

Module 1: Foundations of Mentoring in Prisons

This module has been carefully designed to provide a structured, practical, and theory-informed approach to mentoring in the prison context. It is organised into five key parts:

A. Learning Outcomes outlines what learners will know, understand, and be able to do by the end of the module;

B. Core Theory presents essential concepts, answers key questions, and references relevant case studies or frameworks;

C. Practice Activities offer interactive exercises for applying theory and developing mentoring skills;

D. Trainer Notes and Guidance provide crucial tips, reminders, and strategies for effective facilitation, including how to adapt content for different learner groups and questions to stimulate discussion;

and

E. Resources and References support further learning.

As a facilitator, please **read D before implementing any of the activities**, as it will guide you through the content and ensure effective delivery. The module flows from theory (B) into practical application (C), while trainer guidance (D) recontextualises the material and offers practical advice to maximise learning outcomes.

A. Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Define mentoring and distinguish it from coaching, supervision, and therapy.
2. Explain why mentoring is important in prison environments, particularly for staff well-being, retention, and professional development.
3. Identify different mentoring models used in prisons and discuss their advantages and limitations.
4. Reflect on their personal experience with mentoring and how it might influence their role.

B. Core Theory Content

Section 1: What is Mentoring?

Questions answered in this section:

- *What is the formal definition of mentoring?*
- *What are the key characteristics of mentoring relationships?*
- *How does mentoring differ from coaching, supervision, and therapy?*

Mentoring is a structured, trust-based relationship in which a more experienced person (the mentor) supports the growth, development, and confidence of another (the mentee). Professional mentorship in particular, is designated to the personal development of a mentee's broad skillset in their career within the remit of a reciprocal relationship. For the purpose of this module, mentoring is defined as such.

In the context of prisons, mentoring serves as a powerful tool to enhance both the personal and professional capacity of prison staff, particularly those new to the role. It offers a framework for reflective dialogue, skill-building, and emotional support within what are often high-stress, high-stakes environments.

At its core, mentoring is developmental rather than directive. Unlike supervision, which focuses on compliance, performance, mental health, and institutional authority, mentoring aims to empower. The mentor is not a superior, evaluator, or therapist, but rather a guide who supports the mentee's self-reflection, learning, and professional identity formation. Especially in professional environments coaching may also be implemented to support the personal and professional development of staff. Whilst the concepts of mentoring and coaching are often used interchangeably, coaching is a process in which specific skills as well as clear (career) goals and outcomes are supported. This is particularly important in prison contexts where hierarchical relationships can result in a lack of safe spaces for staff support.

It is, thus, essential to distinguish mentoring from coaching, supervision, and therapy:

- **Coaching** is typically short-term and performance-driven. It involves setting measurable goals and achieving specific outcomes more suited to skill correction or training.
- **Supervision** is hierarchical and evaluative. It ensures rules are followed, tasks are completed, and roles are enforced.

- **Therapy** deals with mental health diagnoses and treatment, typically led by trained clinicians. Mentoring, by contrast, is not about treatment but instead about connection and growth.

A mentoring relationship is characterised **by trust, confidentiality, non-judgmental listening, and a focus on the mentee's needs**. Sessions may include conversation around workplace challenges (including reflective exercises), emotional wellbeing, values, communication skills, and long-term career goals. What makes mentoring powerful in correctional settings is its ability to open up a space for psychological safety, something often missing in public services and rule-bound institutions.

In the prison environment, a mentor might help a new officer reflect on their first confrontational incident with an incarcerated person not by telling them what they should have done, but by encouraging them to analyse the situation, identify what felt challenging, and explore alternative approaches. In doing so, the mentor supports learning without imposing judgment.

Mentoring also fosters **core staff competencies** such as emotional intelligence, active listening, resilience, relationship-building and ethical decision-making - all of which are vital in settings where interpersonal dynamics can escalate quickly and professional conduct must remain consistent under pressure.

In sum, mentoring is an ongoing, humanising practice that enables both new and experienced staff to navigate the complexity of prison work more effectively, while strengthening institutional culture from the inside out.

Section 2: Why Mentoring Matters in Prisons

Questions answered in this section:

- *What are the main challenges in prison staff recruitment and retention?*
- *How can mentoring help improve emotional wellbeing and professional growth?*
- *How does mentoring support adherence to human rights standards in prisons?*

Correctional institutions across Europe are under increasing pressure due to high staff turnover, recruitment challenges, emotional fatigue, and an often-overlooked need for professional support. In this context, mentoring emerges not simply as a useful tool but as a **transformative intervention**. It directly addresses some of the most persistent structural and emotional difficulties in prison environments offering both individual and systemic benefits.

Challenges in Recruitment & Retention

Working in prisons is emotionally taxing, often leading to stress, burnout, and early resignation. Many new officers lack adequate preparation for the psychological demands of the job. High attrition rates among early-career staff result in a constant need for recruitment, reducing institutional stability and worsening workplace morale. In fact, studies highlight how “staffing shortages and operational demands” can derail even well-intentioned peer mentoring, leaving new officers unsupported during their most vulnerable period (Farnese et al., 2017; Forsyth, Shaw & Shepherd, 2022; Wittenberg, 1998; see M-PAVE Expert Input Report).

Additionally, the profession of a prison officer often suffers from low prestige in wider society, making it difficult to attract professionals (Zmugg, 2018). As shared during the M-PAVE sessions, there is a growing need to not only support existing staff, but also to “raise the prestige” of the role itself, showcasing its importance in both security and rehabilitation processes (Bigembe, 2021; Kletter, 2025; Lambert, Dorris, and Williams, 2024; Nixon & Woodward, 2024).

Mentoring - A Source of Support

Mentoring provides a **structured, humanising framework** for connection, support, and reflection. Rather than focusing solely on task execution, mentoring empowers officers to grow through open dialogue, active listening, and values-based engagement. Programmes like *Unlocked Graduates* (UK) and *M4PRIS* (EU-wide) have shown that professional mentoring improves confidence, emotional resilience, and a sense of agency in prison officers (Fenn et al., 2024; see M4PRIS Project). However, a major difference between these two programmes is their scope: Whilst M4PRIS focuses on mental and occupational health and the challenges of job-related stress, *Unlocked Graduates* - and the present MPAVE project - operate on a broader, cultural level.

MPAVE emphasises change management and leadership development as mechanisms for institutional transformation, showing how mentoring not only strengthens individual capacity but also contributes to shaping a more positive and reflective prison culture. This connection between personal growth and organisational change highlights mentoring as a key driver for sustainable improvement in both recruitment and retention.

The emotional benefits are especially critical. Mentees are more likely to remain in their jobs when they feel seen, supported, and valued. As the M-PAVE Project Outputs emphasise (see Webinar Report, see Expert Input Report), **trained mentors offer reassurance and realistic guidance in ways that peer support alone cannot guarantee.**

They bring **consistency, structure, and emotional containment** (Forsyth, Shaw, & Shepherd, 2022). Mentoring also encourages reflective practice, allowing officers to step back from the pressures of daily operations and examine their responses, challenges, and values. When facilitated by an experienced, emotionally attuned, and qualified mentor, mentoring becomes a space for personal development that naturally feeds into **professional growth**.

A stable, self-aware staff body is less reactive and better able to de-escalate conflict and creates safer environments improving conditions for all and aligning with both - human rights standards and rehabilitation goals.

Beyond the individual, mentoring in correctional environments contributes to **a more humane, rights-respecting institutional culture**. Staff who feel supported are more likely to model respectful, emotionally regulated behaviour toward incarcerated individuals thereby contributing to safer, more constructive relationships on the ground. Mentoring also facilitates **clearer boundaries, confidentiality, and ethical awareness** all of which are pillars of good practice in environments where power imbalances can easily be misused.

Case Study: The Unlocked Graduates Programme

One of the best-known examples of mentoring in prison environments is the *Unlocked Graduates* programme in the UK. This two-year leadership development initiative places highly educated young professionals in prisons as frontline officers, combining hands-on experience with structured training, mentoring, and academic work.

Mentoring plays a foundational role in this model providing participants with over 100 hours of personalised coaching, reflective conversations, and emotional support. The programme has contributed to **lower reoffending rates, improved institutional culture, and greater officer retention**, offering a compelling case for expanding structured mentoring across Europe (Fenn et al., 2024).

Section 3: Mentoring Models in Correctional Settings

Questions answered in this section:

- *What are common mentoring models?*
- *What do they look like in practice?*

Mentoring in prison environments can take different structural forms depending on who is delivering the mentoring and how the relationships are situated structurally, institutionally, and culturally. Each model has specific benefits and limitations, and the choice often depends on institutional culture, available resources, and staff readiness.

1. Internal Mentoring: This model involves mentoring relationships between two individuals from within the same prison whereby the dedicated mentor is a more experienced or senior officer mentoring a newly recruited colleague. It allows for immediate access, shared institutional and local understanding, and context-specific guidance. However, risks include blurred professional boundaries and reluctance to speak openly due to hierarchical dynamics or fear of judgment.

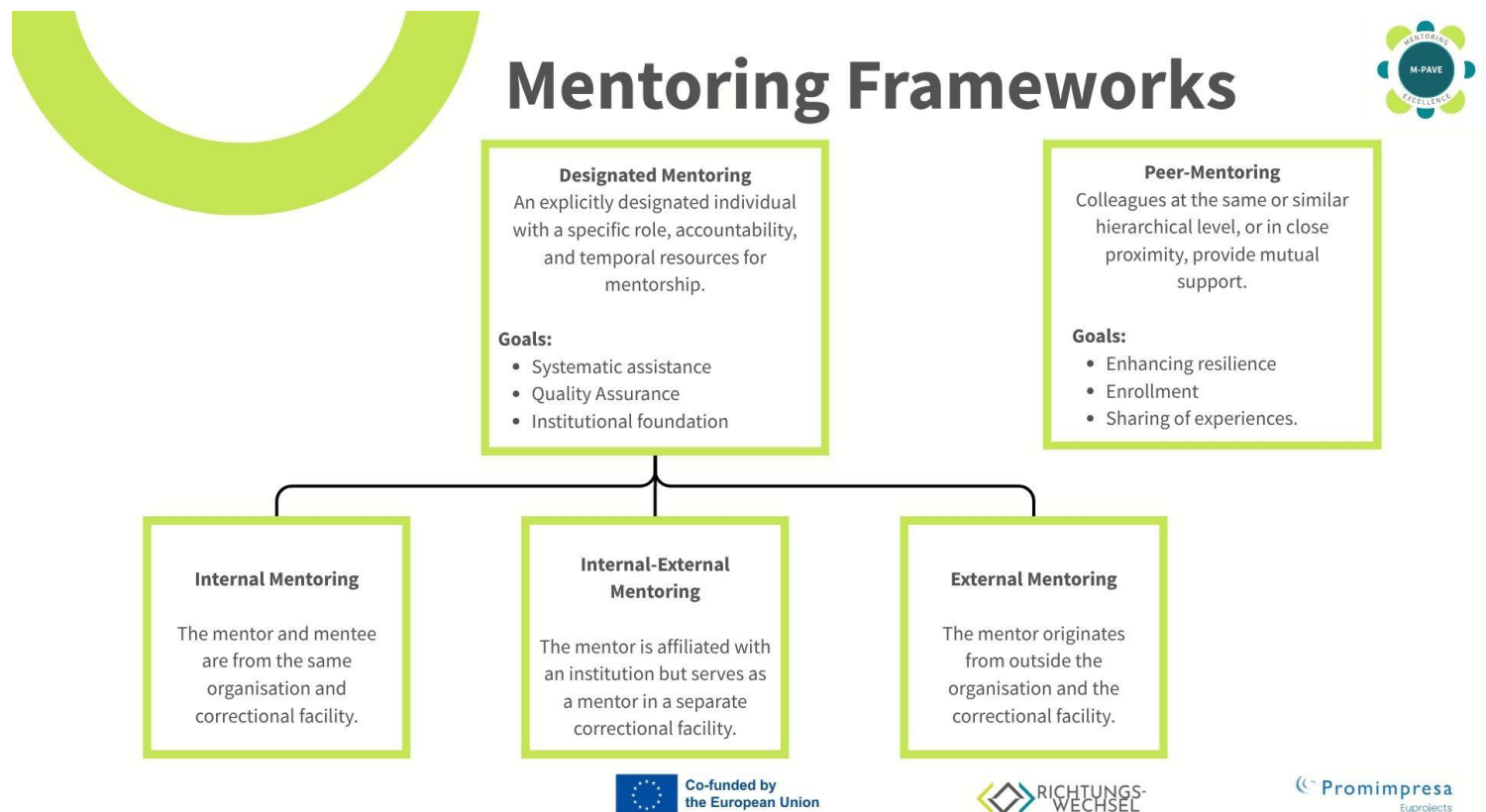
2. Internal-External Mentoring: In this approach, mentors are from outside the mentee's direct workplace but have worked within the broader prison system and are seconded as a mentor to their mentees' prison (e.g., mentors from another facility or regional administration). This can enhance psychological safety, reduce bias, and encourage more open dialogue. It balances familiarity with professional distance, though it may require increased coordination and logistical planning. Internal-External mentoring is used in the leadership development programme of *Unlocked Graduates* and is also the primary and recommended method for the present **MPAVE Project**.

3. External Mentoring: Here, the mentor is entirely external to the prison system, possibly a professional from another sector trained in mentorship or a former prison service employee. While this can provide objectivity and a fresh perspective, it may limit the mentor's understanding of (current) institutional realities unless supplemented by proper orientation.

4. Peer Mentoring: Peer mentoring is the most common and accessible form of mentoring in correctional institutions, offering valuable peer-to-peer support and fostering a sense of solidarity among colleagues. Peer mentoring involves informal or semi-formal support **either** between colleagues of similar rank or experience **or** by a more experienced colleague mentoring a newly recruited colleague (Howard et al., 2022). It helps mentees adapt to the realities of prison work, understand institutional culture, and develop confidence in applying their skills in a demanding environment. demonstrated how peer mentoring can strengthen professional relationships and provide an important support network within prisons. Thereby it reduces isolation, builds collective competence, reduces stress, and increases positive mental health outcomes (Farnese et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2022).

While it can provide valuable collegial support and insight into the daily realities of prison

work, it also comes with limitations. Peer mentoring often lacks consistent structure and long-term continuity, particularly given the existing workload and resource pressures faced by staff. Additionally, peer mentors are - by default - embedded in the same professional environment, navigating similar hierarchies and competing for the same opportunities, which can make open reflection or constructive critique more difficult. For this reason, peer mentoring can be most effective when complemented by structured supervision, external reflection opportunities, or periodic training refreshers ensuring that informal learning remains aligned with institutional goals and professional values (Coulling et al., 2024; Schultz & Ricciardelli, 2025).



C. Practice Activities

List of Practice Activities:

- *Activity 1: Personal Definition of Mentoring*
- *Activity 2: Case Scenario Discussion – “Mentoring Challenges in Action”*
- *Activity 3: Reflection Exercise - Mentoring & Me*

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or OeAD-GmbH. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Activity 1: Personal Definition of Mentoring

Purpose:

Help learners connect personally with the concept of mentoring and recognise its diverse interpretations.

Instructions to the learners:

Individually, write your own definition of what mentoring means to you. Then, pair up with a partner and compare your definitions. Remember that there is no right and wrong as your individual understanding will differ. Consider:

- How are your definitions similar or different?
- Do any definitions lean toward supervision, counselling, or coaching instead?

Debrief Questions:

- What elements appear essential in all definitions?
- What might be context-specific to detention environments?

Time: 15 minutes

Materials:

- Pens and paper or index cards for individual definitions
- Flipchart or whiteboard and markers to record key themes during the debrief
- *(Optional)* Sticky notes for learners to post their definitions or key words on a wall for group visibility and mapping

Facilitation Guidance:

- Encourage learners to reflect quietly for 3-5 minutes before sharing to allow genuine personal responses.
- Remind participants that diverse perspectives are valuable and there is no single correct definition.
- While pairs are discussing, circulate and listen in, noting common themes or interesting differences you can highlight later.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or OeAD-GmbH. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



- During debrief, record keywords or recurring ideas on a flipchart/board to create a “group definition map.”
- If discussions drift heavily toward supervision, counselling, or coaching, gently bring learners back to mentoring, pointing out overlaps but also distinctions.
- Emphasise the importance of context - especially in detention settings - while highlighting the core principles that carry across settings (e.g., trust, guidance, growth, support).

Activity 2: Case Scenario Discussion – “Mentoring Challenges in Action”

Purpose:

Apply key concepts of mentoring, including trust-building, confidentiality, and boundary-setting, to real scenarios from prison settings.

Instructions:

1. Divide into pairs (you may select your own partner or the facilitator may assign pairs to ensure variety in experience/background).
2. Together, select one of the case scenarios provided.
3. Discuss the following guiding questions:
 - What emotional or structural challenges are present?
 - Are there any risks related to boundaries, confidentiality, or role confusion?
 - *(Advanced)* What mentoring techniques would you implement, or how would you react in this case?

Time: 30 minutes

Materials:

- Case scenario handouts (one per pair, or projected on a screen/flipchart)
- Pens and paper for note-taking
- Flipchart/whiteboard and markers for group debrief
- *(Optional)* Sticky notes for pairs to post their key takeaways

Facilitation Guidance:

- *(Optional)* Form pairs deliberately and consider mixing newer and more experienced staff, or pairing individuals who don’t usually work together, to encourage diverse perspectives.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or OeAD-GmbH. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



Co-funded by
the European Union

- Remind learners that there is no single "right" answer - what matters is recognising risks, ethical considerations, and (if the participants feel confident enough) applying mentoring principles.
- Allow 15–20 minutes for pair discussions, then bring the group back together for a 10–15 minute debrief.
- During circulation, listen in and note themes (e.g., common risks, effective techniques) to highlight later.
- In the debrief, invite 2–3 pairs to share insights from each scenario; capture key points on a flipchart/board.
- Encourage comparisons across scenarios - are certain mentoring principles (trust, boundaries, confidentiality) universal, while others are context-dependent?
- Reinforce that prison settings add complexity: confidentiality may be limited, trust can be fragile, and boundary management is especially critical.

Case Scenarios:

1. **Trust Under Pressure**

A mentor meets their mentee - a prison officer - struggling after an argument with a colleague. The officer is hesitant to open up, fearing they will be judged.

→ *Explore how a mentor can build trust without pressuring the officer to share prematurely.*

2. **Boundary Tensions**

An officer feels they've grown too emotionally involved with a young incarcerated person who has started confiding in them.

→ *Discuss how empathy and boundaries can co-exist, and what mentoring guidance is needed.*

3. **Observing Misconduct**

A junior officer witnessed a senior colleague using sarcastic, demeaning language. They hesitated to intervene.

→ *Reflect on how mentoring could empower ethical action and address fear of retaliation.*

Activity 3: Reflection Exercise - Mentoring & Me

Purpose:

Encourage personal reflection and group sharing so learners can recognise how their past experiences, both positive or negative, influence their current mentoring attitudes, boundaries, and strategies.

Instructions:

1. Choose whether to reflect individually (quiet journaling) or in a small group of three (triads) to allow for sharing and dialogue.
2. Think about any prior experiences you've had with mentoring—whether as a mentor, mentee, or observer.
3. Consider the following guiding questions:
 - What made those experiences supportive or challenging?
 - Did any boundaries get blurred?
 - How did it shape your idea of good and bad mentoring?
4. *(Optional)* Use the prompts below to guide journaling or discussion:
 - "I felt most supported when..."
 - "A moment I wish had gone differently was..."
 - "I hope to offer mentees..."

Time: 20 minutes

Materials:

- Journals or paper for personal reflection
- Pens or pencils
- Flipchart/whiteboard and markers (for capturing themes during debrief)
- *(Optional)* Prompt cards with reflection questions or journaling starters

Facilitation Guidance:

- Add your own prompts or guiding questions.
- Offer participants the choice of individual or triad reflection - this respects different comfort levels with sharing personal experiences.
- Set a calm, reflective tone (e.g., ask for a few moments of quiet before beginning).

- If learners work in triads, suggest each person shares for 3–4 minutes without interruption before opening group discussion.
- Circulate gently but avoid hovering - this is a more personal activity, so respect privacy.
- In the debrief, invite volunteers (do not pressure anyone) to share insights or themes they noticed.
- Record common patterns on a flipchart (e.g., “trust was key,” “lack of boundaries created issues,” “role models shaped my approach”).
- Highlight that even negative experiences can provide valuable lessons for shaping one’s own mentoring style.
- Reinforce that mentoring is relational: Past experiences inform future practice, but boundaries, confidentiality, and trust remain central in correctional environments.

D. Trainer Notes and Guidance

In the following section, you will receive guidance on how to implement the four key points during your training facilitation.

1. Encourage learners to share personal stories to build engagement and relate theory to experience
2. Use open-ended questions to deepen understanding (e.g., “What challenges do you foresee in mentoring in your workplace?”)
3. Adapt scenarios to fit your institutional or local culture and policies
4. Watch for confusion between mentoring and other roles - clarify with examples

Encourage Personal Connection

Why it matters: Personal experiences make the concept of mentoring “real” and help participants recognise how trust, boundaries, and support play out in everyday work. Sharing also builds group trust and reduces the sense of isolation learners may feel in their roles.

How to do it:

- Invite participants to share stories where they were supported (formally or informally).
- Normalise that these experiences may include both positive and negative examples. Both are useful for learning.

- Acknowledge contributions respectfully, thanking participants for their openness.

Practical tips:

- Start with low-risk prompts before moving into more sensitive territory.
- Use pair or small-group sharing before whole-group debriefs to make it less intimidating.
- Model story-telling by sharing your own short example of a time you benefited from mentoring.

Gentle prompts:

- “Have you ever been supported in a way that really made a difference?”
- “What qualities do you think a good mentor must have in this context?”
- “What lessons did you take away from being mentored - or from not being mentored?”

Use Open-Ended Questions to Deepen Understanding

Why it matters: Open-ended questions encourage exploration and critical thinking rather than memorising “correct answers.” In prison contexts, this helps learners grapple with complexity and apply ideas to their reality.

How to do it:

- Pose broad questions and allow silence for reflection.
- Encourage multiple perspectives and avoid rushing to summarise too quickly.
- Invite quieter participants by asking, “Would anyone like to add a different angle?”

Sample questions:

- “What challenges do you foresee in mentoring in your specific workplace?”
- “How do power dynamics affect mentoring relationships in detention environments?”
- “Where might boundaries be difficult to maintain in your daily work?”
- “How might a mentor build trust?”

Practical tips:

- Write 2–3 questions on a flipchart or slide so participants can refer back during discussion.

- Acknowledge all contributions without judgment and avoid labelling responses as right or wrong.
- Summarise emerging themes at the end of discussions to consolidate learning.

Adapt Content to Institutional Context

Why it matters: Mentoring concepts are universal, but learners will engage more when examples feel directly relevant to their workplace. Prison institutions vary widely in policy, culture, and language customisation increases ownership and application.

How to do it:

- Modify case scenarios, role-plays, and examples to match the specific environment (e.g., prison landings, detention houses, specific departments).
- Replace generic terms with job titles, ranks, or cultural references familiar to learners.
- Connect theoretical models (e.g., peer mentoring, external mentoring) to actual structures already in place at the institution.

Practical tips:

- Consult local managers or staff before training to identify real-world challenges to weave in.
- Encourage participants to suggest “real-life equivalents” of the scenarios.
- Be flexible - if a scenario feels unrealistic to participants, invite them to reframe it together.

Clarify Confusion Between Mentoring and Other Roles

Why it matters: Learners often conflate mentoring with supervision, counselling, or coaching. Clarifying distinctions prevents role drift and helps participants understand what mentoring can and cannot achieve.

How to do it:

- Prepare a simple comparison chart (Mentor vs. Supervisor vs. Coach vs. Counsellor) for reference.
- Use your institutional context examples, such as:
 - *Supervisor:* Sets performance targets and evaluates - e.g.: *Custodial Manager*
 - *Mentor:* Offers guidance and reflection without judgment.
 - *Coach:* Focuses on specific skill improvement - e.g.: *National Coach*

- *Counsellor*: Deals with deeper emotional or psychological issues - e.g.: *Occupational Health Therapist*

Practical tips:

- When confusion arises, pause to explore: “If you were in this role, what would change if you were a mentor versus a supervisor?”
- Reinforce boundaries: Mentors support growth but don’t replace therapy or line management.
- Encourage learners to share situations where role confusion has occurred and work as a group to untangle it.

E. Resources and References

Resources

- Video on Mentoring Prison Officers:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEjpq6b8cDE>
- Video on Unlocked Graduates as a recruitment and mentoring programme:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMdOG82WEHk&t=2s>

References

- Bigembe, A. (2021). *How Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) can successfully select and train personnel in order to enhance professionalism and reduce employee turnover and other costs*. [Unpublished manuscript / report].
- Coulling R., Johnston M.S. and Ricciardelli, R. (2024). “We must be mentally strong”: exploring barriers to mental health in correctional services. *Front. Psychol.* 15:1258944. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1258944
- Farnese M., Bello, B. Livi, S., Barbieri, B., Giubiotti, B. *Learning the ropes: the protective role of mentoring in correctional police officer’s socialization process*. *Military Psychology*, 2016, 28(6).
- Farnese, M. L., Barbieri, B., Bellò, B., & Bartone, P. T. (2017). Don’t abandon hope all ye who enter here: The protective role of formal mentoring and learning processes on burnout in correctional officers. *WORK*, 58(3), 319-331.
<https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-172628>.

- Fenn, L., Jhawar, K., Porter, N., & Rai, K. (2024). How Prison Climate and Culture Shapes Prison Officers' Role Experiences and Retention. *Advancing Corrections Journal*, 17, 101–124.
- Forsyth, J., Shaw, J., & Shepherd, A. (2022). The support and supervision needs of prison officers working within prison environments. An empty systematic review. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 33(4), 475–490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2022.2085150>.
- Howard, M. Lobo, J., Mahajan, Y., Barkworth, J. *Effects of the workplace mentor program on correctional officer's perceptions of workplace culture*. Corrective Services NSW Research Brief, 2022, 9.
- Kletter, S. (2025). *Organizational support and staff retention in corrections: A secondary data analysis*. [Unpublished research / forthcoming study].
- Lambert, E. G., Dorris, M., & Williams, L. (2024). *The effects of structured mentorship and onboarding of novice nursing faculty*. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 14(2), 45–58. [https://doi.org/\[add if available\]](https://doi.org/[add if available])
- M4PRIS – Mentoring Programme for Prison Staff. (2022-2025). *Peer mentoring programme for prison staff: Mentors training course*. European Union. <https://m4pris-project.eu/wp3-peer-mentoring-programme-for-prison-staff/>
- Nixon, J., & Woodward, R. (2024). *Role exit in prison officers: Returning to "Civvy Street."* *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 63(1), 22–39.
- Schultz, W.J., Ricciardeli, R. Correctional officers and the ongoing health implications of prison work. *Health Justice* 13, 4 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-024-00308-2>
- Wittenberg, P. M. (1998). Successful mentoring in a correctional environment. *Federal Probation*, 62(2), 75–80.
- Zmugg, E. (2018). **Traumjob Gefängniswärter?** Welchen Herausforderungen sieht sich das Berufsbild des/der Justizwachebeamten/in gegenübergestellt?. Karl-Franzens-Universität.