



Inspiring Leaders through Mentoring

by Tracy Reznik

Great mentors can be the secret weapon in the success of both employees and the organization. Apply five best practices to get the most out of your mentoring relationships.

Two and half years ago, a woman joined my company, and more specifically, my team. Despite her many years of experience, she was not confident in her abilities. We quickly entered a mentoring relationship, focusing on acclimation to the company, functional ability, and personal goals and needs. She admitted to me in one of our first meetings that she wasn't comfortable speaking in front of others, especially executives.

We talked about her fears: “What are people going to think?” “What if I trip and fall while I’m getting up to speak?” “What if I look stupid?” My reassurance that she was a smart, able, and poised employee was not enough to help her conquer her fears. Instead, I encouraged “safe” activities where she could get exposure to executives at our company and elsewhere. I made introductions for her and then supported her as she ran with them. She got involved with a locally based professional organization coordinating their programs; because she did that so well, they asked her to present an award at one of their premier executive events. As nervous as she was, she nailed it. Now, she’s able to reflect back on that experience, when the fear creeps back, and say to herself “If I can do that, I can do anything.”

Does your organization foster a culture of collaboration, encouragement, and continuous improvement? Do you regularly promote and develop leaders from within? Are your employees able to bring out the best in your leaders, motivating them to perform even better?

When done correctly, mentoring relationships can help your organization do all of those things. Mentoring forges positive relationships in the workplace, bringing the best qualities out in all parties. It is a vital and extraordinary skill, one that should be developed and honed at all career stages.

I have found that great mentors generally share five key characteristics. Consider them mentoring best practices, which I will break down into their component parts.

Great mentors know how to listen.

What did you say? Oh, l-i-s-t-e-n. It’s easier said than done. Listening is not only about hearing the words, it’s about understanding what is being said. It involves asking clarifying questions, but also avoiding “leading” questions and not genuinely hearing what your mentees are saying.

Listening and truly understanding what your mentees are saying allows you to make connections

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they may miss. They said one thing in your last meeting and something else this week? Work with your mentees through the inconsistencies. Help them align their thoughts, goals, and activities.

Listening to what they are not saying is sometimes just as important. Your mentees may not know how to verbalize exactly what they want to say. It’s up to you to read between the lines and ask questions to find out what they’re really thinking.

“Listen” to your mentees’ body language. Body language is a great indicator of how someone may be feeling. Listen to your own intuition: Is there more that’s not being said?

Listen to others, too. Share feedback and perceptions that others have about your mentees. No one’s saying anything? That’s feedback that your mentees should know. Help your mentees make their mark on the organization.

Great mentors genuinely care about, and are vested in, the success of their mentees.

Connection is a must. If you don't have a solid connection with your mentees, work with them to find someone who can build a connection. Don't force it. It's not that a mentorship won't work with someone you don't connect with, but it takes more effort to maintain a productive relationship. It's OK to not feel a connection. It won't—and can't—happen with everyone you meet. It's great if a true friendship can develop out of a mentor/mentee relationship, but it's not a deal-breaker if it doesn't.

You don't have to be best friends, but you do need to have their best career interests in mind. Ask yourself, "Are they on a successful trajectory?" If not, how can you transition them onto a more productive path? This discussion may even lead to helping the mentee find a better organizational fit elsewhere.

Be willing to visibly go to bat for your mentee. Publicly being an advocate for your mentee can be a motivating factor for them and lets others know about the contributions made. Before you do so, understand whether your mentees desire public recognition; if not, notes to leaders and word of mouth will get the point across without making mentees uncomfortable.

Great mentors are honest.

Don't just be a cheerleader. Part of being an effective mentor is being able to give hard feedback. Work with

your mentees to ensure they are ready to accept—and act on—constructive criticism. Be a cheerleader when your mentee is going through a rough time, either professionally or personally, and when it's time to celebrate those successes.

Don't toe the company line, but don't reveal confidential information either. If you're mentoring someone within your company, find the balance between doing what's best for your mentee and being an ambassador for your organization. What happens if your mentees are questioning their place in the organization and you know about a reorganization effort leaders are not yet ready to share? You can help your mentees think about what they are looking for in terms of company culture, skill development and expertise, and personal life to make the right decision about their career. At the same time, you can let your leaders know that there may be chatter that is causing angst about potential upcoming changes. Transparency is best on all sides.

Great mentors serve as the devil's advocate, offering options.

One of your jobs as a mentor is to help mentees think through all angles and perspectives on a given situation. Ask lots of questions: Have you thought about ABC? What will the impact of XYZ be? The old adage, "if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime" applies here. Don't just solve your mentees' problems, teach them to think critically through options, multiple solutions, etc.

Great mentors reciprocate.

The best mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial. Be open to learning from your mentees—and sincerely do so! Help them hone their own mentoring skills by mentoring you. I'm a better leader because I mentor others—giving them the opportunity to grow and develop. Because they mentor me, my perspective is widened and I learn new things. Even if they don't realize it, I learn from my mentees by listening to them work through their struggles and by celebrating their successes. How they respond to my mentoring has

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helped me adapt and respond to mentoring from my leaders. My mentees help me open my mind to different perspectives and ways of working. As I'm building my career, I'm also building the future leaders of my organization.

Don't limit your mentoring relationship to just those younger than you, less experienced than you, or in the same functional space or area of expertise as you. There's no reason not to mentor those in all stages of careers, functions, or industries. Think about all the millennials who can now mentor baby boomers on technology.

You don't have to be in a formal mentoring relationship to give or receive the benefits of mentoring. Try using these best practices on acquaintances, friends, and family members. You may even realize they are using these practices on you. Be open to informal mentoring, both giving and receiving, and you may find that those informal relationships develop into something deeper.

Mentoring relationships should be fun for both parties. The best mentoring partnerships don't feel like work.

Considering these characteristics for a great mentoring relationship is critical to its success. The relationship between a mentor and mentee can fail if one of the parties does not approach it with the right mindset and goals.

By applying these best practices to your mentoring relationships—listening, expressing genuine concern, being honest, offering options, and reciprocating—you can be the secret weapon in the successes of your employees and your organization.

Now, back to the woman in my story. When I asked her what gave her the courage to get up on stage to present the award to begin with, she said it was the support, encouragement, and trust I (and others) provided to her. She trusted that I wouldn't set her up to fail. Since that time, she now seeks out face time with executives (though she still isn't 100 percent comfortable with it) and she's been promoted to a more senior position. Putting herself out there has made attaining her personal goals more realistic. I couldn't be more proud! ■

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