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Acting as a Mentor

'Mentoring' has lately become a trend in management science as its importance to the wellbeing of organizations here has finally been recognized. It should be taken very seriously. Which is not to say that it can't be fun...

What is a mentor? Our exploration of that interesting question takes us all the way back to the western world's earliest literature. The character in Homer's *Odyssey* named Mentor is a friend of Odysseus who undertakes the education of the hero's son Telemachus. Later, Mentor helps the youth track down his missing father, but by then he has been possessed by Athene, the Greek goddess of war, patron of the arts and crafts, and paragon of wisdom. Athene, in the guise of Mentor, pilots Telemachus past ambushes and other deadly hazards to see him safely through his quest.

Thus the word derives from the image of a loyal, wise and helpful friend — a teacher, protector and guide who uses his/her experience to show a person how to overcome difficulties and avoid dangers. Homer's mythical figure was undoubtedly drawn from the real life of his time, for clearly there have been mentors for as long as there have been human beings. From the stone age on, youngsters learned how to hunt, gather and prepare food and fight their enemies under the guidance of older members of their family, tribe or clan.

The very first mentors as we understand the concept today were probably aunts, uncles or older cousins. The relationship between parents and their children and between older and younger siblings is usually too sensitive for ideal mentorship. Less intimate relatives can talk to young people with a degree of confidence and understanding which immediate family members can seldom muster. To be a mentor requires both a warm interest in a learner's welfare and a certain objectivity.

In any case, mentorship tended to move out of the family circle as societies grew more sophisticated. A system emerged whereby apprentices learned their trades under masters who had gone through the same process themselves. The masters might be related to the apprentices, but more often they were non-relatives who engaged the youths in exchange for near-free labour. For centuries, apprenticeship was virtually the only method of passing on advanced technical skills and knowledge. Book-learning was confined to theoretical questions of religion and philosophy.

And therein lies the essential difference between formal education and what now goes by the unlovely name of "mentoring" — the closeness to the subject being studied. Education, for the most part, tells people about things on paper or in a teacher's words. Mentoring shows them how to do things in actual situations. An old-fashioned master craftsman might have been quite illiterate, but he could demonstrate how to saw a board or make a pair of boots using the right tools, and keep his apprentice at it until it became second nature. Unlike much of what we study through reading or other second-hand means, the things we learn by practice are not easy to forget.

The apprenticeship system still thrives in large parts of the world, where it remains the chief form of technical training. In North America, formal apprenticeships have been replaced to some extent by schooling, but they still exist in various complex trades in which certified competence is required.

Hands-on learning of this kind is not confined to industry. Medical interns and articulated law students, among others, are expected to work for certain set periods under senior practitioners before they are considered fully qualified. Thesis advisors in universities occupy a classic mentor's role vis-a-vis graduate students: they combine their knowledge and judgment with their juniors' boldness and energy to blaze new trails of learning. George Bernard Shaw caught the spirit of the relationship in his play *Getting Married*, in which a character says: "I am not a teacher, only a fellow traveller of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead — ahead of myself, as well as you."

In addition to teaching, mentors employ psychology to encourage people to make the most of their abilities and personalities. Clergy persons, social workers, and concerned volunteers act as mentors when they help people get back on their feet in times of distress.

Not just another buzz-word, but the key to the survival of any group

In our own backgrounds, most of us can recall a teacher or athletic coach who went beyond the call of duty in attempts to bring our potential to its peak.

But mentors need not hold an official position. Some of the best are not even conscious of the role they play. An example may be found in the story of a boy who was nine years old when his father died, and the man next door decided to "keep an eye" on his welfare. Over the next few years he encouraged the boy to do well in school, gave him odd jobs to do, and let him know that he was always welcome to come to him for instruction and advice. When the boy got into trouble with the police, the man interceded and pledged to see to it that the boy behaved himself in future — which he did, mostly out of a sense of obligation. To the man, it was all a just part of being a good neighbour. To the boy, it was an invaluable head start to a successful life.

In the past few years, mentoring has come to be identified with management. In fact, it has become a kind of buzz-word in management theory, and that is not a good thing. Its popularity may lead people to regard it as just another theory of the month in a field where theories burn with the brilliance of Roman candles for a while, then fade into extinction. It should be understood that mentoring is not a fad; it is a serious and eminently practical

matter, vital to the progress of any organization, whatever its purpose may be.

History shows that, among any group of human beings, the nurturing of skills and talent from one generation to the next is the very basis of survival. To go back to ancient Greece, the fathers of western philosophy regarded the transmission of experience as nothing less than a moral duty. Socrates, for instance, declared that knowledge is the most valuable thing a person can have, and that it must be shared for the good of the community.

No matter what size it is, every organization is a kind of a community. Like any village, town, or city, it has its body politic, its culture, its leaders and its specialists. One traditional feature of a well-ordered community is that its elders are called upon to share their wisdom with people who stand to benefit from it. If a community is not to wither away, it must perpetuate itself by a flow of new blood throughout its system. In a modern business or other organization, this new blood takes the form of abilities that are being developed bit by bit, day by day.

The elders in an organization are the managers, supervisors and senior co-workers of "developing" employees at every level. To serve well as mentors, they must be aware that mentoring is not a peripheral task; it is an integral part of their jobs. Some companies drive this point home by specifically pairing off junior and senior employees. These designated mentors and their protégés often work in teams, so that much of the learning and questing is done collectively. Nevertheless, an able team leader singles out individuals for special attention as required.

In most organizations, mentoring is carried out informally, especially when both parties to the relationship are in white-collar positions. It would seem clear that fledgling white-collar workers are just as much in need of assistance and encouragement as their apprenticed blue-collar counterparts, but until lately, this need was widely overlooked. New people would arrive in the office, and — after they had been given a critical once-over — senior colleagues might or might not tacitly "adopt" them. In general, however, managers and supervisors in offices were expected to master their jobs through a combination of osmosis and time.

Until a few years ago, there *was* enough time — and enough people in a typical office — for this slap-dash tradition to yield more or less satisfactory

results. Curiously enough, there is more need for mentorship as a corporate way of life now that productivity has become a watchword and people at all levels have a full quota of work. In a busy shop, the development of abilities among the staff will tend to be neglected unless time and effort is expressly allotted to it. It must receive regular and continual attention, and not be left up to occasional training sessions or seminars. Mentoring is not a sometime thing.

What makes a good mentor? First of all, he or she must be accessible. Today's heavy workloads tend to pin managers down at their desks. Good mentors refuse to stay comfortably ensconced in their office chairs; they walk around, pop into people's offices to see how things are going, keep in regular touch with people in the field over the telephone, and make sure their own doors are open. As one young manager approvingly described her boss, "She has a way of being there whenever I need her, and when I don't need her, she lets me do my own thing."

This is just the reverse of another young manager's report: "When I have a problem, my boss comes in and solves it, and then he goes back to his 'real' job." A person in this position is left knowing as little about how to deal with the problem after the boss has disposed of it as he did before. Superiors who take such a "do it yourself" approach should consider its effect on their subordinates' future capabilities in terms both of know-how and confidence. They would do well to think of those old master craftsmen, patiently nursing apprentices along until they had become masters in their

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own right. Incidentally, at a time when technology is always likely to make sudden big changes in jobs, the "apprentices" are no longer necessarily rookies. They might have years of work behind them, and rank fairly high on the organization chart.

In the old days, relationships between mentors and their protégés usually depended on personalities. Senior people in positions of authority would sponsor those they particularly liked, and stand aloof from the rest. This was — and is — known as the "buddy system," and it had the unhealthy effect of giving rise to office cliques and cabals. Often, there would be political struggles in which "Smith's gang"

would be pitted against "Jones's gang." Those outside of the buddy system would find themselves shoved aside and passed over for promotion. Nothing could be worse for overall morale.

It is only human to like some people better than others, but any boss who aspires to be a responsible mentor should be on guard against the instinct to play favourites. Within working groups and teams, personal feelings must be set aside and everyone given an even chance.

Management experts warn that, apart from any question of fairness, highly personal mentor/learner relationships do not always yield the best results in

*Sympathetic to
personal concerns,
but seeing that the
work is done*

the long run. People are drawn to each other by similarities. The danger is that the mentors will turn out clones of themselves who are followers instead of potential leaders. Juniors should

be encouraged to act independently and pursue their own ideas, thereby reinforcing their individual strengths.

Like parents, mentors who have their protégés tucked too firmly under their wings are inclined either to be too hard on them or not hard enough on them. If the former, there is a danger of destroying their confidence; if the latter, the danger is that they will become overconfident and hence slack. It would be better for all concerned if, instead of playing the father or mother to their wards, mentors would play the concerned aunt or uncle — sympathetic to their personal concerns, but not trying to run their lives.

Some people, of course, try to get close to the boss to push their own advancement. These sycophants are parasites who live off their superiors' vanity. Taking nothing away from their individual right to instruction and honestly-earned opportunity, the wise boss/mentor will subtly let them know that flattery will get them nowhere. Otherwise the bosses can bask in the glow of fake admiration while the morale of other workers goes down the drain.

It takes a delicate balancing act to be both a good mentor and a responsible boss. Mentors must take a learners' weak spots into account and work to overcome them; at the same time, they must ensure that the necessary work is done, and done properly. They must therefore cultivate the art of gentle correction. When things are done wrong, it must be viewed as a learning opportunity and not as a occa-



sion for recrimination. Set-backs are bound to happen, in which case the best course is to analyze the causes together, quickly pick up the pieces, and get on with the work at hand.

The hardest judgment call in mentoring is how much support to give. Over-protection breeds the feeling that the boss will always come to the rescue, so that it does not matter much if work is well done. On the other hand, leaving people to go it alone can make them feel that the boss does not care about whether they look bad in the eyes of even more senior bosses. The worst case is when, under the pretence of mentoring, bosses get juniors to do their work for them, and then shift the blame on them when things go wrong.

A careful mentor must have a feeling for when to exercise restraint by saying, in effect: "Don't try to do everything all at once. What's your hurry?" It is flirting with failure to allow too much independence too soon.

*A generator of humour
and friendship in our
working lives*

At the same time, people hate to have superiors breathing down their necks. They have a basic human desire to be trusted, and they want their indi-

viduality to be respected. There are times when a mentor must recognize that if a person does things differently than they do, it is simply different — not inferior or wrong.

A common way of displaying a lack of trust is by needlessly guarding information. People work best when they know exactly why they are doing something, and how that something fits in with an overall plan. Organizations by their nature tend to play information tight to their chests, and managers may keep secrets merely because it makes them feel important. Mentors should assess how much of what they know should be passed on to their subordinates to keep them in the picture — and the more the better, short of clearly damaging the organization. For a start, people should regularly be kept informed as to how the organization is faring. It strengthens their commitment to thus feel involved.

Mentors must prove by their actions that they are worthy of their juniors' trust. These actions often take the form of using their superior "clout" and familiarity with the organization to clear away bureaucratic difficulties that can detract from their subordinate's performance and impede initiatives. If, for instance, the purchasing authority of a person trying to run a project is restricted to nickels and

dimes, he or she is not likely to feel very trusted. Mentors often find themselves acting as facilitators and friends in court, making it easier to get things done.

Management experts have observed that much of the mistrust subordinates feel towards their bosses stems from poor communications. They must be told explicitly what is expected of them in advance, and not learn that they were supposed to do something only when their bosses complain that it was not done.

If there are times when learners feel let down by their mentors, there will also be times when the mentors feel they have been let down, and they should let the learners know it. Being sympathetic towards people does not mean being soft on them. Good mentors are hard taskmasters, demanding that work be accomplished to the best of their subordinate's abilities at their particular stage of development. They do not accept excuses easily, and they let it be known that they will not allow their juniors to take advantage of them. If such warnings must be given, they should be given early. A relationship that gets off on the wrong foot in this respect may never be put right.

But this makes it sound as though mentoring is a grimly earnest affair, when in reality it is usually just the opposite. As in most other aspects of life, people most enjoy work when it is shared. A wholesome mentor/learner relationship — one in which no undue advantage is taken on either side — adds a lot of fun to working. It brings exchanges of humour and the glow of warm human feelings, and it produces lasting friendships. For the mentor, it brings the gratification of exercising a kind of creativity. Yet another ancient Greek, Aristotle, said that he regarded his students with the affection an artist feels for his work.

In the aftermath of the "me generation" when selfishness gained temporary approval in the public mind, mentoring represents a return to good old human values. On the part of the practitioner, it combines generosity, a concern for others' wellbeing, and the making of a contribution that will last beyond their own time. For its beneficiaries, it revives something that has been somewhat missing of late — respect for elders. Wherever they might be exercised, these are among the values that form the foundation of civilization. The great Greek philosophers would have approved.

