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Newsletter

The Magic of Mentoring

"Mentors focus on the qualities of wisdom and judgment. By sharing what they have learned from experience, they provide perspective. They tell us the unspoken rules and point out the imaginary lines one should not cross. They help us explore the consequences of our decisions."

~ Shirley Pddy, *The Art of Mentoring: Lead, Follow and Get Out of the Way*, Bullion Books, 2001

When people think of mentoring, they often associate it with an older executive who counsels a promising newbie. The senior leader advises the junior employee on his career, navigating office politics and what's needed to get ahead. But mentoring has dramatically changed over the last few decades.

Maybe you find yourself stuck in a career rut or itching to broaden your skills and take on new challenges. Perhaps you're eyeing a higher-level management role or other professional advancement. If you wait for senior managers to notice you and "bring you along," you'll be disappointed with the wait — assuming a promotion ever happens.

Effective mentoring is essential for leadership development. Done right, it's one of the most powerful tools for gaining wisdom, reaping the rewards of job growth and achieving a strong competitive advantage in today's job marketplace.

Successful leaders mentor, coach and partner with their employees instead of practicing command-and-control management. Top organizations are more adaptive, innovative and smart about bringing out the best in their people. Employees are always learning, and managers are always teaching.

That said, it's up to you to cultivate a beneficial mentoring relationship — and to pursue it with rigor and commitment.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?

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Mentoring Vs. Coaching

“Mentoring magic cannot be a solo performance. It is not a one-way, master-to-novice transaction. To be effective and lasting, it must be accomplished through a two-way relationship – the synchronized efforts of two people.” ~ Chip R. Bell and Marshall Goldsmith, Managers as Mentors, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Third Edition, 2013

At its most basic level, mentoring is the simple act of helping someone learn. But the relationship between the helper and “helpee” changes significantly when performed as a learning partnership. Today’s competitive organizations need “learning entrepreneurs,” whose curiosity is valued over conformity.

Words like “mentor” and “coach” are sometimes used interchangeably, but there’s an important distinction:

- **Coaching** is specifically aimed at nurturing and sustaining performance.
- **Mentoring** focuses on learning; its primary outcome should be competence, proficiency, skill, know-how and/or wisdom.

Coaching is practiced by managers who are responsible for meeting performance goals and by executive coaches who are hired to boost personnel development. Mentoring can be practiced without the supervisory constraints imposed by the organizational hierarchy.

While coaching and mentoring are similar, this article will assume that a mentoring partnership:

1. Exists between two people (usually one more experienced than the other)
2. Is dedicated to promoting self-directed learning and development

What do we need to understand about mentoring, and how can this relationship be most helpful? How do you know when it’s the right time to find a mentor? What’s the best way to start a mentoring relationship?

Mentoring Myths

In the last decade, the concept of mentoring has changed, but the need for career counseling has not. In fact, mentoring is more important than ever because most careers take numerous twists and turns in a rapidly evolving world.

In “Demystifying Mentoring,” a February 2011 *Harvard Business Review* blog post, Contributing Editor Amy Gallo identifies four common mentoring myths:

Myth #1: Mentoring is a formal long-term relationship. Because the business world moves fast and people frequently change jobs, a long-term advisory relationship may be unrealistic. Mentoring can be a 1-hour session; it needn’t be an official 6-month assignment.

Instead of focusing on the long term, think of mentoring as a tool you can access when you need it. Of course, advice and guidance may be more relevant if they come from someone who knows you and understands your goals. But you still need to build relationships so you have connections in place when you require advice. In some instances, you may wish to consult people who don’t know you as well, but can offer a fresh perspective.

Myth #2: You have to find one perfect mentor. It’s actually quite rare these days for people to get through their careers with only one mentor. In fact, many people have several esteemed advisers. Seeking a variety of perspectives on a crucial issue may be warranted.

Myth #3: Mentoring is just for junior-level employees. Many people assume they need a mentor only when starting their careers. In reality, professionals at every developmental stage can benefit from a mentoring relationship. You may be surprised to find that reverse mentoring often occurs (a senior manager, for example, learns technology skills from a junior employee).

Don’t wait for problems to occur to find a mentor. Whether you are making a career change, taking on a new role or contemplating leaving a job, solicit advice from someone who has experienced a similar transition.

Myth #4: Experienced professionals mentor out of the goodness of their hearts. It can be an honor to be asked to mentor someone, but the relationship is about more than respect for a trailblazer. Mentoring should be useful to both parties. Think about what you can offer a potential mentor:

- Can you provide a unique perspective on his role in the organization?

- Do you bring valuable outside information that can help your mentor in her job?

While not a direct barter, you may be able to offer your prospective mentor a promise of future assistance.

Mentoring Do's and Don'ts

Mentoring can take many forms, but your goal is to find the right kind of advice, from the right person, at the right time.

Gallo offers the following guidelines in her *Harvard Business Review* article:

Do:

- Build a cadre of people you can turn to for advice when you need it
- Nurture relationships with people whose perspectives you respect
- Think of mentoring as both a long- and short-term arrangement

Don't:

- Assume that your success or experience precludes your need for a mentor
- Rely on one person to help guide your career
- Expect to receive mentoring without providing anything in return

"The most powerful yet difficult part of mentoring is being who you are," write Bell and Goldsmith. "This is not to imply that a mentor must be some kind of super-hero without flaws, doubts or the capacity for making mistakes. Fundamentally, mentoring is about growing — mentors growing with protégés, protégés growing with mentors."

Encouraging Reciprocity

An effective mentoring relationship can be best described as a mutual search for wisdom. It's grounded in a true partnership that thrives on reciprocal facilitation of learning.

Such reciprocity requires the mentor to surrender power differences to build rapport and trust. Learning cannot occur with fear in the room.

Bell and Goldsmith encourage the "SAGE" approach to forming the foundation for an effective mentorship:

S = Surrendering. Power, authority and command (or the protégé's perception of these traits in a mentor) can doom the dialogue necessary for learning.

A = Accepting. Strive for a safe relationship. The protégé must trust the mentor to provide an environment that encourages risk and experimentation.

G = Gifting. A mentor should supply advice, feedback and/or focus. This stage is actually the most delicate. If the mentor has failed to pave the way for Surrendering and Accepting, the protégé may ignore, undervalue, resist or reject the gift of knowledge.

E = Extending. A mentor must help the protégé apply information to real-life experiences so self-directed learning may occur. Creative teaching tools include role-playing, feedback and storytelling.

Quick Tips for Mentors and Protégés

The quality of your mentoring relationship will determine its ultimate success. Each partner must accept responsibility for making it work. When something isn't gelling, be sure to communicate your concerns. When expectations are met, let go and move on.

Bell and Goldsmith offer some fundamental tips in Managers as Mentors:

Tips For Being a Great Protégé:

- Select a mentor who can help you be the best you can be — not the one who can ease you into a promotion.
- You can sometimes learn more from people who are different from you.
- Clarify your goals and expectations for the mentoring relationship, and communicate them in your first meeting.
- Be yourself. Be willing to take risks with new skills and ideas.
- When given feedback, listen well and say thank you.

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Tips For Being a Great Mentor:

- Mentoring is a partnership to help your protégé learn. It's not about being an expert or authority.
- Don't instruct; foster discovery. Ask powerful questions instead of giving smart answers.
- Be authentic, open and sincere. Establish a comfortable and safe environment.
- Act more like a friend than a boss.
- Be curious and attentive.
- Give feedback with a strong focus on the future, not the past.