

Leading Ways: MENTORING

The classical roots of mentoring are conveyed at face value. Telemachus the son of Odysseus is counseled by his Father's retainer, Mentor, actually Athena in disguise, who provides the wisdom that is her province, to the young man so that he might be properly prepared to assume the throne of Ithaca. In contemporary times in the U.S. mentoring has been a part of the growth of awareness of developmental processes as a part of education and psychology.

Both Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crisis of Adult Life* (1976) and Daniel Levinson's *The Season's of a Man's Life* (1979) placed the idea of lifelong psychological and educational development and growth into wide public discussion. Levinson suggested that senior "mentors" could assist younger individuals with the life transitions making them pass more quickly and with a higher quality. For thirty years the awareness of and demand for mentoring has grown both in individuals desiring such relationships and organizations recognizing the value in supporting the process.

But without careful delineation the roles of mentor, coach and supervisor can become confused. It is possible for one person to play all three roles, but success will still depend on careful definition

DEFINITION OF MENTORING

There are a variety of definitions of mentoring. Rather than attempt a synthesis, that would undoubtedly leave something out, one can identify a number of elements that seem to be characteristic of a mentoring relationship that distinguish it from coaching or supervising. Some of the qualities of a mentoring relationship are:

Junior-Senior quality

This is perhaps the most characteristic dimension of a mentoring relationship, it seems to imply that a wise, older and more senior person is working to assist a younger and more junior person develop some of the perspective and wisdom that the older person holds.

Adult

Even though there is likely to be a considerable gap in experience and perhaps age, it makes sense that this relationship is between two adults. However, as a young person becomes an adult someone that was important to them in their earlier years may mature into a mentor.

Guide

The mentor also seems to act as a guide for the person being initiated into a field of work, profession, institution or life. General advice is given about the norms and ways of passage to success.

Personal

One of the mistakes that many mentoring programs make is the faulty notion that a mentor can be assigned. The willingness of the mentor to give and the mentee to receive is highly personal and individual, much like friendship, and cannot be forced. However, the mentor relationship is not a friendship, friendships come from peer relationships and a mentoring relationship is marked by disparities of power, experience, age, insight and wisdom.

Relationship based

Connection between the junior and senior partners must be focused on the relationship, not on the specific work that is being done at that moment by the mentee. This quality is what makes it so challenging for a supervisor to provide mentoring advice while the mentee is still in the mentor's direct employment.

Long-term

The relationship should last over a number of years and is likely to go beyond just a single job. Because of its length the nature of the relationship will also change over time much as the transitions that occur in parental and child relationships, with some of the joys and heartaches associated with such transitions.

Two-way

While the benefits of a mentoring relationship might seem to flow mostly to the mentee, the mentor also benefits from the opportunity to reflect, critique and perhaps bring a deeper and more meaningful understanding of their life experience. The nurturing nature of a mentoring relationship is deeply human, not organizational. In its humanity it speaks to both sides regardless of the time of life.

Protected

The mentor relationship should be private and protected. It is not something that should become a part of formal advancement structures or require progress reports from mentors on mentees.

Intentional and purposeful

Friendships emerge, good conversations happen, and advice is given all somewhat accidentally. A mentoring relationship should be intentional and one that develops initially by the actions of the junior or senior partner. Organizations might encourage such actions, but cannot broker a true mentor relationship. The primary purpose of the mentoring relationship is to assist the junior partner be successful in a career and in life.

Independent

This quality speaks more to the qualities of the mentor who should have perspective on and distance from the work and life of the mentee. The mentor should also be able personally and politically to be candid and direct.

Improvement and change

The relationship is not created as a way of adjusting to the status quo, but to improve and change the mentee in order that they become more successful in their ambitions in life and work. This quality implies that the relationship is one that fosters learning and that the learning will go both ways.

Domain focused

This is not an essential dimension of a mentor relationship, but it is very common for both parties to be in the same profession, career, industry, or institution. And it is often the case that the mentor has achieved some significant level of success within that domain.

Broader life

In distinction to the domain focus, some mentors provide additional insight for the mentee into broader life challenges. Sometimes the relationship has nothing to do with a domain as described here, but exclusively paints on the larger canvas of life.

OTHER SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Mentoring relationships are sometimes confused with two other types of roles that have some dimensions similar to mentoring, but are really quite different. It can be confusing if these other two roles also carry a mentoring dimension or if the mentee would like to have a mentoring type relationship with someone who is really their supervisor or coach.

Coach

Coaching, leadership and otherwise, has become almost an essential part of career or life success. It is also a modern concept when given this name, but obviously has ancient roots in the teacher-learner tradition. Coaching as it is commonly used today is more focused on performance improvement around a specific skill or set of skills such as how to develop others, give an effective presentation, or conduct a delicate negotiation. In this regard it is more limited than the role of supervisor or mentor. The coach is almost always seen as someone with fierce independence whose skills are tied to a specific function or operation. So it would make perfect sense to say “I have a communications coach” and on the following day referring to another person, “That is my interpersonal coach.” But it would not make sense to substitute mentor for coach in these two sentences. While the student might develop a close relationship with the coach at its heart it is one of consultant to client, often for compensation, something that would violate the relationship of mentor and mentee.

Supervisor

This relationship is a well understood one; however ineptly it might be played out in many organizations. Good supervisors should always be working to develop and grow the people that work for them. That is the very best way to influence down in the organization, motivate workers and improve performance. In this regard the relationship can look and seem a bit like a mentoring relationship. But reflect on many of the qualities of a mentor relationship listed above. There are other dimensions of the supervisory role that make it impossible and unwise to think of the relationship as having the qualities of a mentoring one.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN SUPERVISING AND MENTORING

While they are similar and overlap in function, there are several important differences between these two. This tension often leads to confusion in settings where work and training are combined such as a post-doctoral fellowship or clinical residency. The supervisor or leader is responsible for getting work done. This might be advancing a general set of experiments around a research theme or effectively delivering patient care. The post-doc or resident is in part responsible for delivering this work. The trainee must also fit into the culture of a specific work team and abide by the policies of the broader institution. The challenges in clinical training are compounded, as it is likely to be conducted in a great variety of settings each of which will have its own culture.

BALANCING ROLES

An effective leader can play all three of these roles successfully, but it is a challenging undertaking. The first step to success is knowing how effective one is in each role. This assessment should not be self-generated but needs to be drawn from those who have experienced the leader as mentor, supervisor or coach. This quite easily leads to a next step of creating a plan for improving in each domain and for the mentor to continually receive feedback on progress. It is also essential for the leader to clearly segment in their mind when they are mentoring, coaching and supervising and what this looks like and sounds like to the recipient. Finally, as the leader wears these three hats it will be essential to clearly message this to the person they are developing.

To be effective in all three roles requires good feedback skills and a team or organizational culture that supports positive growth and development. An earlier Leading Ways addressed that topic. (Add link.)

Leaders can play each of these roles. Really effective leaders can combine all three with little conflict and maximum impact.