

## MENTORING FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT

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**Defining mentoring.** Mentor was a character in Greek myth whom Odysseus put in charge of his household when he went to fight the Trojan war. Part of Mentor's responsibility was the protection and teaching of Odysseus' son, Telemachus. The goddess of wisdom added her powers to the process when she assumed Mentor's guise.

As is usual in Greek myths and other stories related to the process of living, the extended description of Mentor's assistance to Telemachus exposes complex human behavior and motivation. It suggests questions such as:

- Who is the real mentor?
- Where do power, influence and motivation lie?

Benefitting from another person's wisdom and experience while using your own good judgment and skills is a catalyst for development. The process provides learning opportunities for everyone involved, whether through tutoring, modeling behavior, leading, providing information and feedback, training or inspiring one other.

This broader view brings into question the typical assumption that mentoring is a one-way process with the guide in the lead. Not only does the traditional approach tend to reinforce hierarchy and its associations with control and formality, but also dependency. To offset these tendencies, an effective mentor works herself out of the job as the recipient becomes self-sufficient and blooms.

A two-way process based on exchange and mutual benefit involves more ambiguous roles. Guidelines, including lists of possible skills and services exchanges, and incentives, such as set-asides of time and acknowledgment in performance assessments, assist in the process.

The relationship is more likely to develop best when it is not mandated, but encouraged with guidelines and incentives. Instead, parties create their own matches, using their intuition and common sense to explore possibilities and reciprocal responsibilities.

Though aspects of this article relate to traditional mentoring, participants in a two-way process have complementary capacities and experiences that can enrich and enhance one another. Together, both people participate in learning opportunities, including working through appropriate struggles and conflicts and providing honest and useful feedback. New skills, knowledge and understanding are exchanged and expressed as perspectives and experiences are shared. As with other worthwhile relationships, goals for the process and for each party continue to be clarified as circumstances change.

The participants may already be or develop into friends and colleagues. Other outcomes could be recognition that the process has played out well or a decision that a better match can be found. Whatever happens, open communication is essential.

Who might become mutual mentors? Here are some examples:

- a first-time mother who has a career with an experienced mother who wants one
- a new father who will continue working with one who remained home to care for children
- a leader facing a new challenge with one who knows the subject and could benefit from training in process skills such as team building
- a manager with a broad perspective fresh to a unique group or situation with someone familiar with the territory
- people from different cultures who wish to understand one another's backgrounds and values
- a newcomer to a neighborhood with a long-time denizen curious about other venues
- a parent and child or some other family pairing in which computer expertise is used to capture genealogy and stories
- an entrepreneur whose experience and interests are relevant to a person in an organization who can provide connections and information
- a youth who wants to learn about the world of work and an experienced person who would benefit from answering thought-provoking questions about their profession
- friends who alternate in supporting and leading one another through challenging circumstances
- learners of any age with skills, information or how-to experience that each person seeks

**Creating good matches.** In western society, rational behavior, especially in professional life, is considered best. But mentoring is a relationship that can be nonlinear and messy at times. In these circumstances, emotions, values and processes, such as effective communication, are just as important as good matches for filling in the dots of missing skills, abilities, knowledge and experience.

With this in mind, choose among the following questions to assess your possible partnerships with particular individuals:

- What are the risks and benefits of our mutual collaboration?
- What specific skills, understanding, capacities and experience do each of us have that might be transferred or shared?
- How will our differences enrich one another?
- Do I like this person, or at least am I sufficiently intrigued to want to get to know them well enough to communicate openly?
- Do our motivations, goals and expectations related to starting a mentoring relationship seem to jibe?
- Do we have the time and interest to make a viable commitment?
- Are we willing to explore and agree on ground rules, including how long the process will last and how to handle misunderstandings and conflict?

- Do we have the interpersonal skills, self-knowledge, patience and sense of humor to make this work? If not, what does each of us need to develop further? How could we help one another learn?
- How well do our styles of communication, use of time, and giving and receiving assistance mesh?
- How will we honor one another's confidentiality and avoid doing harm?
- Can I imagine our coming to trust one another, if we don't already do so? How could that process be encouraged?
- Is there a relative balance in what we have to offer one another, however different our knowledge and background?
- Is there a good chance that we'll enjoy the mutual mentoring process most of the time?

Based on your intuition, experience and observations, what questions would you want to add to this list?

Thinking about and exploring your answers can set the relationship on a firm footing and help avoid detours and misunderstandings. As you may have already seen in other relationships, tiptoeing around potential issues is not a good recipe for developing trust and comfort. By aiming for openness and self-awareness, unproductive habits may be modified or avoided. They include:

- repeating unproductive family dynamics
- idolization
- power struggles and competition
- avoidance or indirection
- inappropriate politeness
- denial of realities
- superficiality
- lack of honesty with oneself about motivations and needs
- blame or demonization of others

**Starting up.** Certainly, varying interpersonal styles, experience and levels of confidence will require a getting-to-know-you period until comfortable communication is possible. Although there are arguments for having similar levels of intelligence and capacities, differences also provide opportunities for growth. Two exceptions to this are when significantly conflicting values and degrees of commitment create barriers to progress.

Some simple guidelines will help initially and get both of you used to organizing the precious time for mutual mentoring. Explore any of the following that seem useful through conversations via e-mail, letter, telephone and in person.

- expectations
- hopes
- time commitments
- goals

- what you want to avoid
- processes that help you thrive
- previous, relevant experiences
- strengths of each person
- interests
- lessons learned from past experiences, both positive and negative

As clarification of such subjects occur, attention may also be paid to:

- outlining together a simple plan of collaboration, open to change over time
- sharing materials
- working on a project of mutual interest
- identifying and practicing a particular skill to benefit each person
- doing a pleasant activity as a way of getting to know one another

**Moving ahead.** Although many people anticipate a logical or linear sequence in relationships, whether mentoring or otherwise, ups, downs, leaps forward and regressions occur. That's why periodic revisiting of expectations and planning is useful.

One way to test the value of the mentoring process is to determine whether or not you look forward to spending time with the other person and make regular time to do so. When unanticipated demands intrude, how do you ensure adequate notice is given and frustrations or disappointments are addressed?

Should a serious conflict or misunderstanding occur, consider bringing in a trusted third party, such as a mediator, trainer or anyone else without a vested interest in the outcome. The very skills used to address such problems can be part of the developmental process, permitting a positive experience with conflict resolution.

As the mentoring process settles into a mostly pleasant and stimulating rhythm, take some time to honor what's working well. A hand-written note, playful gift or "certificate" of accomplishment are examples.

**Graduating.** At some point, the reasons that led to a beneficial connection may be satisfied. You may then find new matters that would support continuing your present relationship, re-define how you spend your time together or celebrate a successful ending.

**Applications to other relationships.** As you consider the ideas in this article, you'll notice that they are directly relevant or can be adapted for a variety of connections you have with others. Think about how you might use them to enrich your relationships with colleagues, friends, family members and even people whom you think are above you.

Former General Electric CEO Jack Welch set up such an arrangement when he ordered 500 of his top managers to identify employees who could help with Web browsing and research. This is called reverse mentoring. Imagine how satisfying this bottom-up relationship could be if mutual exchange were to develop from these first contacts. Even

better, what would have been the long-term outcome if Welch "just" created the environment for mutual mentoring? For example, he or his staff could have provided:

- cautionary and positive stories
- guidelines for choosing, developing and ending relationships
- incentives for encouraging balanced exchanges through which all parties benefit

How would you start to stimulate a mutual mentoring opportunity for yourself or others?

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