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Equipping, Enabling, and Encouraging Marketplace Leaders

Mentoring

A lifestyle for growth

What is mentoring? Mentoring is not “the good old boy” system. In “the good old boy” system a businessman selects an heir and “grooms” him or her for ascension to the throne. The objective is to reproduce yourself in the next generation. If this is your view of mentoring, cast it out.

The idea of mentoring is not new. Mentor was a character in Homer’s *Odyssey*. As a friend of King Odysseus, Mentor was given the job of teaching and caring for the king’s son, Telemachus.

Mentor may have provided the name, but the concept had been around for a long time. Examples of mentoring are found throughout the text of the Bible. The first example is in Genesis; God is mentoring Adam. Moses mentored Joshua. Elijah mentored Elisha. Barnabas mentored Mark and Paul. Biblical examples of mentoring are not exclusive to men; Naomi mentored Ruth, and Elizabeth mentored Mary. Jesus mentored the twelve disciples.

In medieval Europe, mentoring was the primary vehicle for passing values, ideas, and skills along to the next generation. The whole idea of trade apprenticeships was simply a formalized method of mentoring.

Today’s business is in need of a resurgence of strong mentoring systems. Discouraged and disgruntled employees hop from one job to the next looking for work that is intellectually stimulating, fun, and economically rewarding.

This job-hopping costs American business millions of dollars in training costs and lost momentum. Job hopping employees need time to be absorbed into a new corporate culture before they become strong contributing members of the new team. About the time they start making solid contributions, they get restless and move on to another “greener” pasture.



Nothing will stop some employees from job-hopping, but a strong mentoring system can reduce turnover by increasing job satisfaction and productivity among current employees.

Mentoring as a Strategic Choice

As a leader, manager, or professional you must understand that mentoring is a strategic choice. A good mentoring system does not happen by coincidence. You must take care to create a mentoring system, nurture it, and build it into the culture of your organization. Mentoring must become a part of the weave of the fabric of your corporate culture. If you are not willing to do whatever is necessary to create and protect an environment where mentoring can exist, then you would be better off not to start.

The Mentoring Relationship

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines a mentor as, "*a trusted counselor or guide, a coach, a tutor.*" The phrase "a trusted counselor" is key. It defines the relationship between mentor and mentee as one in which there is a bond of trust. Also, a "counselor's" role is to provide guidance – not remold the mentee into their likeness.

The relationship between mentor and mentee is similar to that between a teacher and student. A teacher seeks to educate a group of students. A teacher is judged successful if they can impart knowledge to the student. The student "trusts" that they are receiving accurate and timely information.

As a mentee, you should look for a mentor who:

- Is someone you can admire.
- Is someone who believes in the importance of people.
- Is someone who believes in and is committed to the mentoring relationship.
- Is someone who has a positive outlook.
- Is someone who can provide experience, perspective, and guidance.

As a mentor, you should look for a mentee who:

- Is someone who is willing, and teachable.
- Is someone who can apply what they are learning.
- Is someone who is committed to the mentoring relationship.
- Is someone who will respect you as a mentor.
- Is someone who will be accountable.

These ten points can be summarized as mutual respect, whole-hearted commitment to each other, the willingness to teach, the willingness to learn, and accountability.



Attributes of A Mentor

A mentor must have toughness, compassion, integrity, wisdom, motivation, and perseverance.

1. A mentor needs to be able to balance toughness with compassion. You must be honest and direct in your dealings with your mentee. Beating around the bush, or masking your criticism will not get the job done. Stick to the old maxim, “praise in public, criticize in private.” When criticism is due; be honest and direct, and demonstrate unconditional love and acceptance. Criticize the action, *not* the person.

2. A mentor needs integrity. A mentee is like a sponge. They will follow what you do more than what you say, so you must “talk the walk, and walk the talk.”

Do you have employees? Do you want them to be honest with you, and in their dealings with your customers? If the answer is “yes,” then you must demonstrate honesty in your business life. If you use business assets for personal use, expect employees to do the same. If you make a mistake and lie to cover it up, expect employees to do the same. If you take advantage of an employee, expect employees to take advantage of you.

3. A mentor needs wisdom. Beyond experience itself, the mentor needs to have the wisdom to see the implications of today’s decision projected into the mentee’s future.

There is an old Greek proverb of a man confronted by a lad with a bird behind his back. The boy asked if the bird was alive or dead and the man said, “I know not whether the bird is alive or dead, but one thing is for sure, its life is in your hands.” The mentee’s life is in your hands.

Stress and adversity are a part of everyday business life. It takes wisdom to make the right choices when under great stress or in the face of adversity. As a mentor, you need to be able to make tough decisions. More importantly, you will also need to teach the mentee how to make the tough decisions.

4. A mentor needs to be able to motivate the mentee. Barnabas provides an excellent model. His name means “son of encouragement,” and he was able to motivate others by constantly encouraging them in their own endeavors. Barnabas put aside his own needs for the needs of others; he risked his credibility by sponsoring Paul, and again as he mentored Mark.

How many of us wouldn’t love to work for a boss who stood up for us in our failure, who worked to help us overcome our weaknesses, or helped us build our strengths? As a mentor, you will have the opportunity to provide this kind of motivation to the mentee.



5. A mentor needs perseverance. Where would we be today without the perseverance of Christ? Not only did He provide a legacy in the form of the apostles, but He paid the ultimate price for His perseverance; death by crucifixion.

The idea of mentoring is not a popular one in American business. Some businesses encourage, and in fact, expect a results oriented mentality that teaches the ends usually justify the means.

Understand going in that there will be those who oppose mentoring. Whether you mentor an individual or establish a corporate mentoring program, there is likely to be criticism. For these critics consider Proverbs 15:1, *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*

Growth Through Failure

Think of times when you “grew” personally, or in business. Chances are the growth came through the experience of failure. Failure has value when growth occurs.

Sometimes the easiest thing a mentor can do is to “save” the mentee; to try to keep them from falling into life’s potholes. This is also often the worst thing a mentor can do. Remember, the mentor’s role is to offer guidance and counsel, not to take over the life of the mentee. If you are the mentee remember, these “tough times” are your opportunities for the greatest personal growth. Consider Psalm 31:24, *“So cheer up! Take courage if you are depending on the Lord”* (TLB).

Jesus let the disciples fail on many occasions. He could easily have “saved” them, but he didn’t. He let failure work in their lives to build them up. There is a remarkable transformation in the life of Peter that is worth examining:

A prideful Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet until he found out what the consequences were, then he wanted Jesus to give him a bath!

Peter’s boldness was demonstrated when he walked on water to meet Jesus. But when the winds stirred and Peter began to sink, Jesus reached out to Peter and helped him (Matthew 14:25-31). Knowing that Peter would sink, Jesus could have easily kept Peter from trying to come to Him, but He did not. Instead, Jesus encouraged Peter to try. And importantly, Jesus was there for Peter when he needed help.

A few days later Peter’s boldness is demonstrated again when he vows to die with Jesus. But Jesus knew better. A few hours later not only does Peter fail to stay awake while Jesus prays, but he also denies knowing Jesus three times! At the moment of the third denial, Jesus turned and looked at Peter. Imagine what Peter must have felt at that moment when *“he went out and wept bitterly”* (Luke 22:62)?



Despite this denial, Peter was restored by Jesus after His resurrection. Peter goes on to be a leader and spokesman for the apostles. He performed many miracles and went on missions to Jerusalem, Palestine, Syria, and Rome. It was in Rome that Peter was martyred; death by crucifixion. The only disciple to deny Christ became the man who had the strength to die for Him.

In Peter's case, failure led to growth. As a mentor, you will see failure. The mentor's job is to help the mentee grow through the failure.

Getting Started

The best mentor/mentee relationships are often those that occur naturally. But if you want to get some relationships started by creating a more formal mentoring program in your organization, here are six steps to get you started:

1. Commitment

Demonstrate by your words and deeds that this is not a “program of the month,” but a strategic choice made to build the performance of employees.

2. Openness

Make the program open to everyone. Everyone may benefit from a mentoring program as a mentee. Where would Peter have been if Jesus had denied him?

As for mentors, it may be appropriate to have mentors who have a minimum experience level or job ranking. A new employee, or one that is struggling to maintain minimum job standards of their own, is not a good role model for a mentee.

3. Set expectations

Make it very clear that participation in the mentoring program is very serious. Participation should not be a means to advance a career. Mentoring relationships are highly confidential, and should not be compromised in any way.

4. Establish pairs

Mentor/mentee pairs are best made naturally. Ask potential participants if there are people with whom they would like to be paired. For those who do not have a preference, pairings can best be accomplished by an independent group designated just for this function. Pairs can be made by the group and discussed with the supervisors of the people involved, and eventually, with the individuals themselves.

5. Training

Since the idea of mentoring or being a mentee is new to many employees, some training is in order. Whether formal or informal, find a way to let people know what is expected from the mentor/mentee relationship, and how to get started.



One way to get the relationships going is to encourage regularly scheduled meetings between the mentor and the mentee.

6. Monitoring

Do not do it. If people feel that their relationships are being monitored or graded in any way, the program is doomed to failure. If yours is a large organization, you may want to let your personnel manager (or another qualified person), provide for ongoing training to help develop the relationships. But again, avoid anything that looks like “big brother is watching.”

One Final Thought

Building a mentoring system will not be an easy task. It will require careful thought and delicate nurturing. But if you succeed, you will have happier, more productive employees and managers.

The apostle John recorded Jesus’ words, *“He who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to My Father”* (John 14:12). Jesus himself encouraged us to do greater works than He did.

Jesus was a mentor to the disciples. We should be mentors. Encourage someone else to do works greater than yours.