

Seven Essentials of Mentoring

by Ken Graham, Ph.D.

Mentors, future mentors, protégés/mentees, leaders, this article is for you. Please note that spellcheck doesn't approve of "mentees," but lots of us use the term.

A mentor, from the perspective of the protégé, is a Higher Status Friend. The mentor may not even work in the same industry or firm. Ideally, the mentor isn't likely to become the boss of the protégé any time soon. Why? Because the candor required of the protégé in the areas of weakness will make it difficult to have such conversations with a current or near future boss.

A mentor uses greater depth and breadth of experience to first inquire, and to advise over time. Suggesting skill-building activities, for example, then later providing correction and constructive feedback, is an example good mentoring process.

Essential #1—Mentors and protégés, start NOW. Don't wait for a mentoring program to be started or for you to be invited. The essence of success is initiating appropriate action. Either can initiate. Protégés, don't wait to be helped.

Essential #2—Mentors and protégés, know whom to select. Protégés, you're not looking for the person best placed politically so she/he will move your career. You really are seeking insights—good advice that will help your career bloom. Choose politically, and you lose when your political "sponsor" loses. You've just reduced your chances of success. Focus on learning, and you gain at the 100% rate.

You're seeking the very good or great leaders or subject matter experts. Look for individuals who show two traits of great leaders. These traits are generosity of spirit and sincere interest in others. Why? Great mentors take the trouble to learn what your goals are, and what motivates you. That way they guide you toward your strengths, which further enhances your success.

Mentors should look for bright people, and especially those who aren't totally "obedient" to what has gone before. Notice the future protégé's style of questioning what has gone before, as well as the strength of the reasoning and emotion. Those protégés who are in true inquiry, seeking to improve processes and performance, are the better choice. The rest are just seeking attention by advocating something too loudly.

Protégés should similarly look for leaders with open, inquiring minds. Look for inquiry focused on improvement. Avoid those with a tendency to criticize (an attack on the person), but don't avoid those who correct (correction is about improving results through changed behavior, and is never a personal attack) you or others. This is how mentors can add value.

Don't choose a protégé or mentor based on similarity. "You remind me of myself when I was your age" isn't why you're doing this. Look for different field of study/expertise, gender, life experience (urban vs. rural, military background are but two examples), national origin, ethnicity, religious beliefs.

My favorite team of protégés includes two Nigerians, a Dutch woman, two American expatriates, a citizen of Brunei, a Taiwanese-American, three Muslims, two born-again Christians, an atheist, a Syrian-American, several Brits, several Scotsmen, a Canadian, a Russian, multiple Mexicans, an Australian who graduated from the top military academy and served her country, two future medical doctors, a Harvard Law School Graduate who placed first in the Texas Bar Exam, and a future motivational speaker!

You will learn a great deal from each other about values, beliefs, work styles, life styles, families, languages, and most of all what builds success that endures.

Essential #3—Mentors and protégés, know how to initiate the dialog. A North American study more than a decade ago indicated that in 68% of all mentor—protégé relationships, the existence of a mentor—protégé relationship had never been acknowledged between the two! So, protégés don't ask "will you be my mentor" in the first approach!

Why? Because the mentor doesn't yet know your expectations, and frankly, doesn't know how much trouble you'll be! Your first approach needs to be quite specific. For example, "I've been asked to do a 10 minute presentation to a group of your peers on the project I'm leading." "Your presentations at town hall meetings are well received." "May I show you what I've planned so far and have the value of your input?" What is key here? You choose to "borrow" from an area of strength for your future mentor.

Mentors, if you choose to initiate, be similarly specific. "I saw your presentation to your peers on the project you're leading. I think your reasoning is especially good, especially thorough. Feel free to try your material on me before your presentation to the management committee. Perhaps I can help you be successful with that audience."

Mentors can also be more direct. "Your presentation was a success. Congratulations. And I have a suggestion for you. Please come see me. Plan a half hour visit."

My all-time personal favorite approach was used by a future protégé who said simply, “Ken, you were brought here to revitalize leadership development, and I’ve never worked in the area. I’d like to learn in your field. In return I can offer my organization skills and knowledge of and access to people. I’ve already asked my boss if I can help you, and he has approved my using 15% of my time.” Note he never asked for a mentor. I learned so much from him and from his peers that I’m not sure which one of us was the protégé. But our initiatives were very successful.

I’ll help that man succeed wherever he works. He gave me a gift I can never repay—he let me advise him while he advised me.

Essential #4—Mentors and protégés, think “process”, and think non-traditional. I suggest you interact when you have something to cover. Allow at least several weeks between sessions so that suggestions can be acted on, and results inform next steps.

Does this meeting have to be face to face? Not if the process has already begun. The more you have worked together, the more successful virtual exchanges will be. Renew it face to face if more than a year has gone by. I serve as a mentor and coach to good leaders in countries like Brunei, the Netherlands, the UK, the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria, Canada, and the U.S. They range from engineers to HR professionals to administrative assistants to explorer/geologists to medical doctors. All these relationships are continued virtually once I know how they interact with others.

Must mentoring always be one on one? Not necessarily. Seeing small groups can allow the mentor to observe peer-to-peer interaction while peers accept input from each other. This can reduce interpersonal competition and build common purpose. One senior executive I’ve worked with scheduled a monthly two hour session late in the day for anyone wanting to join his mentoring group. At times he had 30 people!

At times specific feedback may need to be private. The mentor must be fully trusted as to motive for providing correction. And the protégé must be fully trustworthy. “Praise in public, correct in private.”

Essential #5—Reverse roles. Mentors should ask for protégé input on specific initiatives. At times, ask simply, “what are you hearing others say about (a certain) initiative?” This grants permission for the protégé to be a listening post. “Thought you might need to know that a reaction is forming around....” Both of you must avoid personal gossip.

Protégés can mentor their mentors. Initiate suggestions you know will be welcome. Become trusted, so that your motives are never suspect when you “advise upward.”

One of Shell's recognized leaders asks a number of earlier career people to "shadow coach" him (a form of mentoring). His first question to them after a meeting is, "What did you notice?" His second question is, "What was missing?" If he isn't getting anything provocative, he'll ask, "What did I miss while having to be in charge of that session?"

Essential #6—Protégés should have more than one mentor, just as mentors should have more than one protégé. I once asked twelve high potential engineers how many had a mentor. Eleven hands went up. Can you imagine what #12 must have been thinking? I'M BEHIND—NEED TO GET ON THIS!

I asked the same group how many had more than one mentor. One hand went up. We actually had a conversation about whether having more than one mentor was FAIR! Of course it is. It rewards protégés with initiative. Do we think there is a shortage of people who can mentor? Is there? If so, the organization culture needs to advocate and support mentoring.

Though it doesn't take any special training, mentoring does take interest and motivation. The reward comes from the doing. Few companies reward mentoring in a way that can ever exceed the joy of investing in someone who will use the investment of time and knowledge wisely.

Essential #7—Protégés must mentor while they're being mentored! Sounds counter-intuitive, but it isn't. "Give what you need" is great advice. By giving to someone else, the protégé rehearses the very skills the mentor is trying to transfer to her/him. Just as teaching causes us to REALLY learn material, mentoring causes us to absorb mentoring lessons.

Start mentoring BEFORE you establish a relationship with your first mentor. Mentor a peer; most will appreciate it and reciprocate. You already have something to offer, even if it is just "how to be new in our company" to a new hire.

You gain nothing by waiting to mentor, and waiting to be mentored. The initiative is yours. Use it wisely. Use it often. Use it virtually. Use it now.

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