

How to mentor and pair *with a skills matrix*

The expertise to close most of your skill gaps is already in the room, in the people who are strong where others are weak. A skills matrix turns that into a plan: it shows exactly who is expert in each skill and who needs to develop it, so you can pair them deliberately. Peer mentoring is faster, cheaper and more continuous than external training, and it spreads the knowledge that would otherwise leave when one person does.

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Reading time 12 min • **Method** Upleashed 0 to 5 capability framework • **Updated** May 2026

THE SHORT ANSWER

To mentor and pair with a skills matrix, use it to find each skill's experts, the people at the level that can train others, and the people who need to develop that skill, then pair them deliberately. Match on the specific skill, and on goals and availability, so the knowledge transfers. In short: **the matrix shows who can teach what and who needs to learn it, so you can build peer-mentoring pairs that close gaps from within, faster and cheaper than external training, while spreading single-person expertise.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **The teachers are already there.** The matrix surfaces who is expert in each skill, the people who can train others, ready to mentor.
- **Pair on the specific skill.** Match an expert to a learner skill by skill, not by vague seniority, so the knowledge actually transfers.
- **Peer learning beats external training.** It is faster, cheaper, continuous, and keeps knowledge inside the team.
- **It spreads single-person expertise.** Pairing the lone expert with a learner directly attacks your single points of failure.
- **Match on goals and availability too.** The best pairing aligns skill with the learner's aspiration and both people's time.

— START HERE

Your best trainers are *already here*

When a skill gap appears, the instinct is to look outward, a course, a consultant, a hire. But a skills matrix usually shows the answer is already in the team: someone strong in exactly the area someone else is weak. Mentoring and pairing turn that latent expertise into development, and the matrix is what makes it **deliberate rather than accidental**, pairing the right teacher with the right learner, skill by skill.

Find who can teach, and who needs to learn

The matrix gives you both halves of every pairing. It shows the **experts**, the people scored at the level that can train others, for each skill, and it shows who is **below the target level** and needs to develop it. Reading a single skill's column tells you instantly who could mentor and who would benefit, replacing a vague sense of "Aisha's good at compliance" with a clear, matrix-wide view of every teaching and learning opportunity in the team.

Pair deliberately, skill by skill

Good pairing is **specific**. Rather than assigning a senior person as a general mentor, you match an expert to a learner on the exact skill to be developed, so the knowledge transfer is targeted and the sessions have a clear purpose. Matching on the precise skill, and ideally on the learner's goals and both people's availability, is what separates a mentoring relationship that produces real capability from one that becomes an occasional, aimless coffee.

Spread the knowledge that would otherwise leave

Pairing is also your best defence against **single points of failure**. When the matrix shows a critical skill held by only one person, that is a red flag, and the direct remedy is to pair that expert with a learner so the knowledge spreads before the expert moves on. Peer mentoring this way turns capability from something locked in one head into something the team shares, which is exactly how organisations stop knowledge draining out when an experienced person leaves.

— WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Knowledge walks out *the door*

Every team holds expertise in a few heads, and when those people leave, it goes with them. Pairing experts with learners while they are still there is how a team retains and multiplies its knowledge, and a skills matrix is what makes the pairing deliberate.

8%

GARTNER, 2024

of organisations have reliable workforce skills data, so most miss the mentoring matches sitting in plain sight.

70:20:10

DEVELOPMENT HEURISTIC

holds that most growth comes from on-the-job and social learning, the territory of mentoring and pairing.

85%

WEF, 2025

of employers plan to prioritise upskilling, and internal mentoring is among the most cost-effective ways to do it.

External training has its place, but it is slow, costly and detached from the actual work, and it does nothing to spread the knowledge already inside the team. Peer mentoring is the opposite: it is faster and cheaper, it happens in the flow of real tasks, and it makes knowledge-sharing continuous rather than a one-off event, while reinforcing the mentor's own mastery in the process. A skills matrix is what turns this from good intention into system: it reveals every place where one person's strength meets another's gap, so you can **pair purposefully across the whole team**, prioritise the single-expert skills that carry the most risk, and build a culture where capability circulates instead of pooling in a few people and draining away when they leave.

Four pairing questions the matrix answers

A skills matrix turns the four questions behind every good pairing from guesswork into evidence. Each makes the mentoring more targeted and the knowledge transfer more likely.

ANSWERS 01

Who can teach this skill?

The experts scored at the level that can train others, for every skill, so you know exactly who is equipped to mentor in each area.

ANSWERS 02

Who needs to learn it?

The people below the target level on that skill, so learners are matched to a real development need rather than a vague one.

ANSWERS 03

Which pairings matter most?

The single-expert skills and the gaps tied to goals, so mentoring effort goes where it reduces the most risk and motivates most.

ANSWERS 04

Is it working?

Re-scoring over time shows the learner's level rising, evidence the pairing is transferring capability, not just meeting up.

Together these turn mentoring from a well-meant but haphazard activity into a **deliberate development engine**. Instead of hoping people learn from each other, you can see every teaching opportunity in the team, pair the right expert with the right learner on the right skill, focus first on the expertise most at risk of walking out the door, and confirm through the matrix that capability is genuinely rising. That is how a team grows its own people, retains its hard-won knowledge, and reduces its dependence on costly external training, all from the expertise it already has.

The 0 to 5 capability framework

Good pairing depends on a scale that identifies who can genuinely teach a skill and who needs to learn it. This framework, developed by Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith, draws that line clearly, Level 4 is the expert who can train

others, the natural mentor, while Levels 1 and 2 are the learners a pairing should lift.

0

No skill required or desired EXCLUDED

The skill is not part of this person's role. Excluded from pairing for them, so mentoring effort focuses only where the skill genuinely matters.

1

In training / Trainee WEIGHTING 25%

Up to 75% trained. A prime learner: pairing someone here with an expert is where mentoring delivers the most visible, motivating progress.

2

Developing capabilities WEIGHTING 50%

More than 75% trained; works alone on routine cases. A learner ready to be coached to full capability, or a near-expert who can mentor trainees.

3

Capable WEIGHTING 75% · USUAL TARGET

Works unsupervised to standard. Usually the target a pairing aims to reach, and a person who can comfortably mentor those at Levels 1 and 2.

4

Subject Matter Expert / Trainer WEIGHTING 100% · THE MENTOR

Expert who can train others, by definition. This is the mentor the matrix points you to, able to teach the skill and lift a learner to capability.

5

Strategic ownership / Leadership WEIGHTING 100%

Sets direction and standards. A senior mentor for high-level capability, and the person whose rare expertise most needs spreading through pairing.

Read a column: mentors at the top, learners below

To find a pairing, read a single skill's column. Anyone at **Level 4 or 5 is a potential mentor**, they can train others by definition; anyone at **Level 1 or 2 is a learner** who would benefit. Match them, favouring the skills where only one person is expert (the riskiest) and where the learner has a goal to grow. Re-score after a few months: when the learner moves up a level, the pairing has done its job and the team's capability has genuinely deepened.

A worked example. Three deliberate pairings from one team:

Compliance Aisha **L4** mentors Dan **L1** (and Hugo, spreading a lone expertise)
Data analysis Eve **L4** mentors Ben **L2** → coach to capable
Forecasting Grace **L4** mentors Chloe **L1** → build the next capable pair.

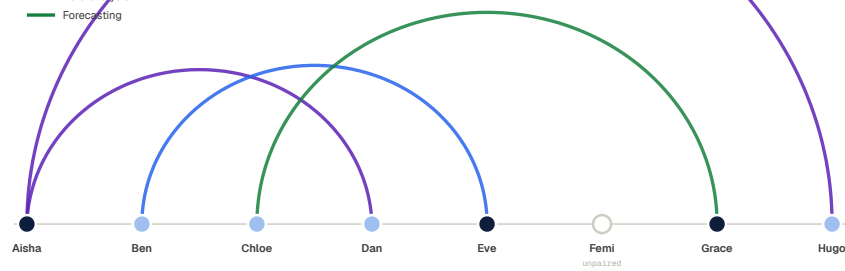
— SEE THE PAIRINGS

Who mentors *whom*

Here is the team laid out along a line, with each mentoring pairing drawn as an arc from the expert to the learner, coloured by the skill being developed. Dark nodes are mentors, pale nodes are learners, and a plain node with no arc is someone not yet paired. In one glance you can see how knowledge is set to flow, and who is being left out of the plan.

MENTOR → LEARNER PAIRINGS · ARC PER SKILL

— Compliance
— Data analysis
— Forecasting



● mentor (Level 4+) ● learner ○ not yet paired

Aisha

mentors two people in compliance, spreading a skill only she holds, the pairing that most reduces risk

Illustrative team on the Upleashed 0 to 5 framework. Each arc is a mentoring pairing; colour shows the skill; plain nodes are people not yet paired.

WHAT THE MANAGER READS HERE

- **Aisha is spreading a lone expertise.** Two purple arcs run from her to Dan and Hugo in compliance, a skill only she holds. This is the highest-value pairing: it directly attacks a single point of failure while developing two people.
- **Two clean skill pairings.** Eve to Ben in data analysis and Grace to Chloe in forecasting, each an expert matched to a learner on a specific skill, with a clear purpose and a measurable target level.
- **Two people are unpaired.** Femi and one other have no arc. Not a problem in itself, but worth asking: could they mentor in a skill not shown, or do they have a development goal a future pairing should serve?
- **Watch mentor load.** Aisha is mentoring two; that is fine short-term, but spreading mentoring across more experts keeps any one person from being overloaded as the programme grows.

— DOING IT

Five steps to mentor from the matrix

Turning the matrix into mentoring pairs is quick and pays back fast in retained, multiplied capability. These five steps keep the pairings

targeted and effective.

1

Find the experts and the learners

For each skill, read the column: note who is at Level 4 or 5 (potential mentors) and who is at Level 1 or 2 (learners). This gives you the full set of possible pairings across the team, grounded in evidence rather than impression.

2

Prioritise the riskiest and most-wanted

Start with the skills held by only one expert, pairing them spreads knowledge and cuts a single point of failure, and with gaps that match a learner's own goals, where motivation will be highest. These pairings deliver the most value first.

3

Match on skill, goals and availability

Pair each expert with a learner on the specific skill, checking their development goals align and both have time to commit. A good match on the skill but a clash on availability or aim will stall, so confirm all three before pairing.

4

Give the pairing structure

Set a clear goal, the target level to reach, a rough cadence of sessions, and what knowledge should transfer. Structure is what separates real mentoring from an aimless catch-up; allow flexibility in how they meet, but be clear on the aim.

5

Re-score and confirm it worked

After a few months, re-assess the learner's level on the skill. A rise confirms the pairing transferred capability; no movement is a prompt to adjust the match or the structure. The matrix closes the loop on whether mentoring is working.

Six mistakes in mentoring and pairing

MISTAKE 01

Vague, general mentoring

"Be her mentor" lacks focus. Pair on a specific skill with a target level so learning is purposeful.

MISTAKE 02

Pairing by seniority alone

Senior is not the same as expert in this skill. Match on the actual matrix score for the skill in question.

MISTAKE 03

Ignoring single-expert risk

The lone expert is the priority to pair. Spread that knowledge before the person leaves with it.

MISTAKE 04

Forgetting goals and time

A skill match that ignores aspiration or availability stalls. Align all three when you pair.

MISTAKE 05

Overloading one mentor

Leaning on a single expert burns them out. Spread mentoring across everyone the matrix shows can teach.

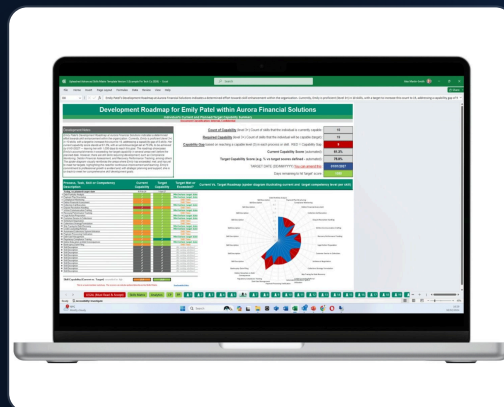
MISTAKE 06

Never checking the result

Unmeasured mentoring drifts. Re-score the learner to confirm capability actually rose.

The method is free. A ready-made matrix just makes every mentoring match *jump out*.

Everything here works in a blank spreadsheet, and that is a fine place to start. A purpose-built template just makes the pairings obvious: with everyone scored on the 0 to 5 scale, each skill's experts and learners are laid out side by side, so you can see at a glance who could mentor whom, which lone-expert skills most need spreading, and, by re-scoring, whether a pairing has lifted the learner's level, turning mentoring into a measurable development engine.



The Advanced Excel Skills Matrix lays out each skill's experts and learners, the basis for building deliberate mentoring pairs and tracking whether they raise capability, all on the same 0 to 5 framework used throughout this guide.

TRY IT FREE	MOST POPULAR	WHEN YOU ARE READY
£0 The online 5x5 builder maps a small team in your browser, with no sign-up. Spot your first pairings.	£199 The full Excel template: experts and learners per skill, required levels and analytics, up to 30 people and 30 skills. One-off, yours forever.	£1 Upgrade to PulseAI in your first year for a living, web and mobile version with AI skill suggestions and reminders.

— COMMON QUESTIONS

Quick *answers*

Q How does a skills matrix help with mentoring?

It shows, for each skill, who is expert enough to teach it and who needs to develop it. That lets you build mentoring pairs deliberately, matching the right expert to the right learner on a specific skill, rather than assigning general mentors and hoping useful knowledge happens to transfer.

Q Who makes a good mentor on the matrix?

Anyone scored at Level 4 or 5 on the skill in question, by definition the level that can train others. Crucially, this is skill-specific: someone may be an expert mentor in one area and a learner in another. Pairing on the actual score for the relevant skill is what makes the match effective.

Q Why is peer mentoring better than external training?

It is faster, cheaper and happens in the flow of real work, and it keeps knowledge inside the team rather than buying it in temporarily. It also reinforces the mentor's own mastery and builds a continuous knowledge-sharing culture. External training still has its place, but for many gaps, the expertise to close them is already in the room.

Q How does pairing reduce single points of failure?

When the matrix shows a critical skill held by only one person, pairing that expert with a learner spreads the knowledge before it can walk out the door. This is one of the highest-value uses of mentoring: it develops a person and removes a key risk at the same time, turning locked-in expertise into shared team capability.

Q What makes a pairing actually work?

A specific skill focus, a clear target level, and alignment on the learner's goals and both people's availability. Structure matters, a goal and a rough cadence turn it into real development, while flexibility in how they meet keeps it workable. Vague, open-ended mentoring without a defined aim is what tends to fizzle out.

Q How do I know if mentoring is working?

Re-score the learner on the skill after a few months. If their level has risen, the pairing has transferred real capability; if not, it is a prompt to adjust the match, add structure, or check availability. Because the matrix tracks levels over time, it closes the loop and keeps mentoring accountable to actual results.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alex is the creator of the Upleashed capability framework that powers Skills Matrix Template, the award-winning Excel skills matrix. A Chartered Manager with an MBA, an LLM and a doctorate in business administration, he has spent more than two decades helping operations, HR and quality teams turn capability from a gut feel into something they can measure, manage and prove.

Connect on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/alexmartinsmith](https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexmartinsmith)

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex J. Martin-Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

— SOURCES

Gartner. (2024). *Talent management research: Workforce skills data*. Gartner.

Martin-Smith, A. J. (n.d.). *The 0 to 5 capability framework*. Upleashed Limited.
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World Economic Forum. (2025). *The future of jobs report 2025*. World Economic Forum.

Grow your people *from within*.

You now have the mentoring method. The quickest way to start is to read one skill's column, find an expert and a learner, and pair them with a clear goal. Begin with the skills only one person holds, those pairings develop someone and spread knowledge that would otherwise leave with them.

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