

Calling All Mentors

by Beverly L. Kaye

"Me, a mentor? Naah. Mentors are supposed to be seasoned, highly successful executives of the company who hold all the secrets of history and success."

Wrong! Mentoring does not necessarily come from just senior managers or executives, nor does one mentor have all the answers. True, the stories of the past have great meaning in any corporation by showing what success is and demonstrating the values of the company. Senior executives do have great knowledge to share, but they aren't the only ones, your stories of today are just as important.

As a manager, you have many stories of your own. By sharing your stories, you teach others how to succeed. They begin to ask more questions, and reach higher for their accomplishments. They "connect" to you as an important influence in their success. The more they connect to you, the more they will want to stay with you. You will be a major source of their learning, their guide through the maze of the company. This positive relationship creates powerful job satisfaction, loyalty, and "staying power" for the employee.

Think of one of your new employees. She is new to your group and new to the organization. She is excitedly looking for signals about how to be successful and wondering what the organization is about. As one of her mentors, you model the desired behavior. You encourage her when she has doubts and you nurture her growth. You are one of her primary teachers. From you she derives a picture of the organization and what she must do to succeed. You give her focus, help her develop goals, and keep her in touch with reality. You provide mentoring through the ordinary activities of getting the job done. It really can take very little extra time.

Now think of the employee who has been with the company for awhile. He wants you to show him the next steps in his career and what to do to become eligible for his next position. He wants to grow and learn. You can help him explore other suitable positions and learn necessary skills to prepare him to be considered for other responsibilities. Your ordinary conversations will tap into your own experiences and knowledge about the paths others have followed – laying the foundation for loyalty to you and to the company. It's a powerful tool for hanging on to your stars.

You've been a mentor to me!

Still doubtful that you are a mentor? Ask yourself these questions: Are there others whom you have touched or influenced? Are there ways you share your job knowledge or understanding of the company to position someone else for success? Do you ever trade information with someone else – your knowledge helps him, and his knowledge helps you in some decision or learning assignment? Have you ever offered someone insight on how she was perceived in a situation, the strategic objective behind a decision, or an alternative course of action? Have you shared stories of success and failure or risk and reward that show how things operate within the company? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes", then chances are you are mentoring others in either formal or informal ways. You may not be "the" mentor in their life, but one of many who contribute to their learning. You are living the new model of mentoring: nurturing someone else and contributing to his or her learning and success.

Debunking Mentoring Myths

In the past, we have made mentors into super-heroes who knew everything, were the picture of "success," and didn't make mistakes. This expectation is highly unrealistic. Real mentors have to be able to learn, too. What they share is what they have learned. Sometimes the best learning comes from making mistakes.

Myth: Mentors are senior and male!

Truth: Mentors do not come in any particular gender, age, title, level of experience, status or longevity. We hear stories of mentors who come in all ages and stages of their careers. It is not true that senior managers have all the wisdom and help to offer other people. We hear stories of secretaries mentoring each other (and their managers) in learning new software. Technical people mentor business people to make their business process smoother. Salespeople mentor technical people to improve their problem-solving techniques for the customer. Inside sales reps provide critical information to outside sales reps. And sometimes, the newest employees have the best ideas about how to solve an old problem.

Myth: Mentors know the big picture!

Truth: Mentors know their own niche. Experience and the resulting learning is what counts. In today's world, no one knows everything needed to run an effective business. We learn to find the resources or "subject matter experts" that can provide the knowledge we need. As we exercise the freedom to build these relationships with others, the result can lead to stronger interaction and understanding between work groups, teams, and departments.

Myth: Mentors are masters at what they do.

Truth: Mentors make mistakes, too. People who are intensely focused on "success" often feel they can't, or shouldn't make mistakes. They believe a mistake could ruin their career. However, a large part of our growth comes from the mistakes we've made and what we learned from them. A person who shares what he has learned from past mistakes can be a powerful mentor to others. Their stories give others the permission they need to make reasonable mistakes as long as the learning is present. Research shows that followers often have more respect for a leader who can say "I've made mistakes, too".

Myth: Mentors have the answers.

Truth: Mentors have great questions. The need to be "right," and to have all the answers creates an atmosphere of perfectionism and leads to anxiety. It's impossible to have all the answers and to be right all the time. Valuable mentors often help others push their thinking one step further by asking great questions instead of always trying to provide the answers, thus increasing the likelihood that problems will be prevented or solved more quickly by uncovering the possible solutions.

Myth: A mentor is a mentor for your entire career.

Truth: A mentor can be a mentor for just a short time. Sometimes mentors "drop in" to a situation or contribute to a project for a short time. Still, they touch other people's lives, offer good advice, ask good questions, and affect the way people evaluate a problem or make choices. Their objectivity and different perspective offer a fresh outlook on an otherwise familiar situation or problem. And then they move on.

Myth: Mentors have learned to weather the storm.

Truth: Mentors are human. The best mentors experience the same feelings and reactions that the rest of us experience. They don't pretend that they are somehow different or better than other folks. It is human to be disappointed when a project fails, or when something we try doesn't work. Mentors who show this human side connect better with their followers. Employees feel safer discussing their feelings and questioning how to do things better. Humanness creates a better space for learning. Good mentors learn how to show their own humanness and allow others to show theirs. Discussions can then be open and real.

Myth: Mentors mentor for altruistic reasons.

Truth: Mentors benefit from the process, too. The best mentors admit that they like mentoring. They like helping others determine how to be successful. They like teaching. They like building relationships. They find it very satisfying to see employees grow, learn, and create connections. In many cases, they have also had good mentors during their career and this is their way of "giving something back."

Trying It on for Size

If you are trying to decide whether you could be an effective mentor, try these questions: What have I learned about this organization and how it works? How have my mistakes helped me to grow? What counts for success here? How do people derail themselves and their career? What are the "don'ts" and "do's" in this organization? What have I learned from the "school of hard knocks" that might be useful to someone else? What have I learned through observation as I watched others work? How could I pass this on to help someone else? You may be the best possible mentor to someone near you or in another group. If they find you approachable, interested, knowledgeable, and respected, your words may have more power than you know. Try it on for size. Today's employees want to learn and grow. Their own success is very important to them. The employee who cannot get answers, cannot learn, or cannot find out how to be successful often grows frustrated and leaves the company. How much wiser it would be to retain good employees through effective mentoring and coaching. You can help employees clarify what is important and how to make good choices along the way. This is mentoring at its finest.

When Coaching Really Counts

Many employees tell stories about what keeps them at their companies. The reasons are often simple, human things. "I was keenly aware that my company didn't pay the highest wages for the job I do. At times it nagged at me. I would say to myself, 'You know, you could get much more money for this job somewhere else. You should get your resume in order, and at least look around. What would it hurt?' One day, I decided to draw up a chart of the 'pluses' and 'minuses' of my job. I started to realize how many opportunities I had to learn. My boss was really good at knowing when I was ready to go to the next level, and she always offered the next step of learning, even before I would think of it. I was able to get exposure to other divisions and serve on multi-functional task teams. My manager took time to talk with me about success and about how to do things better. I had gotten two certifications in my field. I had never thought about that as an opportunity. But when I made my list, I realized how far I had come in a couple of years. To me, that is worth more than the increase in pay, because it makes me more valuable. I decided to stay because I didn't believe that all this would be easy to find in another company." Susan isn't a manager. She hopes to be a manager one day, but realizes she has a lot of learning to do. The availability of a variety of learning opportunities has a great appeal to Susan. Access to her manager for development discussions and feedback is a powerful learning tool. Susan recognizes it as the element of her job that keeps her there. A powerful lesson.

Mentoring Made Easy

Organizations are aware that the "picture" of success today will not be the picture of success tomorrow. As technology continues to change and as the world continues to move faster, the value of using knowledge effectively in organizations will continue to sky-rocket. A hit-and-miss approach to developing people will not achieve the desired results. You need to understand and master the skills and techniques that will make you most effective. As a manager, your days are full of opportunities to mentor those in your group and others, across functional boundaries. Mentoring your staff can provide tremendous benefits for you as well as for them. The more an individual assists with the learning of others, the more valuable she becomes to the organization, and the more doors open for her own learning. This kind of knowledge exchange builds a solid foundation for achieving business results.

Small Ways to Set the Stage

- Ask employees what they would like to learn in this job to position them for growth in their career.
- Ask in a staff meeting what employees would like to know about the company and how it works.
- Make a staff meeting activity of defining "success" and "failure" through stories of what has happened to each individual. Elaborate on their points. Provide insight as to why things turned out the way they did.
- Make a "fun activity" of having each team member go out and find a "success story." Get the group talking about "what creates success around here."
- Have the group create a 'Learning Log' of unusual ways they have learned. Each item should identify a precise learning, establish why it is important, and mistakes one might make if they didn't know this.

- Brainstorm a list of knowledge that individuals could share to enlarge the knowledge of the group, and position people for success.

About the author

Beverly L Kaye, Ph.D., is President, Career Systems International, Inc., Sherman Oaks, California. Her cutting edge management and career development programs are used by such leading corporations as Microsoft, Nintendo, Nortel, Qualcomm, Sprint, Dow Corning, Compaq and Chrysler. She is a prolific writer, popular lecturer and management consultant. She earned a Ph.D. in Organization Development at UCLA, and completed graduate work in organization development at the Sloan School of Management at MIT. The scores of products she has designed for career development programs are produced by Career Systems International, Scranton, Pennsylvania.

The Wall Street Journal best seller, *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* (Berrett-Koehler, 1999) is Dr. Kaye's co-authored book in which she shares her latest research on management strategies for retaining knowledge workers.

In the early 80's Dr. Kaye published her now classic book, *Up Is NOT the Only Way* (revised, Davies-Black, 1997), which foresaw the effects on individual careers that moving to leaner and flatter organizations would have. During the last decade, she has worked with a host of organizations to establish systems to help their employees grow and develop when "up" has been impossible. At the same time, she has been a strong proponent of the need for employees to manage their own careers, rather than leaving career management to employers.

Over the past decade she has published more than 40 articles in professional publications, including *Training & Development*, *Workforce* and *HR Magazine*. She also is co-author of another classic book in the field, *Designing Career Development Systems*.

Dr. Kaye is frequently called upon by the news media for interviews on career development topics. Recent interviews have been With the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Time*, *Fortune*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and many others.

Dr. Kaye has received many honors and awards, including the National Career Development Award of the American Society for Training and Development [ASTD]. Most recently she received the Best Practice Award from ASTI) for her work with global client Dow Corning.

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