This issue’s feature describes how the qualities and roles of a mentor in formal and informal mentoring programs help proteges help themselves—and why this approach is successful.

Think back to the early days of your career. Does someone came to mind for having showed you the ropes? Such a person—a mentor—can be critical to the success of your career. Mentorship is a valuable tool in developing proactive, talented individuals.

Cultural myths tell of the magician Merlyn, who mentored young King Arthur, heralding the importance of the mentoring relationship and its impact on civilization (Bustard, Farewell & Holdnak, 1991).

One of the most effective training strategies for professionals to gain valuable work skills is using a buddy or mentoring system (Reichert, 1994). In this strategy, experienced staff members mentor the less experienced personnel by modeling a job, and then by having the protege watch and listen.

**Reasons for Mentoring**

Mentor relationships and arrangements are as diverse as the people they involve. In more formal relationships, the mentor-protege program is established and administered by a company or organization. Formal mentoring programs have been found to do the following:

* Reduce high turnover in early career stages. Through a mentor’s influence promising professionals can be encouraged not to leave a company, even if their experience has not developed as they had hoped.
Prepare talented people to replace those retiring, moving, or being promoted. Mentors can be helpful in finding and training others to fill the voids.

Assist people trapped in the wrong job. Mentors can help professionals find other positions if the professional’s talents are being wasted in their present positions.

Provide ways for people to contribute to the organization until they retire. As professionals prepare to retire, their job responsibilities and thus value to the organization decrease. By allowing these people to mentor, they continue to contribute to the organization by sharing their accumulated knowledge with their newer professionals.

Informal mentoring relationships are established spontaneously and voluntary; in some instances neither party may be consciously aware of the relationship. Rather than being assigned to one another, they gravitate toward each other, perhaps through shared enthusiasm for a particular cause. Usually the mentor recognize potential in the novice and initiates a mentoring relationship. The novice also may see more experienced person as a source of guidance and support. (Zembe & Anderson, 1997).

The Role of a Mentor
As a mentor, professionals will be called on to act in a number of capacities: as a role model, guide, tutor, coach, and confidante. By far, a mentor’s most important function is to help the protege grow and think (Rice, 1989). Mentors can best serve their proteges two ways: (1) by listening carefully without taking on the other person’s problem or giving advice, thus enabling the protege to articulate the problem and sort out solutions on his or her own; and (2) by providing feedback and confirmation.

Helping Proteges Help Themselves
What should mentors do when their proteges are about to make a serious mistake or are not performing within basic guidelines? A mentor’s role is not to dictate, but to enable proteges to determine an appropriate course of action. This can be done two possible ways.

The first approach is to draw attention to current activity or results, then point out the desired activities or results. While this shows that a “gap” exists between what is and what should be, it leaves the responsibility of determining a course of action in the protege’s hands. The mentor should focus the protege’s attention toward possible solutions, but the protege should determine specific ideas.

The second method involves the use of “I” statements rather than “you” statements. When confronting a protege about questionable plans or actions, it is best to avoid “you” statements such as, “You made a mistake.” Rather, use “I” statements, which generally have three parts: a neutral description of what the mentors perceive that the protege intends to do, a statement of the potentially negative effects on the protege or others, and the mentor’s thoughts about their proteges plans. Since “I” statements don’t dictate behavior, the protege is less likely to become defensive. Instead, the protege is given the opportunity to reconsider the plan and to decide whether to carry it out.
Stages of the Mentoring Relationship

Though no two mentor-protege relationship are alike, there does seem to be a general pattern that the relationships follow. Most pass through the following stages:

**Initiation.** During this time expectations are formed and realized as the relationship becomes important to both people. The mentor provides coaching, challenging work, and visibility. The protege exhibits respect, desire, and willingness to be coached.

**Cultivation.** The mentor’s contribution reach a maximum, and both people continue to benefit from the relationship. The parties are emotionally linked.

**Separation.** One party is prompted or relocated, or one party desires independence and the relationship, as existed, draws to an end.

**Redefinition.** The mentor and protege becomes colleagues and come to share a mutual respect.

A healthy mentoring relationship does not last forever. The purpose of a mentor is to teach the protege to think independently. Once a protege can perform effectively without close assistance, the mentor is no longer needed. In fact, the greatest compliment for a mentor is when a former protege is recognized with a promotion. At that point the mentoring relationship has been fulfilled, and a new relationship begins.

Summary

Everyone plays a role in a knowledge based society. Individuals can recognize needs and identify goals and objectives to meet those goals. Individuals should revise their goals annually and reformulate their vision statements. Davis & Botkin (1995) recommend that the individuals examine their stake in training and assess the technology used.. An individual must evaluate what will and will not work for him. Through awareness, education will move to the forefront of the issues facing the world of work.

References


Qualities of a Successful Mentor

Serving as a mentor is a challenge as well as an excellent opportunity for personal growth. Although potential mentors often feel that they lack the necessary knowledge or experience to help someone else, this isn’t usually the case. If you look around you’ll see plenty of people who could benefit from encouragement and support. Good mentors possess the following qualities:

- **Power.** A strong mentor has a connection to the top of the organization.

- **Respect.** A good mentor receives support from peers as well as those higher in rank.

- **Security in position.** Mentors must be interested in their proteges’ development and ideas and not feel threatened by their proteges’ achievements.

- **Articulation.** Mentors must effectively communicate what they know.

- **Coaching capability.** Mentors should give constructive criticism and offer advice.

- **Compatibility with proteges.** Mentors and proteges should share similar views and values. They should have the same outlook on their organization, goals, and careers.

- **Stability.** Mentors must have long-term plans to stay with the organization.

- **Patience.** Mentors realize it will take time for the protege to develop.

- **Availability.** Mentors must have time for their proteges apart from business and family commitments.