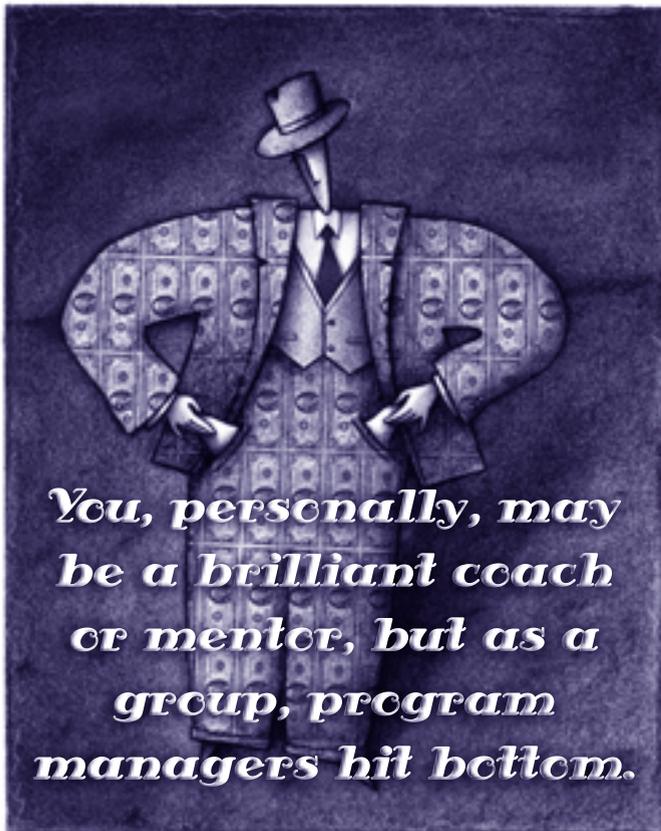


Lending a Helping Hand

The Importance of Mentoring

Owen Gadeken



changes took me from a job or role where I was extensively qualified to a new area where I had few qualifications.

With a Little Help from my Friends

As I thought back over each job or role change, what I realized was that none of these changes would have occurred without significant help from other people. In some cases, I asked for the help; in others, it was offered when I had neither requested it nor perceived the need. In all cases, the help proved immensely beneficial and often critical to my successful job transition. Three examples from my early career illustrate this last point.

After four years of active duty in the Air Force, I was faced with a decision to remain on active duty or pursue a civilian career. I'd had some tough bosses and accumulated a series of mediocre officer performance reports. When I sat down for a career counseling session with my boss, Col. "Bob," he was surprised, based on my current performance under him, that I had such a poor record. He said he was "required" to counsel me on the benefits of pursuing an active-duty career, but since the Air Force was winding down from their Vietnam buildup, he felt certain I would likely be caught in the draw-down and either passed over for promotion or ruffed. So he offered his candid and personal opinion: that I would be better off making an early move to the civilian workforce. I didn't think much of it at the time, but it took some courage for him to go against the party line and recommend I leave the Air Force. And much later, I realized that it set the stage for my rapid and successful civilian career progression.

Once I decided to pursue a civilian career and apply for jobs at my local base, I had to decide which ones to apply for and how to go about it. My formal education and the bulk of my job experience were in chemistry. Pete, the senior civilian in my office, gave me a quick overview of the civil service application and hiring process as well as the job classifications. He recommended that I look in the 0801—general engineering—career field since it offered more jobs and higher grade levels than those found in the pure sciences. I took his advice and very shortly

As a DAU faculty member, I teach critical and reflective thinking to our students who are, or will soon become, program managers. So I recently decided to take a critical and reflective look at my own 33-year acquisition career. I could never have predicted how, starting out as a young lieutenant in the Air Force, I would end up as a well-seasoned DAU professor. I had no overarching plan ("career acquisition strategy") but instead made a series of short-term, almost independent decisions that included multiple job and role changes as well as geographic moves. These changes took me from research chemist, test engineer, strategic planner, program control branch chief, deputy program manager, program analyst, acquisition policy instructor, research director, education department chairman, to engineering management professor. Several of these

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was hired as a GS-11. Again, I didn't think much of it at the time, but seven years later, after four promotions and two geographic moves, I was a GS-15. Much of my upward mobility was the result of the greater variety of jobs and higher grade levels offered in the 0801 job series.

I was planning a clean break from active duty, but while working on my civilian job transition, I was visited by Larry, a civilian operations research analyst from another part of my organization. Larry was also an Air Force reservist, and he strongly suggested I consider staying on in the Air Force Reserve, which I could do on a part-time basis while working full time as a civilian. He explained that in addition to the pay and benefits, I could even qualify for a partial military retirement based on my reserve duty. His logic made sense, and I was able to transfer directly from active duty into the Reserve at my then rank (captain) without loss of even one day of service. Twenty-five years later, I retired from the Air Force Reserve as a colonel after working on a variety of fascinating acquisition-related jobs in six geographic locations.

The three above examples all occurred within a few weeks as I made the transition from military active duty to the civilian workforce. None of these inputs was solicited by me. In fact, I was too naïve to even ask for advice. It was offered for my benefit, and as time has proved, it was of great benefit indeed.

But Enough About Me

My own experiences were a lead-in to the real subject of this article: YOU. Asking for help when you face a difficult problem or career decision may seem like common sense. But human nature often seems to get in the way. Having taught acquisition professionals at DAU for over 20 years, I have found a marked tendency for our students, regardless of their experience level, to *not* ask for help.

There are many possible explanations. The more experienced (and often overconfident) students assume they will be able to solve the problem themselves. They are also reluctant to show any sign of weakness or indecision in front of their fellows. Less experienced or less confident students are reluctant to ask for help since they somehow feel everyone else already knows and they should too. They don't want to ask a "stupid" question in front of their possibly more experienced peers and be ridiculed for it. And sometimes they are simply too shy to speak up in class.

The practical result is that these students would rather keep quiet and fail than admit in the first place that they don't know what to do. That may not be a huge problem in the classroom but it certainly can be in the workplace, where the consequences are real in terms of cost, schedule, and performance on major acquisition programs.



Don't be too shy or too proud to ask for help when you need it.

On the other side of the helping partnership, most of us are willing to help others—but with two important caveats: We need to be asked, and it must not interfere with our really important priorities. Practically speaking, these caveats almost guarantee that our help will neither be solicited nor effective. The message we often convey is, "I'm busy, so don't bother me."

Don't be too busy to offer your expertise when it's needed. Find others who may not realize they need your help and—without being obnoxious or interfering—offer it anyway.

Doing Your Second Job

Imagine this scenario. Mr. X and Ms. Y are the program managers of challenging acquisition programs. In spite of a staff of military, civil service, and support contractors, our PMs find it a constant struggle to keep up with program priorities and externally imposed changes. They reached their current position of PM because they were good at handling complex problems, often with short time horizons. They have capable staffs but often find it hard to delegate, so they end up taking on too many tasks themselves. After all, the programs are their responsibility, and their reputations are on the line. Sound familiar?

What's wrong with this picture? Well, for starters, there's a mismatch in the priorities. Our PMs are doing their first

job well—keeping the program on track. But what about their second job?

What's that you say? What second job?

Well, the second job of every manager is to develop his or her people. There is no evidence in my scenario of that taking place. So what will happen when Mr. X and Ms. Y move on to bigger and better things? "Not my problem," they may say. Well, if not theirs, whose problem is it? It becomes the problem of the people they leave behind or the ones who come in to replace them. And what did Mr. X and Ms. Y do to prepare their people to step up to the challenge or to support the new PMs?

While we have no data on current PM performance as mentors, we do have considerable data from our program management students who were preparing to be PMs when they came through our DAU courses. Every student in our advanced program management course was given a 360-degree-feedback report based on workplace feedback from supervisors, peers, and subordinates, as well as the student's own self-assessment. In all, 7,796 completed this assessment between 1995 and 2002. "Coach and Develop" was the lowest-rated skill of the 24 skill factors over this entire time period. This skill factor (and accompanying low ratings) included accurately assessing strengths and development needs of others; giving timely, specific feedback and helpful coaching; and providing challenging assignments and opportunities for development.

There you have it. Our population of program managers is lousy at coaching and developing their people. Of course, you, personally, may be a brilliant coach or mentor, but as a group, we hit bottom.

The Rule of Four

The obvious question is what can we do about this deficiency? Well, "we" as a group can do very little, but each of us as individuals can do something very specific where we work right now. Actually four very specific somethings.

1. Identify promising candidates you would like to mentor.

Many organizations have scrambled to create formal mentoring programs and assign mentors to all new arrivals. But these programs usually turn out to be mediocre and ineffective. At its heart, mentoring is a human skill and as such there needs to be some chemistry between mentor and protégés. So the best approach may still be to do your own evaluation and select your own candidates. Look for people who have both the potential and desire to do more difficult and challenging work. In some cases, you may lack objective data and need to go with your gut feeling. Should the people you mentor work for you? There are pros and cons to this, but mentoring often works bet-

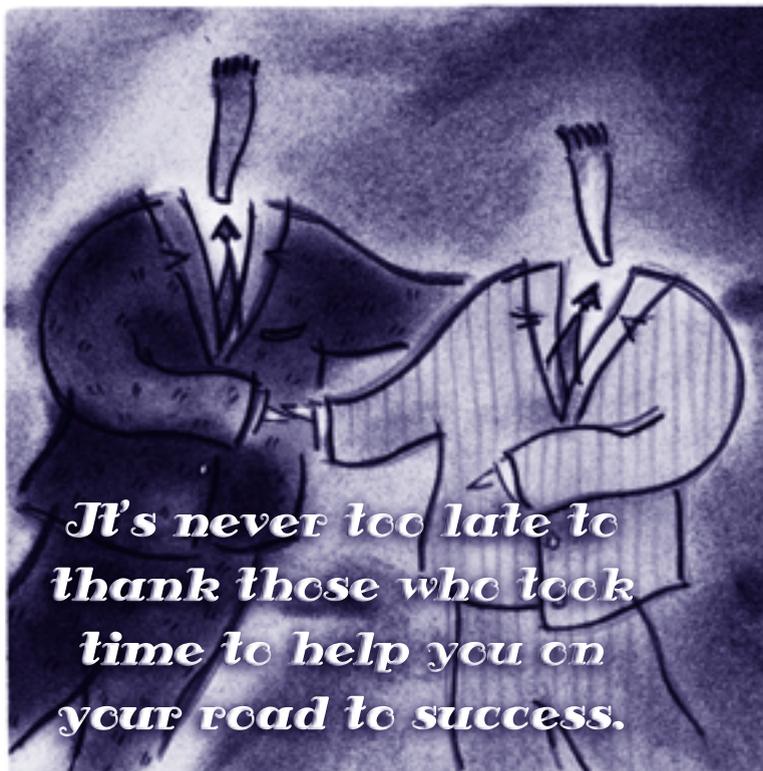
ter with people you don't directly supervise because you have more flexibility in these relationships and are not burdened with the supervisor's formal evaluation role.

2. Spend enough time with those you mentor to make a difference.

Since mentoring involves developing a relationship with your candidates, spending enough time with them to develop the relationship is a high priority. You must get to know your candidates well enough to assess their strengths and development needs. They also need this time to get to know you, observe you as a role model, and see how you can help them. While there are certainly ways you can combine regular work with mentoring, you will still need to set aside extra time to work with your candidates. So it's advisable to limit protégés to the number you can fully support.

3. Arrange for special experiences and developmental opportunities.

Letting things develop in a business-as-usual fashion can limit your impact as a mentor. Remember, you chose your candidates because you thought they had extra potential to advance in both responsibility and rank. So it behooves you to identify opportunities for them to display their potential. These experiences can be as simple as accompanying you to a meeting or site visit, or as complex as creating an entirely new product or service for your organization. Here it's important not to push them too fast or too far afield.



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4. Give timely and constructive feedback.

Giving feedback is an art and perhaps your most important skill as a mentor. Not all of your candidates' actions and behaviors will work well at first. So you'll be faced with providing candid feedback and coaching your protégés to improve—at the same time making sure they don't get discouraged, or you don't dampen their enthusiasm. The S-B-I model is useful: review the **Situation**, describe the **Behavior** you observed, and discuss the **Impact**. Even with the S-B-I model, there is still great latitude in how much information you provide and how you provide it. Sometimes, to have a real impact, you'll need to repeat your feedback in different ways and at different times. And often, the impact of your feedback will not be evident until long after it was given. Behavior change and skill development take time, so you must be patient and consistent with your feedback.

Being an effective mentor or coach is difficult. If it wasn't, there would be no need for this article. On the other hand, being an effective mentor can be the most rewarding part of your job. After your projects and programs are fully developed and passed on to the field, there will still be people in the system who remember what you did to develop them. And if you did your mentoring job well, they will pass on what they learned—in their own way—to those who work with and for them. That is the

true value of mentoring, a process that grows well beyond any individual contribution or accomplishment.

A Final Thought

As I remembered the helping-hand examples I related at the beginning of this article, I was struck by the fact that I never properly thanked the three offerors for their helpful advice. At the time, I suspect I was either too confused or too focused on solving my own problem of military-to-civilian job transition. And I simply didn't realize that these offers of advice and counsel would have such a profound impact later in my career. In a way, this article is an attempt to make up for my lack of appreciation at the time. I have long since lost track of the three individuals in question, but I now intend to make an effort to contact them, share this article, and express my gratitude. And this leads me down the path to the many others who helped me later in my career and who are much easier to contact.

It's never too late to thank those who took time to help you on your road to success.

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