

## Make Mentoring Memorable

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Along the way people planted seeds in my soul and spirit and added stones to the foundation I was trying to form.

—Lisa Fain, quoted in *Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization Guide* by Lois Zachary (John Wiley and Sons, 2005).

When I began my human resources career, I was thrilled when a leader in my organization picked me as a protégé. His advice was helpful in navigating the unknown waters of corporate America; however, I was soon in the middle of a political battle of corporate power and wills. Although I learned about personal loyalty and organization alignment in this process, that experience, even 20 years later, still leaves a bitter taste about power struggles and corporate politics.

So, when a second executive tapped me to be a "high potential," I was more cautious than excited. Again, learning the ropes from someone who has gone before is indeed a benefit of having a mentor. Unfortunately, like my first experience, instead of catapulting my career, I was once again used as a pawn to shield a mentor.

So, after two early, negative experiences, I was disillusioned and did not immediately seek out, or accept offers from, potential mentors. However, I continued to observe leaders that I admired and those that weren't always effective, learning from both types. I examined mentoring programs and talked to HR professionals who had positive and negative experiences with mentors. Hence, I assumed my current—and more positive—point of view on mentoring through observation, research and self-reflection.

My experiences as a mentor and a protégé during the past 10 years have been personally rewarding and professionally invaluable. During the past three years, I have done a tremendous amount of research on best practices.

Contemporary mentoring focuses on learning partnerships, with mentor and protégé playing action roles. Whether the mentoring relationship comes together formally or informally, it should have an educational framework with objectives, development goals, shared roles and outcomes.

As I learned from my first experiences, mentoring is not an



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innate skill, so mentors and protégés should receive training, tools and support. Mentoring relationships are short in duration, but the dialogue and work should focus on a long-term scope of the protégé's profession, and look at the person holistically during different stages of his or her life and career.

Mentors don't develop people; they equip protégés to learn for themselves by sharing experiences, asking great questions, challenging decision-making and expanding problem-solving skills. A mentor becomes a catalyst for professional change and growth. A mentor inspires the mind and heart of the protégé. Below, I offer a framework—in the form of an acrostic—to make your partnerships more MEMORABLE.

**Mutual trust.** An ideal mentor is not one's boss. It is difficult to maintain an objective, nonjudgmental dialogue when a formal reporting relationship exists.

Yet you must include the protégé's manager in the process. When I began mentoring free-spirited Pierre Rougny, director of rehabilitation services at Sebasticook Valley Hospital—a new, talented front-line manager—it was clear that we needed to include his corporate-minded manager Mike Peterson, vice president of clinical services.

I start each new relationship with a mentor-protégé agreement outlining the roles of each individual, setting realistic expectations and establishing specific, custom objectives. In Rougny's agreement, we agreed upon providing monthly feedback to Mike on the projects we were working on and the progress made. Once I began working with Rougny, and with little prompting, he began suggesting innovative solutions to his department's challenges. In addition to working with Rougny on creating these proposals and gaining executive support, I also spent time coaching Peterson to be open-minded to alternatives and selling other people's recommendations for change to senior leaders. Both Rougny's and Peterson's reputations were enhanced during this collaboration.

Mentors model, share and facilitate, while protégés observe, question and explore. The mentoring model of learning requires participation and shared activity by both parties.

**Expand and challenge thinking.** True learning rarely happens in a sterile, safe environment. As a mentor, I set the stage for my protégés to be open to new ideas, grow and make personal changes. Both failure and success are powerful teachers. Mentors' "war" stories offer powerful insight.

My relationship with Lisa Madore, human resources manager at Valley Distributors Inc., began as a teacher for a Society for Human Resource Management HR certification preparation class. Once the class ended, Madore asked me to help her be a

stronger strategic HR business partner in her company.

Madore was an inexperienced, mostly self-taught, HR professional. I quickly learned that she had many organizational hurdles. However, we worked for 12 months on a variety of projects and assignments to enhance the role of HR in her organization. She worked on HR strategic planning, we examined common HR metrics, and she researched best practices. Madore sent me her written materials to critique and help her expand and support her recommendations. She was open-minded to the feedback and kept improving.

Her initial recommendations were met with resistance, but Lisa never gave up and we worked on her presentations, ensuring that she added better statistics and financials. She was able to get some initial management and financial support to enhance the HR function. We still touch base, and Madore continues to make slow but steady progress with her business owners and is becoming an influential HR leader.

**Meaningful feedback.** Criticism needs to be positive, clearly communicated with specific examples, and constructive. Mentors must be sensitive to the other person's ego. Self-confidence must be maintained for people to develop. Both mentor and protégé should agree on a feedback model to be used during their partnership. I spend much time at the beginning on providing balanced feedback. If someone gets defensive, I will go back to the agreement to remind the protégé that feedback must exist for learning to occur.

**Offer alternatives.** Mentoring focuses on expanding one's view through sharing of another's perspective, knowledge and experience. The mentor should pose questions to uncover assumptions and then offer options for the protégé to test his or her analytical and problem-solving skills. The mentor must help the protégé see that each alternative has its own consequences. Skills I introduce in mentor training to enhance protégés' abilities to offer alternatives are storytelling and decision-making techniques.

**Reflection.** Insightful reflection can be difficult for some people and challenging in a fast-paced world. An effective mentoring relationship will help the protégé reflect on past employment and education choices; clarify perceptions; and examine personal limitations to accomplish dreams through development, planning, perseverance and focus.

Another protégé was looking to enhance her voice at the executive table. "Aretha" (not her real name) was an experienced member of the senior leadership team at a progressive company. Yet top managers still viewed HR as a reactive, transactional function, rather than a proactive, transformational influence center. I worked with Aretha for almost a year, sharing my 20-plus years of HR knowledge and

utilizing all my mentoring skills, yet we never moved off square one. Aretha and I worked on some excellent strategic-planning assignments, and I provided her honest feedback on how to improve. Yet every time she was encouraged to present her work to senior managers, she responded that it wouldn't work in her culture or that it hadn't gone well. When I sought insight, Aretha had difficulty defining what was happening. She also had a tendency to blame others. Aretha's lack of progress did not come from lack of skills, planning or effort, but from the inability to examine her professional development and to reflect on how others respond to her.

**Action plans.** The mentoring model of learning develops competencies and success through meaningful dialogue and structured action plans. Results occur more frequently with formal, written and evaluated goals. Establish a follow-up plan and discuss the plan at every session. Modify the plan as necessary to take advantage of changes and opportunities. Challenge the protégé to set high, measurable and action-oriented but realistic goals.

**Be selfless.** Mentors should enter agreements with protégés because they have the passion and desire to help someone develop and grow. If done well, the mentoring experience will be satisfying and rewarding for both parties. Individuals who want to be mentors for their own gain should look for another role. A mentor's focus should be on motivating and inspiring the protégé. A mentor must be prepared to contribute anything required to ensure development of his or her partner. The mentor should express confidence in the protégé's plans and continue to encourage dreams for a prosperous future. If the mentor expects his or her protégés to succeed, they generally will.

**Learn from each other.** Mentors and protégés should learn from each other. Empathetic and self-aware mentors will be constantly assessing their own effectiveness and adjust efforts accordingly.

One of my most rewarding mentor relations also was the most untraditional. I was asked to mentor Linda Woolley, regional director for Eastern Maine HomeCare, as a requirement for her participation in a health care leadership academy. Linda has a long and distinguished health care career and had more life and work experience and as many management skills as I did. How could I enhance her professionally?

Woolley and I had worked together for several years in the same organization, but due to restructuring we were working for different organizations in a larger health care system. We immediately found common ground to explore our experiences and to help one another have a clearer understanding of the system's overall strategy and culture and how to better navigate politically.

Woolley wanted an expanded role in the new home-health organization; and during our mentoring relationship this opportunity came to fruition. She leveraged my HR experience to discuss employment negotiations. I encouraged her to look at pay and to negotiate scheduling and travel time to benefit herself now that she would be managing multiple locations.

Woolley showed me that mentor relations need to be learning-based and driven by the protégé for maximum results. She knew what she wanted from a mentor and called for meetings at key steps as her expanded management goal was becoming a reality. Woolley and I always met over lunch, and we both saw that networking and learning can and should be fun and relaxed. Although we started the relationship as mentor and protégé, it was clear we were equal-learning partners.

As we were ending our mentor relationship, my significant other had a massive stroke. Woolley's mother had also suffered a stroke. Because of the trust we had created, we reversed roles. Woolley became the mentor and I the student on becoming an effective caregiver. Woolley's insight and support were invaluable. I love sharing this example to demonstrate that mentors have much to learn from protégés.

**Extend the development.** Mentoring provides a holistic experience over an accelerated time frame, one that ideally will evolve and build. However, mentor relations have a beginning, middle and end. When a relationship has reached a plateau, it is time to work on a transition plan to extend the protégé's development and goals beyond the relationship. I like to help the protégé identify next learning steps and possible future mentors.

We need to look at mentoring as life long. Whether we are just breaking into the human resources profession or are retiring as chief HR officer, others who have already been there can help us objectively see what we want to do next and how best to accomplish it. Like a career consisting of numerous jobs, our growth and learning should rely on a variety of mentors.

Mentoring can be magical when two people have a commitment to self-discovery and growth. When done well, mentoring will be memorable. Find a mentor to help you develop personally or professionally. Be a mentor and leave a lasting legacy.

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