



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Mentoring — It's Not Bloody Rocket Science

A compendium of 110 FAQs from the book

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110

questions answered

12

FAQ sections

3

audiences: mentors, mentees,
organisations

About this compendium

Here are 110 questions taken from the 12 FAQ sections in our book. Questions that either we were asked in our research, or that came up for us as a group – and we answered together.

To begin, there are general questions you might have as a Mentor, a 'Mentee' (we prefer the term Mentoring Partner) or if you are organising mentoring in your organisation as a manager or HR leader.

After these general questions, you will find the FAQs that appear at the end of each book chapter. *Page numbers refer to the page in the original book so that you can find that FAQ easily – and perhaps read the chapter or story that precedes it.*

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GENERAL FAQs

FAQs for Mentors

15 questions

Q How do I know if I'd be a good mentor?

You don't need to be perfect, just willing to do the work and the reflection. Curiosity, humility, and follow-through matter more than job titles or decades of experience. *p. 311*

Q What should I do before the first session?

Contract clearly (see Chapter 1.) Use the questions in Chapter 4, on chemistry and contracting, as a starting point for your own questions. Agree how you'll work together, how honest you'll be, and what's off-limits. People can't tell you the truth if they don't feel safe. *p. 311*

Q How can I tell if it's a good match?

Chemistry is everything. If the connection feels flat after one session, name it kindly and step away. It saves you both time and awkwardness. *p. 311*

Q How much should I talk versus listen?

It depends on which hat you are wearing. But overall, perhaps a 70/30 split is about right: listening 70%, talking 30%. Make everything you say count and ask before you advise: 'Would it be helpful if I shared something?' *p. 312*

Q What if my mentee keeps cancelling?

Take it as a signal, not an insult. If they're avoiding the meeting, the chemistry or timing might be off. Talk about it openly rather than rescheduling endlessly. *p. 312*

Q How do I avoid giving advice too early?

Stay curious for longer than feels comfortable. Ask one more why? than you usually would. *p. 312*

Q How do I handle difference – age, race, culture, background?

Ask, don't assume (see Emma, Tadiwa, and Rav's stories). Curiosity is inclusion in action. You don't have to share someone's identity to support them well. *p. 312*

Q What if I accidentally say the wrong thing?

Own it, apologise, and keep listening. Humility builds more trust than perfection ever will. *p. 312*

Q How long should mentoring last?

Long enough to make progress, short enough to stay fresh. Six sessions is often a good rhythm before reviewing. *p. 313*

Q Can I mentor more than one person?

You can, but not if it means spreading yourself too thin. Each mentee deserves your attention and preparation. *p. 313*

Q Should I mentor someone in my own organisation?

Maybe but remember the limits. If you're their boss or their boss's mate, they'll filter what they say. Internal mentors help navigate politics; external ones help explore possibility. *p. 313*

Q What if I realise I'm not helping?

Say so. 'I'm not sure I'm the right fit for what you need – can I help you find someone who is?' That's generosity, not failure. *p. 314*

Q Can I mentor a whole team?

Yes, if you focus on learning, not leading. Make it about shared reflection, not instructions. *p. 314*

Q How do I give tough feedback without breaking trust?

Check first: 'Can I be direct with you about something?' If they say yes, you have permission to challenge. *p. 314*

Q What if I get emotionally drawn in?

It's human but keep clear boundaries. You're there to support, not rescue. Use supervision or peer support if needed. *p. 314*

GENERAL FAQs

FAQs for Mentees

11 questions

Q How do I find a mentor?

Start with curiosity. Who's doing work you admire? Ask them for a short conversation first – you're not proposing marriage. *p. 315*

Q What makes a good mentoring goal?

Pick something real but not rigid. 'I want to be more confident in senior meetings' works better than 'I want to be CEO by 30.' *p. 315*

Q What if I don't click with my mentor?

It happens. Thank them, be honest, and move on. Chemistry beats obligation. *p. 315*

Q How much should I prepare?

Enough to respect their time. Bring topics, not essays. 'Here's what I'm stuck on' is perfect. *p. 316*

Q What if my mentor cancels or seems distracted?

Don't assume they've gone off you (see Rav's story). Politely ask to reschedule and explain how much the time matters. *p. 316*

Q Can I challenge my mentor?

Yes, especially if something doesn't land right. Try: 'Can I share how that felt from my side?' *p. 316*

Q How do I talk about identity differences?

Gently and honestly. 'There might be things about my experience you won't know – can I share some context?' sets the tone. *p. 316*

Q What if I want a new direction from the mentoring?

Say so. 'Could we focus on X next time?' The best mentors appreciate clarity. *p. 316*

Q How do I make sure I'm not just venting?

End each session with 'What will I do next?' Reflection is learning; action is progress. *p. 317*

Q How do I know it's working?

You'll think differently. If every conversation ends with a small shift in perspective, you're on track. *p. 317*

Q Can I outgrow my mentor?

Absolutely. Most of the best relationships end well – with gratitude, not guilt. *p. 317*

GENERAL FAQs

FAQs for Organisations and L&D Teams

6 questions

Q How do we know if mentoring is part of our culture, not just a tick box?

People talk about it unprompted. They share stories of being helped, not just forms they filled in. *p. 318*

Q When should mentoring happen in someone's career?

At every transition: first job, first leadership role, big promotion, or return from leave. Change is when mentoring has the most impact. *p. 318*

Q How do we encourage more people to be mentors?

Show them what's in it for them – growth, purpose, legacy. People give more when they gain, too. *p. 318*

Q What training do mentors need?

The basics: contracting, confidentiality, and how to listen without fixing. Plus, a safe space to share their own wobbles. *p. 318*

Q How do we measure success?

Look for stories, not just surveys. Ask 'What's changed because of this relationship?' *p. 318*

Q What if we don't have enough mentors?

Try group mentoring or speed mentoring (see Tadiwa's story). It's a great way to make quick, high-impact matches. *p. 318*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 2

The Neuroscience that Underpins Successful Mentoring

10 questions

Q What if I trigger a threat response by accident?

You probably will at some point. That doesn't make you a bad mentor. Human brains are wired to react quickly to perceived threats, especially around status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. The key is not perfection, it is noticing what may have happened, slowing down, getting curious, and helping the conversation move back into Top Right. *p. 141*

Q What if my mentoring partner agrees with me too quickly?

Don't assume agreement means alignment. It may simply mean the authority gradient is alive and well, or that their brain is taking the cognitively easy route. Try pausing and asking 'What's your take on that?' or 'What might not work about that in your world?' or 'What would you do if my view wasn't available?' *p. 141*

Q Do I really need to know the neuroscience to be a good mentor?

No, but a little helps a lot. You do not need to become an expert in the brain. You just need enough understanding to realise why good intentions are not always enough, why people may not say what they really think, and why trust, autonomy, and psychological safety matter so much. *p. 141*

Q Isn't this overcomplicating mentoring?

No. It is actually making the invisible visible. The purpose of the science is not to make mentoring academic. It is to explain why simple things like timing, tone, body language, questions, and hierarchy can make such a big difference to whether someone thinks well in your presence. *p. 142*

Q What if I'm worried I'm not doing mentoring properly?

That worry is normal. In fact, it is often a sign that you care about doing it well. The danger comes when your focus shifts too much onto yourself and away from your partner. Preparation helps. Shared tools help. Curiosity helps. You do not need to sound impressive: you need to be present. *p. 142*

Q When is it right to tell someone what to do?

When speed, safety, legal risk, technical accuracy, or serious consequences make that the best option. Telling is not wrong. Advising is not wrong. The issue is telling or advising on autopilot. Great mentors know when to tell, when to teach, when to ask, and when to pause. *p. 142*

Q What if my partner says very little?

Don't rush to fill the silence. Silence may mean thinking, not resistance. It may also mean the authority gradient is steeper than you realise, or that you have accidentally triggered a threat response. Give them time and use open questions. Check how the conversation feels for them and contract for what helps them think well. *p. 142*

Q How does this help with reverse mentoring?

It helps because reverse mentoring only works if the more senior person can hear things that may be uncomfortable, and the less-senior person feels safe enough to say them. Knowing about SCARF, PREFACE, cognitive miserliness, and the authority gradient helps both people understand why honesty can be hard and why it matters. *p. 143*

Q What if I disagree with my mentoring partner's interpretation of what feels unfair or threatening?

You do not have to agree for it to be real to them. Threat is personal, fairness is subjective, and relatedness is subtle. Start with curiosity rather than correcting them or trying to get someone to see it your way. Understanding how something landed for them is usually more useful than defending what you meant. *p. 143*

Q Why does asking questions matter so much?

Because questions can create thinking, ownership, and autonomy. A well-judged question can lower defensiveness, increase reflection, and help someone generate a solution that is more useful than anything imposed from outside. Questions do not just gather information, they shape the quality of thinking in the room. *p. 143*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 3

The Benefits of Mentoring

8 questions

Q How do we show mentoring has an ROI?

Track something simple you both care about (decision speed, rework, confidence to challenge). Re-contract every 2–3 sessions: 'Is this still worth it?' *p. 163*

Q We're time-poor. How short can mentoring be and still be useful?

Fifteen to 20 minutes can still work if you contract well ('one decision, one next step') and ask tighter questions. Rav's point stands – clarity beats clever. *p. 163*

Q What if mentoring just feels like a nice chat or time in the diary?

You are likely sitting in Top Left. Re-contract with your partner to focus on your purpose, the outcomes you could get with some additional stretch, and how you can integrate more challenge. *p. 163*

Q Does mentoring always need a long-term relationship to work?

No. A single high-quality conversation can have long-term impact if it focused and meaningful. A mentor is someone we can become and not necessarily have mentoring meetings in our diary. We can do it as we go. *p. 163*

Q What is the biggest mistake that organisations make with mentoring?

We think there are two: treating it as a tick-box exercise without clarity of purpose, outcomes, or values, and assuming that experienced leaders will know how to mentor well without training or support. *p. 163*

Q What if there isn't an obvious benefit to mentoring or sponsorship yet?

Benefits are often delayed and can take time. However, there is no harm in revisiting the contract and defining what success would look like more clearly. Ensure conversations are Top Right. *p. 164*

Q Our mentors say the process feels rigid. What should we change?

Give mentors permission to adapt. If the model is too prescriptive, you'll lose motivation and authenticity and it will feel like role-play, which over time simply erodes confidence in the process and of the participants. Mentors worry they are not doing it right (and there's a cognitive issue with that which we explored in Chapter 2). The mentoring partner doesn't get value, but is probably too polite to say so and exit the relationship. Inauthentic mentoring is frankly a waste of time and money. *p. 164*

Q We want to build a mentoring programme with clear benefits for the mentor too – any tips?

Let mentors choose their partners or offer up mentoring topics that energise them. Consider building peer-mentor groups so they learn from each other. Recognise the impact on their time – either in your policies and culture, or just by making sure their own line manager recognises and regularly notices and checks in on the value and time invested. Share the value of reverse mentoring and suggest they add that in if they feel comfortable to do so. *p. 164*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 4

How to Find Each Other: Chemistry, Contracting, and Trust

11 questions

Q Is mentoring confidential?

Mostly, yes, but it's worth being clear upfront about the boundaries. Mentoring works best when it feels like a safe space to think out loud. However, there may be rare occasions where something needs to be shared: for example, if there are safeguarding concerns or something that could impact others or the organisation. Agreeing how you would handle that together builds trust rather than undermining it. *p. 190*

Q How do we know if the chemistry is right?

You'll feel it in the flow of conversation. If you're both curious, laugh a little, and leave energised, you're on track (see Juliett and Tadiwa's stories). *p. 190*

Q What if there's no spark?

End kindly. A no-fault exit is better than a half-hearted mentoring. Re-match or wait until you find a fit. *p. 190*

Q How long should we give the chemistry before we decide it is not working?

Long enough to have an honest first contracting conversation and then at least one or two real discussions. Not so long that politeness means it just drifts without adding value. *p. 190*

Q What if my old boss is now my mentor?

It can work really well, just make sure to re-contract for the new relationship so old habits or ways of working don't get in the way. *p. 190*

Q Can trust grow if it isn't there straight away?

Yes, absolutely, and for some people trust isn't a given and instant. However a total lack of connection is different from building trust gradually. The key is whether both people feel curious, respectful, and willing. *p. 191*

Q What if one person wants to move faster than the other?

Name it. Pace matters. Moving too quickly can trigger threat and reduce honesty. But feeling like you are moving too slow can cause apathy or a lack of motivation. Talk it through. There might be something interesting for you both to gain through understanding how someone else perceives your pace. *p. 191*

Q Is it OK to mentor outside the office?

Yes. Walking, coffee shops, or other less formal settings can work really well if both people are comfortable and confidentiality still feels protected. *p. 191*

Q Is it OK for a mentor to share their mistakes?

Yes. It builds psychological safety and models learning (see Juliett's story). Just don't make it therapy. *p. 191*

Q How formal should contracting be?

Simple is best. Agree the purpose, cadence, and boundaries (what's in/out of scope). Revisit every few months. *p. 191*

Q Why do silence or walking and talking work well in mentoring?

They both trigger the default mode network – the brain's reflective and creative zone (see Mel and Emma's stories). *p. 192*

Reverse and Diverse: Difference Done Well (for Mentors)

8 questions

Q How do I avoid saying the wrong thing about someone's identity?

Lead with curiosity, not certainty. Reflect on Emma and Rav's stories. Ask what matters to them and listen without defence. *p. 216*

Q What if I don't share my mentee's background?

You don't have to. You just need to be willing to learn and create safety – see Rav's story. *p. 216*

Q How can I show inclusion beyond words?

Keep your commitments. See Rav's story. Cancelled sessions say 'I'm too busy'. Follow-through says 'You matter'. *p. 216*

Q How do I build inclusion into everyday mentoring?

Start by asking whose voice is missing. Inclusion isn't a project, it's a habit. *p. 216*

Q What if I get someone totally wrong or say something offensive?

Own it, apologise, and reflect on how to ask a better question next time. *p. 216*

Q What if I'm worried about asking the wrong question in a reverse mentoring conversation?

Say it out loud! Humility helps. You do not need perfect language, but you do need curiosity, care, and a willingness to stand corrected with grace. *p. 216*

Q Is reverse mentoring only useful for senior leaders?

No. It is useful anywhere there is a visibility gap, a lived-experience gap, or an expertise gap that would benefit from more honest two-way dialogue. *p. 217*

Q How do I stop reverse mentoring becoming a token gesture or something we do but don't get value from.

Don't treat it as a policy and expect wonders from day one. Contract properly, build trust gradually, act on what you hear (actions speak louder than words), and make sure the learning goes both ways. *p. 217*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 5

Reverse and Diverse: Difference Done Well (for Mentoring Partners)

5 questions

Q How do I speak up if a leader, sponsor or mentor gets it wrong?

You can say 'That didn't quite land for me – can I share why?' Brave honesty builds trust. *p. 217*

Q What if my leader or mentor is very different from me?

Difference is a gift if you both stay curious (see Emma's story). *p. 217*

Q How can I ask for what I need without feeling needy?

Be direct. It's respectful to say what would help you. Guessing is hard work for everyone. *p. 217*

Q What if I don't feel senior enough to say what I really think?

Start small and be specific. You are talking about your own lived experience rather than trying to represent everyone. *p. 218*

Q Is it my responsibility to educate my mentor or leader about everything in my lived experience?

No. You are not responsible for carrying all of the learning. Reverse mentoring works best when the other person is doing their share of interpreting and building on what you share. *p. 218*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 6

The Power of Not Knowing the Answers

4 questions

Q How do I stop myself from giving answers too soon?

Contract for timing or use the hats. Ask if they want your view now or later. *p. 238*

Q What if my mentee just wants me to fix things?

Explain why you won't. Share some of the science that explains that they learn more when they do the thinking, and that a good mentor eventually makes themselves redundant. They don't need you to fix things because they know what you would ask them in order for them to think it out for themselves. *p. 238*

Q Can you mentor a team rather than a person?

Absolutely. For a full account of how this can be done please refer to Paul's story within this chapter of the book. *p. 123*

Q What's the most powerful phrase a mentor can use?

Try 'I'm not sure I know – what do you think?' It signals trust and equality. *p. 238*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 7

Mentoring as a Culture, not a Programme

8 questions

Q How do you make mentoring part of culture, not a programme?

By rewarding curiosity and learning as much as delivery. See Paul's story. *p. 123*

Q What if people don't volunteer to mentor?

Make it visible and valued. The positive side to the human threat response is that people do what the most senior or influential leaders model and celebrate. Put simply, if you do it well and talk about the genuine value it brings for you personally and the organisation, others will follow. *p. 259*

Q Can a line manager be a mentor?

Yes, if they create space for genuine reflection in the partnership rather than supervision. A line manager may need to be particularly cognisant about the neuroscience that might get in their way. A quick re-read of Chapter 2 might help. *p. 259*

Q What's the benefit of group mentoring?

Shared learning, safety in numbers, and cross-functional empathy. It can also be a good use of time. We also illustrate that learning doesn't just work up and down; peers learning from peers helps to remove silos and create cultures with better workflows. *p. 259*

Q How long does it take to build a mentoring culture?

Longer than a programme because it builds gradually through behaviour, not launch events. Start small and do it well. *p. 259*

Q Should mentoring be mandatory?

We would say not. Encouraged and valued, yes. Forced, it rarely works (see Paul and Mel's stories). *p. 260*

Q How do we know if our mentoring culture is working?

People seek it out without being told to, conversations improve, and thinking improves. *p. 260*

Q What does a great mentoring programme look like?

We think that one size doesn't fit all. When we work with clients to set up a mentoring programme we wear the Confidence-Building Coach hat, rather than give definitive advice or tell them what to do. There are some dos and don'ts that we cover in this book (and the scientific why behind those) but we always recommend that you are the best judge of what will and won't work in your own organisation. We can help you by co-constructing a mentoring programme with this in mind, rather than simply replicating what works elsewhere or providing strict templates. *p. 260*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 8

When Mentoring Doesn't Go to Plan

8 questions

Q What should I do if the chemistry isn't right?

End well, not abruptly. See Mel's story – call it early and with kindness. *p. 273*

Q Can you repair a mentoring relationship after trust breaks?

Yes. Be honest, own your part, and re-contract for what both of you need now. *p. 273*

Q What if I realise I shouldn't have said yes to mentoring?

Better to pause than to plough on. A respectful no is healthier than a resentful yes. *p. 273*

Q How do I know when it's time for a mentor myself?

If your world has changed faster than your confidence, that's your cue (see Paul's story). *p. 123*

Q How do I stop the ending feeling awkward or a bit flat?

Integrate questions when you start when contracting and keep asking them as you go 'If this relationship has done its job, what would a good ending look like?' or 'Where do you think we are up to in terms of our timeline? Half way through, 75% of the way there, close to finishing up?' *p. 273*

Q What should I do if I feel like cancelling meetings because I just don't have the time or energy, or I sense my mentoring partner isn't fully committed?

Being honest with yourself about what is going on will help your choices. A coach or HR partner may be able to help you with that. Contracting upfront will help – 'What should we do if we start to feel we haven't got the momentum that we once had?' – and then re-contracting as you go – 'I'm noticing we don't seem to have the energy when we are together that we did have. Is that a clue that we should re-focus, or that it is time for a pause?' Certainly don't leave it for more than one or two sessions without talking about it. *p. 274*

Q It feels like we have become friends, is that OK?

It is and it isn't. If you have become friends and the relationship has moved into Top Left as a result and become very easy and with no 'edge' or challenge then it's time to call that out and talk it through: 'I'm conscious we have transitioned into a friendship. It's fine for us to continue with that and meet for a coffee on those terms, but I am conscious we may need to revisit what we do as a mentoring partnership? What do you think?' *p. 274*

Q My mentoring partner has told me something that is really troubling me. What should I do next?

This can be really difficult territory which is made a whole lot easier if you have contracted upfront for what you do if this happens. Certainly don't ignore your instincts, but be cautious of acting without permission and reducing their autonomy or risk disclosing something they thought *p. 274*

FAQS FROM CHAPTER 9

Giving and Receiving Feedback

16 questions

Q Why does feedback sometimes feel worse than it actually is?

The brain processes social threat in a similar way to physical threat. This means we might argue (fight) or run away (flight) when, in reality, the danger is quite low. We also have an inbuilt negativity bias – we can receive a piece of feedback and think it affects everything and will always be an issue. Whereas a lot of feedback is actually about a specific thing and is a temporary blip that is easy to resolve. *p. 304*

Q Why do people sometimes react strongly to feedback or challenge?

Because the brain can interpret challenge as a social threat. For some people, this reaction can be particularly strong (remember Rav's education for our group on Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria, which is linked to ADHD), but this doesn't mean avoiding challenge. It simply means being aware and thoughtful about how and when you introduce it. *p. 304*

Q What if my mentee asks me for 'honest feedback', but I know they're fragile right now?

Honesty doesn't have to be brutal to be useful. You can be truthful and kind by choosing what will help them most in this moment. Ask first: 'Would you like feedback that stretches you or supports you today?' That question alone creates psychological safety. *p. 304*

Q How much feedback is too much?

When in doubt, give less but focus on the most important or relevant thing. Mentoring isn't about emptying your wisdom bucket all over them – it's about helping them take the next step forward. People can only metabolise small chunks of insight at a time. *p. 305*

Q What if I just hate giving feedback. Can I still mentor well without doing it?

Not really. It is an essential part of the mentoring contract, even if it is implicit, that you are honest if you either observe something yourself or hear on the grapevine something that you think could genuinely limit someone's career opportunities if it continues to be something other people see but is hidden from your mentee. *p. 305*

Q How will I know that my feedback worked?

Through asking questions. 'What are you taking from that?' is a simple question to ask. Assuming that someone will take something on board because you told them about it is probably too simplistic. Most people need help with the next step – even if it is just making time for someone to take it in and sit with it. *p. 305*

Q What if my feedback makes them defensive?

Expect defensiveness. It's a natural human reaction when identity feels threatened. Stay curious, not combative. Ask questions that help them think rather than retreat, such as: 'Can you tell me what part of that landed hardest?' Curiosity is the antidote to defensiveness. *p. 305*

Q How can I make feedback feel less personal?

Focus on behaviour, not character. 'When X happens, the impact is Y' lands far better than 'You always...' Statements that externalise the issue – so it's you and them together looking at the problem – create psychological safety and collaboration. *p. 306*

Q My mentee shuts down when I offer feedback. What should I do?

Pause. Ask what's happening for them and reassure them that you're on their side. Then gently remind them that everyone learns by trial and error. If they spiral into self-criticism, try something like 'Speak kindly to my friend [their name]'. It works surprisingly well. *p. 306*

Q What about when my mentee just doesn't care?

Apathy is a clue, not a dead end. Find what they do care about – status, creativity, belonging, freedom – and connect your feedback to that. Curiosity unlocks motivation. Once you find the spark, you can work together to light it up. *p. 306*

Q Should mentors share their own stories of failure?

Absolutely – if it's done with humility and relevance. Vulnerability turns feedback from a power move into a partnership. When mentees see you've stood where they stand, feedback becomes a shared exploration, not a judgement. *p. 306*

Q Can obvious feedback really change anything?

Yes. Sometimes, and even at senior levels, there might well be a bit of the Emperor's New Clothes going on. Being curious about blockages, being on the outside, and having the courage to ask the obvious questions, can often make the complex feel simple – and be what unlocks stuck teams – see Dulcie's story. *p. 306*

Q Should you always ask before giving feedback?

Not always, but asking for permission – or even if now is a good time – increases autonomy and reduces threat. Even a quick 'Can I share something I have noticed with you?' can change how it lands. *p. 307*

Q What happens if I don't have much evidence for my feedback – or it is not something I have experienced personally?

We would suggest it is not feedback yet – it is a hypothesis or hearsay. It is still possible to share it as such and explore it together: 'I am wondering whether something is true which might be getting in your way?' or 'I heard some feedback about you which I wondered whether to share because I have no way of knowing if it is true or not?' *p. 307*

Q How do I give feedback to someone more senior than me?

Contract for it first. Without permission it can feel like a threat to status or expertise. With permission it feels like a mature contribution to continuous improvement. *p. 307*

Q Can giving feedback damage a relationship?

Possibly. If delivered badly, certainly. But we would suggest that avoided feedback – knowing something and withholding it – damages relationships more than honest, well-delivered feedback. *p. 307*