

Mentoring partnership stories



David is a senior leader for Thales, a French multinational company that designs and delivers high technology solutions within the aerospace, defence, transportation and security markets. His mentee, Lei, is a structural engineer for Atkins, a British multinational engineering design, planning, architectural design, project management and consulting services company. Their mentoring relationship began at the Women in Rail launch event in November of last year and since then their relationship thrived and Lei nominated David as mentor of the year.



In one sentence, can you please explain what you do on a day-to-day basis for someone who knows nothing about your role?

Lei: I'm a structural engineer for Atkins. On a day-to-day basis I work in multi-disciplinary design teams and lead structural design, as well as attending interface meetings with a wide range of stakeholders. I've also recently taken on a line manager role for an apprentice in our company.

David: I work for Thales. I lead and manage the main line rail business in the UK and I primarily deal with railway signalling. My role is very broad; it involves leading a large team across the spectrum of early business development to project execution and delivery.

Did you have any mentoring experience prior to being involved in the programme run by Moving Ahead? If so, could you please briefly outline?

Lei: I have been mentored on several mentoring schemes and have seen tangible developments in my professional success over the years. What I like in particular about the Women in Rail mentoring programme is that the mentoring topics are decided between me and my mentor, which tailors more to the specific areas I would like to work on.

David: I've experienced both sides of the coin – being a mentee and a mentor. My career started in the Army which has a very supportive and mentor-like structure throughout. This style of mentoring was quite different to that which I've experienced by working in the private sector. I've learnt from some great mentors and I'm still in touch with some of them today. For the last eight years or so, I've been mentoring in both formal and informal settings. I'm also working towards building my formal coaching qualifications which I started in tandem with the Women in Rail mentoring programme.

“ I've been offered an opportunity which I might not have achieved without my mentor. ” Lei

What was your biggest fear ahead of participating in your mentoring relationship and was this experienced?

Lei: I feared that David and I wouldn't have anything in common and this would mean it would be difficult to build a connection and trust. However, I found that the pairing system on the programme was fantastic; David and I are a great match. David has the leadership and management skills that I would like to achieve in the future. We initially met at the launch event in November of last year and immediately found David to be very approachable, so my initial worries soon disappeared. Since then, we have connected regularly, and I've felt very supported.

David: My concern was that I wouldn't be able to offer anything valuable to Lei. However, this was quickly put at ease by the way Lei and I laid out our expectations and needs from one another. I know now that I shouldn't have worried at all!

Has your mentoring experience led to any tangible benefits either inside or outside of work?

Lei: When I started the programme, one of my main goals was to improve my communications skills. I became a line manager at the beginning of lockdown and immediately had to confidently handle situations with those reporting into me, and firefighting problems which arose. David helped me manage the situation calmly and productively; advising me on a green and red feedback strategy which I've since started using. This guidance has been invaluable. I feel that my communication skills have become much bolder and more confident. I feel braver expressing myself in my working environment thanks to David.

David: When Lei came to our sessions with improving her communication as a goal, it reminded me how important effective communication at work really is. I was able to look inwards to my own experiences to help Lei with her scenario. This way it felt much more like co-mentoring as I began to think about my own communication and ways to continually improve it. This is the benefit I've gained from the mentoring programme.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to somebody who is just about to embark on a mentoring relationship for the first time?

Lei: I would tell them to be proactive and prepared. I'd also ask them to be open-minded about how successful the mentoring programme can be. I completely trusted both the programme and my mentor, and I'm so happy that it all worked out the way it has.

David: Every mentoring relationship is different from the rest. So, I'd say that it's important to recognise that there isn't a template for successful mentoring. I would also advise anyone who is going to take part to contract your values and expectations with your mentor/mentee. Doing this right from the beginning was so valuable for Lei and myself.

What was the highlight or most rewarding part of your mentoring experience?

David: For me, the most rewarding part was exploring solutions together with Lei to solve any issues she brought to our mentoring sessions. It was great to start seeing Lei come up with her own solutions and try them out, based on our conversations. I've felt incredibly valued and Lei's feedback has always been so positive. It's been such a rewarding experience.

Lei: What I've enjoyed the most is how inclusive David's mentoring has been, he's been open and non-judgemental about every scenario I shared with him. I enjoyed the active learning atmosphere that David and I have created. Every session I would take away some ideas to try out and reflect the outcome in the next session. It's like riding a bicycle. I feel I have mastered those skills by practice, not just by words. I think this will stay with me for the rest of my career and it is very rewarding.

“ This guidance has been invaluable. I feel that my communication skills have become much bolder and more confident. ”
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