

Module 5 - Mentoring in Context: Challenges & Opportunities

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. Understand the broader structural and cultural challenges within prisons that mentoring can help address.
2. Explain how mentoring can improve staff wellbeing & cohesion.
3. Recognise the contributions of mentoring to recruitment, retention, and institutional culture.
4. Understand how mentoring contributes to reflective leadership and staff motivation.

B. Core Theory Content

Section 1: Mentoring as a Driver

Questions answered in this section:

- *What systemic challenges in prison environments affect staff wellbeing, retention, and performance?*
- *In what ways does mentoring contribute to positive institutional culture, staff cohesion, and reflective leadership?*
- *What barriers can limit mentoring effectiveness, and what strategies help ensure sustainable, high-quality mentoring programs?*

Correctional institutions operate under persistent structural pressures that significantly influence both operational efficiency and staff wellbeing. Staffing shortages, high turnover, and widespread burnout are among the most pressing challenges facing prison services across Europe. Studies show that newly recruited prison officers often resign within the first two years of service, citing emotional strain, insufficient support, and unclear career progression (Institute for Government, 2025; Magnusson, J., 2025). This turnover exacerbates instability, generating constant recruitment demands and creating a demoralised workforce. Additionally, the prison environment is inherently high-stress: Officers must maintain safety, respond to conflict, and navigate complex relationships with incarcerated individuals, often without adequate psychological support. Coupled with the low prestige of the profession, limited training opportunities, and organisational cultures that prioritise compliance over staff development, these factors contribute to fatigue, disengagement, and mistrust within institutions (Harizanova & Tarnovska, 2013; Piotrowski, A., Sygit-Kowalkowska, E., & Hamzah, I., 2020; Supreme Audit Office of Poland, 2024; Sygit-Kowalkowska, E., Orlak, K., & Stolarski, M., 2023).

Additionally, mentoring plays a critical role in shaping institutional culture. Staff who feel supported and heard are more likely to engage with colleagues empathetically, model respectful interactions with incarcerated individuals, and contribute to a safer, more constructive environment. Mentoring relationships also reinforce adherence to human rights and professional standards, including the UN Mandela Rules and European Prison Rules (see Section E.), by fostering ethical reflection and consistent practice. In this way, mentoring not only improves individual wellbeing but also strengthens institutional legitimacy, professionalism, and public trust.

Mentoring also serves as a strategic lever for broader organisational change, fostering culture transformation, staff cohesion, and reflective leadership. By modelling ethical

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decision-making, empathy, and collaboration, mentoring gradually shifts organisational norms and expectations. Group mentoring sessions, in particular, build trust, strengthen collective problem-solving, and promote collegiality. Reflective mentoring supports leaders and staff in critically evaluating their own practice, adapting to challenges, and making decisions with both professional integrity and operational effectiveness in mind. In effect, mentoring embeds a culture of reflective practice, collaboration, and ethical accountability that extends beyond individual interactions to the wider institution.

Furthermore, mentoring provides an ideal platform for developing key professional competencies such as change management, proactive opportunity-seeking, and increases staff motivation. Whilst correctional environments may inhibit bottom-up change management and innovation, mentors can guide mentees to create organisational change through collective movement and collaboration. By identifying intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, mentors support mentees in setting meaningful, achievable goals aligned with both personal and institutional objectives. Mentoring relationships also encourage proactive career development by highlighting opportunities for skill-building, leadership practice, or cross-departmental collaboration. Exercises focusing on these areas, such as reflective planning, motivational mapping, and goal-setting with SMART, T-GROW, or OSKAR frameworks, enable mentees to integrate lessons from mentoring into practical strategies that enhance engagement, performance, and professional satisfaction.

Despite these clear advantages, mentoring programmes in correctional settings face significant barriers that must be addressed for effectiveness. Resistance or stigma may arise when staff perceive mentoring as unnecessary or indicative of weakness. Operational pressures, such as heavy caseloads, limited time, and high-intensity work environments, often constrain the availability of both mentors and mentees. Hierarchical cultures may inhibit open dialogue, with staff fearing judgment or breaches of confidentiality. Finally, informal mentoring programmes risk inconsistency, blurred boundaries, and lack of structured support. Without deliberate planning and institutional buy-in, these barriers can reduce engagement, diminish programme effectiveness, and compromise trust between participants and institutions.

These challenges and strategies are widely applicable across correctional systems. Trainers should adapt the examples and references to reflect national policy frameworks, institutional culture, and available resources

To maximise impact, mentoring must be embedded into organisational structures. Leadership buy-in is critical:

- Senior managers should openly endorse mentoring, model participation, and signal the value of reflective professional support.

👉 *You can use this guide to make a case for mentoring at leadership level highlighting its proven impact on wellbeing, retention, and organisational culture. It provides language, evidence, and structured arguments to engage senior decision-makers.*

- Integration with human resources and professional development pathways ensures mentoring is connected to induction, career progression, and ongoing training opportunities.

👉 *This guide offers practical frameworks and templates for aligning mentoring with HR functions, such as onboarding and development plans ensuring that mentoring becomes a recognised element of career development.*

- Structured training for both mentors and mentees, covering communication, ethical boundaries, and reflective practice, underpins safe and effective relationships.

👉 *You can use this guide's modules and activities directly to design or deliver mentor training sessions. It provides ready-to-use content, reflective exercises, and facilitation tools to build confidence and consistency across mentoring pairs.*

- Recognising mentors' contributions through incentives or public acknowledgment enhances motivation and elevates the prestige of the role.
- Evaluating systematic evaluation of outcomes, such as staff retention, wellbeing metrics, and engagement surveys, ensures programmes remain relevant and responsive to organisational needs.

When mentoring is institutionalised, it ceases to be a peripheral support activity and becomes a central pillar of workforce resilience, professionalisation, and sustainable staff development.

In conclusion, mentoring in correctional contexts is a multifaceted tool that simultaneously addresses systemic challenges, enhances individual wellbeing, and strengthens institutional culture. When embedded strategically, supported through training, and aligned with organisational priorities, mentoring fosters resilient, reflective,

and motivated staff, contributes to cohesive teams, and drives cultural change that benefits the workforce, the institution, and the individuals it serves. By integrating structured mentoring frameworks, reflective practice, and explicit attention to professional development, prison services can build a workforce capable of navigating high-stress environments with confidence, ethical integrity, and collaborative professionalism.

Section 2: Mentoring as a Catalyst for Leadership & Growth

Questions answered in this section:

- *How can mentoring influence leadership development and reflective practice among staff?*
- *In what ways does mentoring support professional growth and staff resilience?*
- *How can mentoring contribute to positive culture change and improved staff cohesion?*

Leadership Development

Mentoring is a powerful tool for cultivating leadership at all levels of prison staff. Leadership in correctional environments requires a balance of authority, empathy, and decision-making under pressure. Mentors provide role modelling, guidance, and reflective space for mentees to practice leadership skills safely. By discussing real-life scenarios, navigating ethical dilemmas, and reflecting on personal responses to challenges, mentees develop emotional intelligence, confidence, and resilience - qualities essential for effective leadership. Importantly, mentoring encourages reflective leadership, where officers consider not only operational outcomes but also the human impact of their decisions on colleagues and incarcerated individuals. Over time, this reflective approach fosters leaders who are self-aware, adaptive, and capable of guiding others through complex environments.

Professional Growth and Staff Resilience

Prisons are high-stress workplaces with systemic pressures, including staffing shortages, high turnover, and operational risk. Mentoring helps staff transform these pressures into growth opportunities. Through consistent, structured dialogue, mentors help mentees identify strengths, address development areas, and set achievable goals for their career progression. Mentoring also normalises challenges such as bore-out, stress, and burnout, providing practical strategies for coping and promoting wellbeing. Evidence from programs like Unlocked Graduates shows not only that formal mentoring increases retention and reduces emotional strain, but also that staff can create meaningful change within their institutions if supported to do so by their mentors (see Fenn et al., 2024). By

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fostering problem-solving skills, adaptability, and self-efficacy, mentoring equips staff to manage operational challenges - going above and beyond their duties - without sacrificing professional development or wellbeing.

Culture Change and Staff Cohesion

Mentoring does not only affect individual growth it can transform institutional culture. In environments historically characterised by hierarchy, compliance-focused practices, and limited support, mentoring introduces relational, trust-based practices that model collaboration and empathy. When staff experience mentoring that is consistent, supportive, and reflective, they are more likely to extend these behaviours in their interactions with colleagues and incarcerated individuals. This creates a ripple effect: improved communication, reduced conflict, increased mutual support, and more ethical, consistent application of institutional and international policies.

Mentoring thus acts as a lever for cultural transformation, promoting **shared values**, **psychological safety**, and a **sense of collective responsibility**. By embedding mentoring in organisational structures and linking it with professional development pathways, institutions reinforce these cultural shifts over time.

Section 3: Biases in Mentoring and Their Impact on Growth and Culture

Questions answered in this section:

- *How can mentors' biases affect mentee development?*
- *How do biases impact institutional culture, leadership, and change management?*
- *What strategies can mentors use to mitigate bias and support equitable growth?*

Understanding Bias in Mentoring

Bias refers to the unconscious or conscious assumptions, stereotypes, or preconceptions that influence how we perceive others. In a mentoring context, biases can shape who mentors choose to invest in, how they interpret mentees' behavior, and what opportunities they make available. In correctional environments, hierarchical structures, operational pressures, and entrenched cultures can intensify these biases.

- **Hierarchical Bias:** Assuming that lower-ranking staff or newer officers lack potential for leadership or strategic thinking.
- **Personality Bias:** Judging mentees as “difficult” or “resistant” based on attitude or communication style, rather than evaluating their actual capability or motivation.
- **Confirmation Bias:** Noticing only behaviours that confirm pre-existing beliefs about a mentee and ignoring evidence of growth or potential.

- **Similarity Bias:** Preferring mentees who are similar to the mentor in background, values, or work style, which can limit diversity of thought and opportunity.
- **Past Performance Bias:** Discounting a mentee's future potential because of mistakes or previous struggles, rather than focusing on learning and improvement.

Impact of Bias

Biases can significantly affect how mentors interact with mentees and the opportunities they provide.

- **Limited Opportunities:** Mentors may unconsciously withhold challenges, responsibilities, or visibility from certain mentees.
- **Reduced Trust:** Mentees who sense judgment or low expectations may disengage, eroding the mentor-mentee relationship.
- **Inequitable Support:** Some staff receive more encouragement and guidance, reinforcing institutional hierarchies and perpetuating inequity.
- **Stifled Growth:** Bias can prevent mentees from exploring leadership potential, innovating, or participating in change initiatives.

Bias in mentoring extends beyond individual relationships. Unchecked, it can reinforce negative cultural patterns.

- **Blame Culture:** Leaders or colleagues may attribute mistakes to personal failings rather than systemic factors, discouraging initiative.
- **Low Cohesion:** Staff may feel unsupported or excluded, reducing teamwork and collaboration.
- **Stagnant Leadership:** If mentors only invest in certain staff, the pool of future leaders narrows, hindering organisational adaptability.
- **Resistance to Change:** Mentees who feel underestimated or undervalued may avoid contributing to innovation or improvement initiatives.

Conversely, **mentors who actively address biases** contribute to:

- Greater equity in development opportunities
- More reflective, resilient, and diverse leadership pipelines
- Enhanced trust and cohesion among staff
- Positive, inclusive shifts in institutional culture

Strategies to Mitigate Bias

Mentors can adopt several practical strategies to minimize the influence of bias:

1. **Self-Awareness:** Regularly reflect on your own assumptions about mentees and challenge automatic judgments.
2. **Structured Frameworks:** Use objective tools (T-GROW, OSKAR, SMART goals) to guide sessions, keeping the focus on behaviours, goals, and evidence rather than perceptions.
3. **Diverse Perspectives:** Seek input from colleagues or supervisors to check assumptions.
4. **Focus on Strengths:** Emphasise mentees' capabilities, progress, and potential rather than limitations or past mistakes.
5. **Equitable Challenge Opportunities:** Offer mentees responsibilities, exposure, and feedback regardless of perceived rank, attitude, or personality.
6. **Reflective Practice:** Debrief sessions to consider whether bias influenced your guidance and adjust strategies accordingly.

Link to Change Management, Leadership, and Culture

By actively addressing bias, mentors help mentees develop confidence, resilience, and reflective leadership skills. This creates a **virtuous cycle**:

Mentors challenge their assumptions → mentees access more opportunities → mentees demonstrate capability → institutional culture shifts toward trust, equity, and collaboration.

In correctional settings, this contributes to **culture change** by promoting:

- Inclusive leadership pipelines
- Staff cohesion across hierarchies
- Reflective decision-making and problem-solving
- Adoption of positive, constructive responses to conflict and systemic challenges

C. Practice Activities

List of Practice Activities:

- *Activity 1: Institutional Challenge Mapping*
- *Activity 2: Quick-Win Action Card*
- *Activity 3: Bias and Assumption Reflection*

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Activity 1: Institutional Challenge Mapping

Purpose: Help participants identify how systemic issues within prisons (staff shortages, burnout, low morale, conflict, etc.) affect their daily work and interactions. The activity makes abstract challenges tangible and highlights points where mentoring can have an impact.

Time: 20 minutes

Materials:

- List of common institutional challenges (printed or projected)
- Flipchart paper or whiteboard
- Markers or pens

Instructions:

- Provide participants with a list of common challenges, e.g., staff shortages, burnout, low morale, interpersonal conflict, high workloads.
- Ask groups to map each challenge onto its practical impact, creating “chains of effect.”

For example:

- *Staff shortage → double shifts → fatigue → reduced patience with incarcerated people*
- *Burnout → disengagement → poor communication with colleagues → errors or tension*
- Encourage participants to explore both direct and indirect consequences.
- Each group presents one or two key chains of impact to the wider group.
- Facilitator highlights recurring themes and draws attention to areas where mentoring could intervene (e.g., reflection, peer support, coping strategies).

Common Challenges

1. Staff Shortages
2. Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion
3. Low Morale
4. High Turnover / Retention Issues

5. Conflict (Interpersonal or Operational)
6. Hierarchical and Rigid Culture
7. Blame Culture / Fear of Repercussion
8. Limited Training or Professional Development Opportunities
9. High-Stress Environment
10. Resource Constraints
11. Ineffective Communication Channels
12. Resistance to Change

Facilitation Guidance:

- Emphasise that there are no “wrong” mappings as different perspectives reveal the complexity of systemic challenges.
- Prompt reflection with questions such as:
 - “Which of these challenges affects you most personally?”
 - “Where could mentoring realistically provide support or mitigation?”
 - “Are there challenges that could be addressed collectively rather than individually?”

Activity 2: Quick-Win Action Card

Purpose: Personalise the learning by encouraging participants to commit to a small, achievable action that strengthens mentoring in their context. This bridges theory and reflection with immediate practical steps.

Time: 10 minutes

Materials:

- Index cards or sticky notes
- Pens

Instructions:

- Ask each participant to consider one tangible action they can take in the next week to reinforce mentoring in their workplace.

Examples:

- Invite a colleague to reflect on a recent challenge.
- Speak to HR about allocating time for mentoring sessions.

- Offer to facilitate a brief peer reflection session on a recent incident.
- Encourage participants to choose actions that are realistic and achievable in their current role.
- Participants can either:
 - Post their “Quick-Win” cards on a board for collective inspiration, or
 - Keep the card private for personal accountability.
- Invite volunteers to share why they chose their action and how it might support mentoring or wellbeing.

Facilitation Guidance:

- Reinforce that small actions can have meaningful ripple effects across teams and culture.
- Encourage reflection on motivation: “Why does this action matter to you and your colleagues?”
- Emphasise follow-up: Suggest participants review their action in a week and note any outcomes or challenges.

Activity 3: Bias and Assumption Reflection

Purpose: Help mentors identify and challenge their own assumptions about mentees’ capabilities, motivations, or potential for growth. This activity encourages reflective practice, awareness of unconscious biases, and consideration of how these perceptions may affect mentoring effectiveness and institutional culture change.

Time: 25–30 minutes

Materials:

- Printed or digital reflection worksheets
- Scenario cards with brief mentee profiles
- Flipchart or whiteboard for group discussion
- Markers or pens

Instructions:

- Each participant receives 2–3 short mentee scenario cards, do not reveal the purpose of bias reflections.

Examples:

- A junior officer with low confidence and limited influence in their team, perceived as “not leadership material.”
- An officer with a challenging attitude who often questions authority.
- A peer mentor who struggles to implement change in daily routines.
- Participants complete a worksheet for each scenario with prompts:
 - What assumptions might you make about this mentee’s ability to grow, lead, or implement change?
 - How could these assumptions influence your mentoring approach?
 - What strengths or potential might you be overlooking?
 - How could you adapt your mentoring to support growth despite your initial impressions?
- Form small groups of 3–4 participants.
- Each person shares one scenario and their reflections on their assumptions.
- Groups discuss patterns they notice, such as common biases related to hierarchy, attitude, or past performance.
- Encourage the group to brainstorm strategies to challenge assumptions, including:
 - Asking open-ended questions to discover motivations and potential.
 - Focusing on concrete behaviors and achievements rather than perceived personality traits.
 - Encouraging incremental steps and celebrating small wins.
 - Revisiting assumptions regularly as the mentee demonstrates growth.

Facilitation Guidance:

- Avoid pointing out biases too early, make space for true reflections
 - Emphasise that unchecked biases can limit mentees’ opportunities, reduce trust, and hinder institutional culture change.
 - Highlight that the purpose is not to feel guilty, but to increase awareness and consciously adapt mentoring strategies.
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D. Trainer Notes and Guidance

Understanding Systemic Challenges

Why it matters: Participants need to connect theory to their real-life environment to see mentoring's relevance.

How to do it:

- Encourage participants to share personal experiences of stress, hierarchy, and workload.
- Use visual mapping (flipcharts, sticky notes) to make abstract challenges tangible.
- Draw attention to patterns across groups without making it about individual blame.

Practical tips:

- Reflect back the systemic patterns they identify to validate their observations.
- Avoid letting the discussion turn into complaint sessions instead focus on *impacts* and *potential mentoring interventions*.

Gentle prompts:

- “Which challenges do you encounter most often?”
- “How could mentoring realistically help mitigate this?”
- “Are there patterns across different teams we should notice?”

Bias Awareness

Why it matters: Mentors' unconscious biases can limit mentees' growth and affect culture change. Participants must explore biases safely.

How to do it:

- Use anonymised mentee profiles for reflection exercises.
- Emphasise that bias is normal and the goal is awareness and adaptation.
- Ask participants to list assumptions and then challenge them through existing evidence or alternative perspectives.
- Be mindful of the participants' sensitivity to the topic and create room for discussions before starting activities.

Practical tips:

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- Pair reflection with discussion to normalise sharing insights.
- Encourage participants to develop one concrete action to counter bias.
- Avoid naming participants' biases instead focus on general patterns and reflection.

Gentle prompts:

- “Which assumptions might you unconsciously make about a mentee?”
- “How might these assumptions affect your guidance?”
- “What practical steps can you take to avoid limiting a mentee’s growth?”

Culture Change & Staff Cohesion

Why it matters: Mentoring is most effective when participants see how small actions ripple through the institution.

How to do it:

- Highlight case studies where mentoring improved communication, trust, or collaboration.
- Encourage participants to identify opportunities for mentoring to influence team norms.
- Discuss incremental approaches as even small actions can build momentum for change.

Practical tips:

- Recognise small successes participants have had in influencing culture.
- Use examples from previous modules.
- Facilitate discussion on how reflective mentoring spreads positive behaviours.

Gentle prompts:

- “What small mentoring action could make a difference this week?”
- “How can trust and collaboration be modelled by mentors?”
- “Which behaviours could you encourage to change culture over time?”

Supporting knowledge for Growth, Motivation & Change Management

Why it matters: Mentoring supports proactive, motivated staff who can contribute to organisational change.

How to do it:

- Encourage participants to identify motivators and obstacles for themselves and mentees.
- Connect mentoring sessions to career development and operational improvement opportunities.

Practical tips:

- Ask participants to plan one achievable action that links mentoring to growth.
- Emphasise that mentoring is not just reactive; it can create strategic improvements in teams.

Gentle prompts:

- “What opportunities exist in your role to support a mentee’s growth?”
- “How can mentoring help staff take initiative?”
- “Which small steps could lead to meaningful changes in culture or performance?”

E. Resources and References

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