Conference Session Report:

7 Sept 2026

salad
South African Learning Alliance for the DHS

Lessons in organising and scaling up mentorship as workplace-based support in health systems

Introduction

On 7 September 2026, the South African Learning Alliance for the District Health System (SALAD) hosted a one-hour organised session at the World Congress on Public Health in Cape Town, South Africa. Lucy Gilson of the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Beth Engelbrecht, formerly of the Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness, Adjunct Professor and coordinator of the UCT Oliver Tambo Fellowship/health leadership postgraduate diploma mentoring activities, facilitated the session, which focused on the role of mentorship in strengthening health systems through the experiences of the South African District Health System (DHS) as considered through SALAD.

Mentoring is voluntary, relational and developmental, informal yet structured, in which a more experienced leader guides and shares experiences with a less experienced mentee, but the mentee holds the process

The session was built on SALAD's shared understanding that leadership development is critical to health system strengthening and that, given South Africa's experience, formal training programmes must be complemented by workplace-based leadership support.

The event featured the following panellists, listed alongside their mentorship experience:

- Karabelo Segwai: Bojanala District in North West province, South Africa, and a participant in both the mentorship activities of the UCT postgraduate diploma in health leadership and higher-education supported mentorship and capacity strengthening programmes in North West province.
- Tumelo Assegaai: Convenor and lecturer within the postgraduate diploma programme in health leadership at UCT (the Oliver Tambo Fellowship Programme) and as a member of the African Health Collaborative funded by the Mastercard Foundation.
- Reno Morar: Director, Medical School, Nelson Mandela University, where he mentors staff and students. Reno is also a lifelong learner who has sought mentors throughout his career.
- Krish Vallabhjee: Former senior manager within the Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness and an Adjunct Associate Professor with UCT, supporting mentorship within the health leadership postgraduate diploma as well as organising a mentorship programme for 12 hospitals across five provinces for the Clinton Foundation.

What is SALAD?

Lucy Gilson provided a brief overview of SALAD as a learning network and community of practice focused on the DHS as the foundational health system governance platform, bringing together researchers and decision-makers across provinces to:

1. Enable bottom-up knowledge generation and learning
2. Identify policy and strategic needs across settings and support implementation
3. Strengthen the DHS for improved health outcomes

To learn more about SALAD, access this webinar or explore other SALAD knowledge products, scan this QR Code

SALAD, though loosely constructed, is held together by a Secretariat at the University of the Western Cape and UCT and led by a Steering Group of about 15 members. The Provincial Engagement Working Group holds monthly experience-sharing discussions that reach across South Africa's nine provinces, creating a safe space for honest dialogue about challenges and successes. Other thematic working groups focus on a variety of topics that evolve as the needs and interests change. Across these structures, knowledge is mobilised through publications, webinars, annual retreats, conference presentations and other platforms, with the overall goal of driving learning about the DHS.

The personal value of mentorship as a mentee and a mentor

Karabelo Segwai shared the positive role mentorship has played in his career progression within the South African DHS, from mentee to mentor. He began as a mentee in the Oliver Tambo Fellowship Programme shortly after taking on the role of acting chief director in Bojanala District, North West. The fellowship, which encompasses a postgraduate diploma programme for health system managers based at UCT, combined academic study with structured mentorship. He entered the programme as he took on the new role, and as the University of the Western Cape, UCT and North West University entered a partnership with his district to develop a leadership and management programme.

Mentorship is about a mindset shift wherein you move towards a supportive process where you view mentees as equals and work with them to forge their own path. The mentor must actively listen and pose powerful questions.

When establishing a mentorship programme in North West, it was important to develop clear terms of reference to ensure legitimacy. However, it is important to select mentors who embrace ethical leadership, not just those who were available or willing. A supported pairing process empowered mentees to select from a pool of mentors. Both parties then signed a social contract that clarified the relationship's objectives and expected outcomes. Ongoing engagements were tracked, while adding a third party, higher-education institutions, brought useful outside perspectives.

Sharing his experience as a mentor, Karabelo noted that the transition from clinician to manager is not well supported through formal training, and mentorship programmes can support only a limited number of mentees. However, by creating a psychologically safe space for a mentee to open up, the mentee can begin to share experiences and also take advice. One key message he shared was to look beyond weaknesses and focus on strengths and skills, showing mentees they have the power to address the issues they face. His mentee shared that the whole process made them more self-aware and ambitious –now able to reach their full potential.

In North West, the mentorship process focuses on four Fs:

Facts
Feelings
Findings
Future

He ended by briefly reflecting on the power of his work as a mentor. He found it enhanced his self-awareness. Although he had anxiety before the engagement began, he was pleased to see his ability to build a trusting and vulnerable relationship with his mentee. Preparation before those sessions was critical to building confidence and helping him enjoy the relationship.

Lessons for sustaining a mentorship program

In the second half of the session, all four panellists shared thoughts on what makes a mentorship program successful and how to sustain it. The core themes are described below.

High-level support and strategic vision

In South Africa, support from the provincial head of department (HOD) is critical to embed mentorship within the provincial department's strategic vision. Once that endorsement and vision

are codified, programmes must also be embedded at all levels of the system, with endorsement from the highest levels of leadership.

Operationalisation and systems thinking

At its core, formal mentorship systems are not about a relationship between two people; rather, they are a strategic intervention for leadership development. Mentorship can support succession planning. To do this, it needs structure and accountability from both sides, with each accountable to the other, to avoid another "traditional" power relationship.

Mentorship requires deliberately created structures. Anchoring the program not only at senior levels but also with lower-level managers, by empowering them, can further support its sustainability. Communities of practice can also share experience and strengthen the overall mentorship approach.

Mentorship programmes complement existing human resource processes, and can be coordinated and supported by human resource departments or equivalent structures. For a sustained, system-wide approach, panellists recommended integrating mentorship into performance management processes, but only alongside procedures that ensure those involved understand what they are being asked to do and that mentors are selected based on their values and leadership approaches.

Capacity building and psychological safety

Even with endorsement and supportive structures, mentorship programmes do not exist in a vacuum and require broader organisational culture initiatives to build the psychological safety needed for mentorship to succeed.

"Mentorship is part of a learning environment. You must be psychologically safe to learn."
– Reno Morar

Psychological safety is critical for all learning and therefore critical for a successful mentorship programme. Establishing it requires addressing organisational culture beyond the programme itself. Managers at all levels have to foster that environment. Everyone involved must also be willing to give and receive feedback respectfully.

Not all managers are equipped to mentor well without support. They need proper preparation on the terms of reference and the differences between a mentor/mentee relationship and a supervisor/supervisee relationship. Training should focus on the soft skills needed to build trusting interpersonal relationships rather than "traditional leadership" driven by edict, policy, and standard operating procedures. There must be a mind shift away from corrective action to growth and development.

Benefits of mentorship

Panellists highlighted many bidirectional benefits of mentorship, as those involved understand each other's stories, broaden their understanding of organisational challenges, and consider perspectives beyond hierarchical structures. It can also happen without a formal label, and yet still be quite impactful. It is important to look for those who are wiser than you, more experienced than you, and to embrace what you can learn from them.

Audience reflections

Lucy Gilson invited those in the room to speak with their neighbour regarding how systematic mentoring can be implemented and scaled to support DHS leadership. Volunteers then shared the following perspectives:

High-level endorsement:

- If you want institutional mentorship in the South African DHS, it is critical to have the HOD engaged and endorsing the program. This enables it to be part of strategic planning and supports the mentor's coaching and training.

Psychological safety and organisational culture:

- Setting the expectation for mentorship as soon as someone enters an organisation can help them feel supported on their new journey.
- Good mentorship is going to encourage people to want to solve problems, to ask questions, to challenge difficulties. If we want good leaders to emerge in the hierarchical system, it needs to be responsive, listen to challenging questions, and welcome new ideas to solve problems.

"Mentorship requires an organisational culture where people feel they can make a mistake."

- Beyond just the structure of a mentorship programme, there needs to be an organisational culture where people feel they can make mistakes.
- Consider cross-sectoral mentorship relationships and ensure mentors understand that the goal of the programme is to create new versions of themselves.

Capacitating mentors:

- Mentorship goals can be integrated into KPIs, but it is still important to consider that not everyone can be a good mentor. If mentors are not properly trained, they can further perpetuate toxic environments.
- It is important to frame mentorship as a means towards capacitating the next generation, who then nurture and lead the organisation moving forward. In the context of health, that literally means mentoring those who will care for mentors in their old age.

Balancing formality and systematic implementation with "spoiling the magic":

- KPIs can lead to a system driven by compliance rather than one of substantive engagement. Formalising the system this way risks making it a "scoring-based" endeavour rather than one focused on value-add.
- Engaging higher education institutions as an outside third party, somewhat removed from the current environment, can help provide needed insight.
- There should be flexibility for mentors and mentees to find each other, and it should not be driven solely by organisational expectations around KPIs.

To learn more about SALAD and access its resources:

SALAD hosts a Repository of information generated through the network, organised by thematic groups: The DHS in South Africa; community-oriented primary care; monitoring, evaluation and learning; health financing; leadership; and quality health systems.

To join SALAD events or learn more about the Network, contact SALADLearning@gmail.com.

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