



Be a Mentor

Wayne Turk

Hopefully, you have or have had a mentor in your career. It may have been for a short while, or it may have lasted your career. Now it's your turn. Coaching and mentoring are not the same but are related. Like coaching, the results of mentoring are applicable to the subordinate, the manager, and the organization.

Characteristics

- Mentoring normally, but not always, occurs outside of a line manager-employee relationship.
- Mentors are usually senior managers in the organization.
- Mentors know the organization's structure, policies, processes and "politics."
- It is at the mutual consent of both parties.
- It is focused on professional or career development; this may or may not be in the protégé's primary area of expertise or work.
- Relationships are personal; a mentor provides both professional and personal support.
- Relationships may be initiated by mentors or created through matches initiated by the organization.
- Relationships cross job boundaries and, in some cases, organizational boundaries.
- Relationships last for a specific period in a formal program but may continue in an informal mentoring relationship.

If you are a lower-level manager, these characteristics don't mean you can't be a mentor. Informal mentoring relationships frequently start early in a career. As a manager, you learn the capabilities and potential of those folks working for you. If you see that potential in an employee and can help them along, why not? It's good for the individual and the organization.

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In choosing someone or those who you want to mentor, look for junior-level subordinates who exhibit strong leadership skills. Those who display energy, commitment, integrity, good decision-making skills and the courage to take smart risks are your future leaders. They are the folks who you want to help with their career development.

There is a warning, though. Mentoring someone who works directly for you can appear as favoritism. This is especially true if the mentoring leads to special treatment in the workplace. That can cause jealousy or envy in other employees. You don't want that to happen. Those emotions cause nothing but problems in the workplace.

Duties of a Mentor

As a mentor, you want to guide, counsel, support, coach, and encourage your protégé in ways that will help them to expand their abilities, talents, skills, and knowledge. You want to help them understand the "ways of the world," at least as they apply to your organization. You want to share your experience, both good and bad. This is applicable on both the military and civilian side in DoD.

Promote honest, confidential sharing of information, ideas, goals, and thoughts. You need to be honest with your protégé so that they can benefit from what you have to offer. The protégé needs to be honest with you so that you know their thoughts, ambitions, desires, and problems. That honesty will highlight problems and learning opportunities. For example, they're going to make mistakes in the work environment; everyone does. Those are great things to discuss so that your protégé can learn from them. Don't berate them or be judgmental. Just use these mistakes as learning opportunities.

Don't assume every employee wants to be a manager or that every military person wants to be a general. Many people don't want the responsibility or headaches that go with management or moving up in rank. That doesn't mean that you can't help them with their career development. There are other paths to career success. But you have to know what they really want to do before you can help them.

Meet on a regular basis to discuss things. Sometimes because of geographical differences, this is difficult. In those cases telephone calls and e-mails will have to suffice. You need to know what is happening with the person and be able to give them feedback from your perspective. Use those meetings to ask questions, discuss options, share experiences, and any changes that have occurred. Try to let the person you are mentoring take the conversational lead whenever possible. It may take asking questions of the employee to get them talking. Open-ended questions are best.

Give feedback. You want to let your protégé know what you think. It also is the time to discuss options—both for specific events that have transpired in the workplace and for career

development. If something has happened in the workplace that causes concern (for either of you), ask them for options on how it might have been handled differently. Talk through the options and the potential ramifications of each. This works well for situations or events that are upcoming, too. For those future events (in fact, for everything), try not to direct, but to guide. In other words, don't tell them what to do, but get them to discuss what they think and, with them, dissect those actions and discuss all the options.

Remember that people learn in different ways. Consider different learning styles. Some people absorb new information best when it's offered verbally. Others prefer documents, while other people want to be shown. Mentoring everyone the same way is not effective. Sometimes differences in age, gender, and background can be factors in how they learn or how they accept information.

You have certain responsibilities as a mentor. You need to assist the employee in developing their talents. You have to maintain your objectivity and balance. Don't focus only on the mistakes or bad things, but also on the good. Allow the person to grow and become more independent. They won't learn if you always tell them what to do. Foster a sense of risk-taking when it is appropriate. As has been discussed before, the "tried and true" doesn't always hack the program. Balance any responsibilities you take on for the person with what they might learn. Finally, do not do their work for them.

The results should be obvious: Good career progression for those with potential. Better managers and better officers. Fewer losses of good people. Those are three big ones. Most of the studies on mentoring show very positive results.

There are also good results for the mentors. Invariably, they learn from their protégés. That makes them better managers, too. Those who mentor, especially in formal programs, are looked with favor by their bosses. Mentors also develop a better network of contacts. And finally, their subordinates respect them for helping.

There are a few bad things about mentoring. A bad mentor can destroy the career of a good worker or cause the loss of that person to the organization. When the mentoring is successful, the person becomes good at what they do which makes them desirable employees/managers for other organizations. I mentioned jealousy and envy much earlier. Those not selected for mentoring, either formally or informally, can feel hurt, discouraged, or disgruntled.

In the end, mentoring a subordinate pays benefits to all involved. The good far outweighs the bad. And besides that, when your protégé is successful, it makes you feel good.

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