

MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB

MENTORING PROGRAM

Introduction

Early career journalists have consistently given feedback to the MPC's The Edit events that they feel the need for more professional support in their workplace and help to build a stronger rapport between senior and junior staff. In response, we have devised a mentoring program that aims to develop some of those relationships and foster that support.

This is a pilot project, which will be evaluated and, if needs be, changed. We will be liaising with mentors and mentees to ensure both parties are getting benefit from the program. The program is open to all early career journalists with up to seven years' experience.

It is part of the MPC's mission to promote quality journalism and a mentoring program offers a good opportunity to build the professional relationships that will help sustain quality journalism in an era of rapid change.

How the program works

Our initial approach is to connect mentees and mentors who are not both from the same media organisation. The intention is to increase the likelihood of honest exchanges, where the mentor's guidance is not clouded by their own place in a newsroom and the mentee's candour is not compromised by the mentor's seniority.

To allay any concerns about confidentiality, talent poaching and commercial sensitivities, we have developed guidelines to which we expect all participants to adhere. We also require the early career journalist's supervisors to sign off on their participation.

The Melbourne Press Club's role will be to facilitate connections and oversee the program. The Club won't be directly involved in individual relationships.

What's in it for me?

Mentees: The chance to connect with colleagues who can share insights, observations and wisdom gleaned from their time in the industry. It could potentially provide access to a network of journalists from outside your media organisation. Most importantly, it will help give you additional professional support.

Mentors: The opportunity to engage with different (and often fresh) ways of thinking about journalism and the industry. There are great rewards in helping a colleague to progress and develop. It is also an opportunity to give something back to the industry and help sustain it.

MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB

MENTORING PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Mentoring – what to look for

Many journalists have for years been “informal” mentors to less experienced colleagues, providing advice, support and friendship over coffee, a sandwich or a glass of wine. The impetus and goal behind that collegial support is exactly the same for a formal mentoring program: to offer support, guidance and insight to early career journalists. It doesn’t matter where it happens – over a coffee, or on the phone or via email – the fundamental goal is to establish a partnership and exchange information in a confidential and supportive environment. It can be a conversation about skills: “What does it take to be an investigative reporter?” It could be about newsroom structure: “How do I get ahead when there are so few opportunities in the newsroom?” Or it could be about professional dilemmas: “I spoke to a witness about the accident and now they’re denying I even asked their permission to be quoted”. Or it could be versions of all three.

How it works

For mentees, this is not about charting a detailed career path or trying to find another job – although some of the discussions may well lead to that outcome. There will also be times when venting about the chief of staff or news director (as cathartic as that may be!) won’t really get the discussion very far. For mentors, trying to explain to a younger journalist what they should do by referring to what you used to do when you were their age is not always going to be helpful. It is not about providing legal advice, which is best left to legal counsel. And it is not about being indiscreet or searching for a story about how another media organisation operates.

The role

Mentors: The best guide on how to mentor is to reflect on journalists in the industry who gave you advice – those you felt a connection with and instinctively sought out. Others gave advice that might have stayed with you but was delivered with all the charm of the Soup Nazi, and you probably didn’t have much regard for the people skills of the journo in question. So the trick is to try to build a respectful relationship with your mentee. It is about bringing the skills of good journalism to the task – good listening, asking hard questions where necessary and respecting confidences. In this case though, it’s all off the record! Trust is non-negotiable. Empathy is important. The mentee will need to know your interest is sincere. You will also need to balance advice and action with guiding the mentee to his or her resolution. Sometimes the mentoring will be very practical. A mentee will want to know, for example, how best to deal with a press secretary who is giving them problems. At other times the issue will be a more nuanced one, such as dealing with rivalry with a colleague.

Mentees: It is the mentee’s responsibility to drive the process and set topics for discussion. Realistic expectations about what you’ll get from the relationship are fundamental. Your mentor is not a door-opener or just a careers advisor. They are on your side but expect some tough love! It will not be a relationship that assumes you’re right every time, hard done by or without blame. The mentor will call your behaviour out if he or she thinks it’s appropriate to do so. It’s your responsibility to be honest about your circumstances and yourself. That may mean admitting you stuffed up a story, or that your digital skills are not as advanced as they should be, or that you don’t actually understand federal politics that well. Mentees need to be able to ask the “stupid” questions of their mentors, to reveal what they don’t know and confess to their professional doubts and dilemmas.