

Why Are There So Few Mentoring Relationships?

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The past two weeks of articles on mentoring have evoked some interesting responses. One reader sent this e-mail: "I have been unable to find a business mentor, even though I tried. One of the hardest things about finding a mentor is the rejection. It's hard not to take it personally."

At least this reader has tried. I speculate that many readers have never even sought a mentor, merely because of the fear of rejection. "Why would someone with experience be interested in spending some of his or her valuable time helping me?"

Let's face it—somebody has to initiate every relationship, right? Are you going to just wait around and hope individuals with more experience invite you to be the beneficiary of their understanding?

Oh, it can happen, but it's pretty rare. The probability is that anyone you might want as a mentor is already overcommitted. You may be of the opinion that this individual would never be willing to focus his or her attention on helping you uniquely.

Maybe that's so. I've worked with many leaders, most of whom didn't have a strong initial interest in developing others. Competent leaders have a lot on their minds—like solving operational problems, balancing cash flows, and figuring how to attract competent staff to handle future growth. Time is clearly a limitation, but many strong leaders have never even considered being a mentor.

Still, as the Bible suggests (Matthew 7:7), I encourage any individual who wants help in building skills to ask! And keep on asking! Just because one individual turns you down is no reason to avoid asking someone else. Or even asking that same person again three months later!

Okay, failure of the mentor or potential mentee to ask is one reason. A mentoring relationship won't generate itself! What are some other reasons mentoring relationships either fail or are not started?

- Chemistry isn't right.
- Potential allegations of favoritism.
- Risks associated with poor performance of the mentor or mentee.
- Pride ("I'm too good to ask for help.")
- Pride ("I'm too valuable to use my time helping just one person.")
- The organization never legitimized mentoring relationships.
- The organization has forced mentoring relationships, and they've not worked.
- The relationship outlived its usefulness.

I'm sure a book could be written on each reason. There are probably many more explanations. This is just the list I've catalogued from my experience. I'm sure somebody somewhere has done some research on this subject. I've just not looked hard enough for it!

But I did find this resource after a lot of looking: The Mentor Handbook by Bobby and Richard Clinton (1991). A pastor friend introduced me to the "The Constellation Model" they describe:

- upward mentors—those who have gone before and can share their experience with you
- inside lateral mentors—peers who provide confidential perspective and accountability
- outside lateral mentors—trusted colleagues with no explicit role on your team, yet they provide trusted objective perspective and external accountability
- downward mentors (mentees)—those who are just learning what you've already experienced

With all these possibilities for helping or being helped, the real question shouldn't be "Why are there so few mentoring relationships?" The more appropriate question is "Why are you not in a mentoring relationship with someone, as either mentor or mentee?"

Dennis Hooper guides leaders as they mentor future leaders and build organizations of excellence. Contact Dennis at (478)-988-0237 or dhooper2@juno.com.