laid out in their job description as a key responsibility.

I take pride in witnessing individuals transition from entry-level roles to team leaders – and even beyond, with some establishing their own businesses or securing senior positions elsewhere. Knowing that The Garden Company has provided a solid foundation for their growth is very rewarding.

Mentoring externally

I love our industry, and it has served me very well over the years. However, being a business owner can be quite a lonely place to be, and both BALI and the SGD have helped me enormously over the years not to be too isolated. Through both organisations, I have made useful contacts, built up a network and learnt from other people facing similar challenges. This includes very useful conversations with Mark Gregory and the late, great John O'Conner at North Thames BALI meetings in years gone by.

Throughout the latter half of my career, I've gained huge satisfaction from 'giving back' to our industry through my involvement with both BALI and the SGD, sometimes in a mentoring capacity. Currently, I serve on the SGD accreditation panel, mentoring individual designers by reviewing their work and providing constructive feedback to help accelerate their progression. I also contribute to our industry by serving on the judging panels for the SGD Awards and Pro Landscaper Project Awards.



I create the time to take part in such activities by prioritising them in my diary and delegating tasks to my team leaders. I am proud of the self-directed culture we have in place at The Garden Company; one of its main implications is that I can spend time focussing outward, confident that my team leaders can handle decisions and solve problems themselves. They are willing and able to work like this because of our mentoring relationship.

“Simply having the mindset to be as helpful as you can when you meet more junior people is likely to lead to mentoring connections”

Advice to those seeking to be mentored or to mentor others

If you're keen to benefit from some mentoring, you may be able to arrange this in-house with someone you respect and trust – a line manager or senior colleague. If in-house options are limited or not available, I highly recommend immersing yourself in one or two industry trade associations/ or societies. In design, landscaping and horticulture, you'll find lots of people who are more than happy to share their wisdom and advice – seriously, it's like a treasure trove of guidance! Whether you are looking for a quick chat or a long-term mentoring relationship, there's absolutely no need to wrestle with your work dilemmas alone. There are some formal mentoring opportunities available too; for example, the

SGD offers a group mentoring programme with selected mentors, who provide 5 group sessions covering lots of topics.

And if you're interested in giving back and mentoring others, then again – look at ways to do so within your own organisation or actively engage with trade associations and societies to identify suitable mentoring opportunities. Simply having the mindset to be as helpful as you can when you meet more junior people is likely to lead to mentoring connections too.

I see mentoring as a crucial leadership tool, and this was reinforced by the recent panel discussion with fellow industry colleagues and our audience at FutureScape. Mentoring provides personalised guidance, fosters career growth and contributes to business success. It does so by facilitating knowledge transfer and developing leadership talent. Mentoring has benefited me personally throughout my career and I trust it will continue to play a pivotal part in shaping the next generation of leaders.



JAMES SCOTT

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1991. He has received multiple national awards, serves as a judge for the SGD Awards and the Pro Landscaper Project Awards and belongs to the SGD accreditation panel. In 2022, Pro Landscaper named him as one of the Top 25 Most Influential figures in the industry. thegardenco.co.uk