

# **Mentoring—A Powerful Development Method**

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Mentoring has been around for a very long time. For example, Moses' father-in-law Jethro served as a mentor to Moses in suggesting a better way to handle the burdensome task of settling disputes among the Israelites (Exodus 18: 13-26).

Mentoring is usually an informal arrangement between an older, more experienced individual and a younger person who is not as far along in his or her career.

The mentoring relationship is a process of empowerment in which the mentor transfers valuable perspectives to the mentee for the purpose of the mentee's development. The mentor contributes time as well as information, awareness, advice, knowledge, wisdom, encouragement, emotional support, career guidance, linkage to resources, and sometimes even status or protection.

Mentoring relationships often seem to occur spontaneously. However, both parties are usually able to trace the relationship back to some initial overt request, perhaps small, from either the mentor or mentee. ("Protégé" is a synonym; "mentee" seems to be more commonly used today.)

Many strong mentoring relationships develop slowly. Neither party may even use the word "mentor" to describe what is happening. The mutual respect level is high and both parties are willing to examine and share perspectives on methods and approaches in successfully accomplishing work.

For mentoring relationships to develop and remain healthy, the chemistry between the two individuals must be right. They share similar values. They each raise questions and offer stimulating ideas. Each individual derives some beneficial consequences, though these are often not overtly raised or even acknowledged.

Many successful leaders have never had a mentor. However, anyone who has been fortunate enough to have experienced such a relationship will typically speak of it with very appreciative words. "Trial and error" may be a very effective method for learning, but it consumes large quantities of time and the number and size of errors may be very detrimental to one's career!

You may be wondering, "If mentoring relationships are beneficial to both parties, why are there so few such relationships?" Or maybe you are thinking, "Hey, if mentoring relationships are so effective, why not start a formal mentoring process in our organization?"

Those are good questions, and I'll offer some answers next week. For the rest of today's article, let's look at some characteristics of mentors. (As you read these, think about whether you qualify as being a mentor to a developing leader in your organization.)

Mentors have a passionate interest in helping others grow. They see potential in younger, less experienced individuals and are willing to share their understanding to help develop that potential. However, they are selective about where and how they use their time, so they are unwilling to invest heavily in more than one or two individuals concurrently.

Mentors have perspective, able to envision "what could be" for a given individual. They are willing to offer suggestions to enable the person to move in that direction. They are aware of what is good for the organization and good for the individual, and they hold these in proper balance.

Mentors expect mentees to bring agenda items for dialogue. They are flexible and able to flow with the interests and attention of the mentees. However, they expect mentees to respect their time and respond thoughtfully to the suggestions offered.

Mentors are able to explain why they behave as they do, describing effective processes and methodology. Mentors are usually gifted in the areas of teaching, giving, or encouragement.

Instead of being a potential mentor, you may be thinking, "Hey, I want a mentor!" I will share some characteristics of a successful mentee next week.

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