

**LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS
FOR PROTÉGÉS**

by

Ken Graham, Ph.D.

Foreword

Successful people don't get there alone. Each has a success network of friends, colleagues, and more experienced people to whom they can turn. Such people are protégés to those who serve as mentors.

It is my belief that such mentors are "higher status friends." They often are the people to whom we go to discuss our career interests and possibilities. I've worked with CEOs who still had mentors as their careers came to a close. These are relationships to begin early, and to keep for life.

As you will see in this *Leadership Insights*, the major responsibility for developing and sustaining this relationship lies with the protégé. But once begun, there is no greater honor you can give a valued mentor than becoming a mentor yourself to someone else. The insights from your mentor are more detailed, insightful, and valuable to the degree you serve in the mentor role for others.

Mindset is valuable here. Protégés are often in the typical early career mindset of "getting." Only giving as a mentor can cure this disease. Giving is its own reward. Benefits to you do not come directly. They are produced by your generosity.

In addition to this *Leadership Insights* installment, be sure to read the *Leadership Insights for Mentors* to complete your preparation to be a protégé, develop a relationship with your first mentor, and to become a mentor for the first time.

Acknowledgments

James, Russell, Miriam, Paul, and even Richard have served as mentors to me. More formally, Bob Pashek, John Coyle, Ray Watson, Al Vicere, Ray Sluk, Roger Colmer, Tom Tewksbury, Tony Ambler, Jan White, John Gaynor, and Pamela Miller all served in this role, though some didn't know it. Each of you displays a generosity of spirit and a sincere interest in others that are the hallmarks of mentoring success. Your protégé wasn't always sharp enough to get the lesson the first time. Your unselfish contributions to my growth can only be effectively honored by the relationships I build and sustain. I offer a sincere "thank you" to each of you.

Leadership Insights for Protégés

- I. What is a Mentor (and therefore a Protégé)?
 - A mentor is a more experienced professional not now and not likely to soon be your boss with whom you can discuss informally your career and the factors that can lead to its success.
 - A mentor should be thought of as a “higher status friend.”
 - A mentor is other-centered and exhibits generosity of spirit, sharing what he/she knows and has experienced.
 - A mentor is especially good at helping the protégé extract the lesson from both failures and successes.
 - A mentor’s humility in the role encourages the humility of the protégé.
 - A mentor is not a king maker, someone who advances the careers of lower level employees so as to require their loyalty to her/him.

- II. Why Have a Mentor?
 - Your career needs thought partners—people with whom you can try out your interests and alternative futures.
 - A huge challenge in our careers is that we don’t know what we don’t know. It is the mentor’s use of questions to reveal the unconsidered dimensions that is most valuable. Mentors aren’t sources of answers to your career questions, they’re sources of questions that can help us complete the inquiry. The answers lie within us and beyond, but not in the mentors themselves.

- III. Obvious Points
 - You need a mentor.
 - You need one now.
 - You need more than one soon. (Why more than one? Different skills and perspectives).

- IV. How Not to Get a Mentor
 - Don’t wait for the HR department to launch a mentoring program. Such programs are fine, but action now on your part is the best policy.
 - Don’t approach the highest status person you can access and ask her/him to be your mentor. The request sounds like a lifetime, time-eating commitment. You need prior relationship with your future mentor.
 - Don’t wait because your “perfect target” hasn’t become available. Choose imperfect over none.

V. How to Get a Mentor

- Approach an experienced person whom you admire. Admire only demonstrated skill in work, work relationships, and building the future of the enterprise. Ignore political skill. The person should already know your name and approximately what you do in the organization. A mentor can be from outside your organization, even with a competitor or unrelated organization?
- Think of work you're doing. Relate it to something this person does well. For example, if you must give a presentation, tell the future mentor that you admire their presentation skills, and that you have a presentation of your own in two weeks.
- Ask the prospective mentor if you can spend 20 minutes with him or her to receive their feedback and suggestions. Expect to use the feedback.
- Repeat twice more. Then move to career advice. Congratulations, you have a mentor!

VI. Be an Effective Protégé

- Be prepared for each visit. Send something written in advance so the conversation will start quickly. These are busy people.
- Know what you want to ask. For example, if you'd like to explore a career move to another area, suggest two such areas. Ask for reactions to both. Be prepared to ask if you should approach person X and person Y to learn more about those areas. Listen for what is said and isn't said about each area, each suggested target person.
- Listen carefully to what questions are asked. Don't hurry to answer them. The question is the point, not the answer.
- Take notes on what is said. Later ask yourself, "What do I notice about what wasn't said?"
- Ask for candid feedback on your strengths and your areas for improvement.
- Follow up on suggestions.
- Write a handwritten thank you note immediately for the session. Mention something of special value or a next step they've encouraged you to take soon.
- Wait to schedule a follow up meeting. A reasonable rhythm is every 3 months or so. More frequently if you're in action, less frequently if the visit is an update.
- Don't call the person your mentor unless you're sure the comment is welcome. One study showed that 68% of mentor-protégé pairs never acknowledged the existence of the relationship in this way. If it is acknowledged, be sure it is in private first. Otherwise it could look like you're bragging about the support you have in high places.
- When speaking of your peers, boss, and subordinates, be sure to give what each does well, especially if you must comment on their

shortcomings. Mentors are human. They don't want lots of negative judgments, especially if they're opinions rather than based in fact.

- Become a mentor to others with the same or less experience than you have. Gently let your mentor know that you are serving in this role. Being a mentor teaches you as least as much as you teach your protégé. To be a good protégé, be a good mentor simultaneously. And you've just honored your mentor.
- Be sure to develop multiple mentors. No need to explain each to the other. No need to hide it. Don't be ashamed to have more than one mentor. Mentoring does not require a one-to-one ratio.

VII. Reread “Seven Essentials of Mentoring” Article on My Website—
www.kengrahamphd.com

About the Author

Ken Graham is a consultant, author, lecturer, and leader. He has more than 25 years experience leading groups up to 131 people, teaching leadership to experienced leaders, and coaching individuals and groups of leaders.

Ken's favorite professional activities include working with leaders individually or in groups, and speaking at conferences. See www.getenergyevent.com for Ken's contributions at the Dubai 2007 event and London 2008 event.

Ken experienced command and control leadership in a steel mill, where being alive and uninjured at the end of a work shift was an accomplishment. He experienced leaders who serve and leaders who teach early in career. Becoming a better leader and helping others do likewise are the focus of his work. He finds the ground for such growth especially rich in the developing world. Ken has visited or worked in over 80 countries.

Current and recent clients include Shell, Nigerian National Petroleum Company, Technological University of Delft (The Netherlands), Boeing, Bury and Partners, IBM, and Intel.

Ken's Ph.D. is in Strategy and Logistics from Penn State University, where he led Penn State Executive Programs. He has served as Vice President for Allstate Insurance, and most recently as Head, Global Leadership Development for Royal Dutch Shell Exploration and Production in The Hague, The Netherlands.

Ken has recently addressed conferences for GetEnergy, Limited, in Dubai (2006, 2007) for Management Centre Europe (2004), and for Petroleum Training Journal in Abuja, Nigeria (2006).

Since age 20, Ken has been a single engine airplane pilot. More recently he added floatplane flying to his license. Adventure trips have included Alaska, Yukon Territory, and Northwest Territories (to the Arctic Ocean). He owns a new type of short takeoff and landing aircraft called a Savannah, which performs especially well in off-airport operations (think pastures, roads, etc.) See www.skykits.com for examples.

Working With Ken

Are you a program chair for a professional organization or for a conference that will be held inside your organization? Ken may be available to work with your audience. Expect participants to take an active role, to learn by doing, and to apply what they learn.

Ken will provide copies of selected Leadership Insights as prizes for participants during his session. Session organizers also receive printed copies.

Visit Ken's website at www.kengrahamphd.com where you'll be able to view excerpts from each *Leadership Insights* in the series. You can contact Ken via email at kengraham8@msn.com

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