



# Mentoring 101 – for leaders today, and tomorrow

Think of mentoring both as a powerful form of leadership and as a serious responsibility to another person.

by Mike DeGrosky

I was recently invited to participate in a leadership panel at work on which the panelists, all senior managers in our organization, were asked to address questions about our own leadership influences and development and offer a bit of advice to developing leaders who made up the audience. The panel moderator asked us to speak to the influence of mentors in our lives and careers. The panelists were also asked to express our views on opportunities for employees to grow within our organization and the relationship between those opportunities and mentoring.

As I prepared to answer the first question, I reflected on how, though having never benefitted from a formal mentoring relationship, a number of mentors had shaped my life and career, as well as my leadership philosophy and approach. Some people, whose mentorship really mattered to me, were only passing through my life; temporary influencers who, just the same, left me some gift. Sometimes those gifts were big, other times small; sometimes obvious, other times not-so-obvious and maybe even unknown to me at the time. Other mentors played a big role in my life and career and affected me obviously and profoundly. From each, I learned life and leadership lessons that stuck with me, shaped me, influenced me, helped me pursue my potential, and brought me closer to being the person I could be.

Technically, mentoring is a professional relationship in which an experienced person assists a less experienced person in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the less-experienced person's professional and personal growth. Effective organizations know that people perform better, advance faster, and choose to stay in their organizations when they have effective mentors.

I've been doing a little reading-up on mentoring lately, and discovered three excellent articles that resonated with, and are influencing, me. First, is an article by W. Brad Johnson and David G. Smith (<https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-best-mentors-think-like-michelangelo>). The second is an article by Anthony K. Tian (<https://hbr.org/2017/02/what-the-best-mentors-do>). Rounding out the group is a second article by Johnson and Smith on reciprocal mentorship and cross-gender mentoring relationships ([https://hbr.org/2018/03/mentoring-women-is-not-about-trying-to-rescue-them?utm\\_campaign=hbr&utm\\_source=linkedin&utm\\_medium=social](https://hbr.org/2018/03/mentoring-women-is-not-about-trying-to-rescue-them?utm_campaign=hbr&utm_source=linkedin&utm_medium=social)). I recommend each of these articles to anyone contemplating a mentoring arrangement either as a mentor or a mentee.

As I read these articles and I reflected on my recent answers to our panel's assigned questions, I recalled why I am such an advocate of mentoring. However, I also remembered that mentoring can be ineffective and even risky if not done well. What appears below is a fusion of ideas I assembled from the articles above as well as my own thoughts on mentoring based on my experiences both as mentor and protege. I think of each as an essential mentoring principle.

**Think of mentoring both as a powerful form of leadership and as a serious responsibility to another person.** When we choose to mentor someone, we are committing to helping someone reach their potential and come closer to the person they want to be. Leadership is a duty and, done well, requires a somewhat selfless commitment to others. This may be truer to mentoring than almost any other form of leadership, because mentoring is so personal and requires a high degree of trust to succeed.

**A mentor's job is not to make or re-make their protégé**



**into something, and is certainly not to replicate the mentor.** A mentor's fundamental purpose is to help the mentee find and release the more ideal person that exists within them.

**The relationship comes before the mentorship.** For a mentoring arrangement to succeed, there must first exist some basic and authentic relationship, empathy, and affinity between mentor and mentee. In my experience, a relationship of trust and a climate of mutuality must exist or the mentoring arrangement will struggle. Mentoring requires connection and rapport if the mentor and mentee are to transcend their usual formal organizational roles and relate to one another as people. In my experience, to achieve rapport and transcend hierarchy requires a deliberate emphasis on shared power.

**High-quality mentoring relationships benefit both mentor and mentee.** The best mentoring relationships, the ones with the most meaningful and durable impact, are both mutual and reciprocal. By definition, the mentor should bring more experience to any mentoring arrangement than their mentee. However, in high-quality mentoring relationships, both mentor and protégé learn and grow from the relationship. It stands to reason that any protégé worth mentoring brings insight, experience, and talents to the table. Consequently, mentors in a high-quality mentoring partnership should want and expect to be influenced by their mentee's perspective, and both people in the relationship should expect professional and personal growth. Our panel moderator asked us how individuals can develop themselves as leaders. I offered that I believe a person can grow as a leader, not only by being mentored, but by mentoring someone. I have found that, by helping someone become their ideal self, I connect with the person I strive to be.

**The most effective mentors, those who can help proteges achieve truly transformational change, approach their mentoring task with humility.** A humble mentor is one that understands that, by exposing their own vulnerability and imperfection they can provide a relatable, empowering role model; reduce the power differential between mentor and mentee; and open the door to their influence. This can present a challenge for senior leaders, requiring them to check their egos, be honest about what they don't know, and model comfort with a reciprocal relationship.

**Focus on the whole person and extend the breadth of mentoring outcomes.** Too often, mentors approach their assignment simply as a training program focused around the mentee gaining job skills or as a quick path to career advancement. However, my best mentors took me well beyond skill building and job seeking; helping to shape my character and values and find my professional identity. The best mentors I encounter these days are helping their mentees with personal confidence, stress resilience, overall effectiveness, and their emotional intelligence.

**Effective, reciprocal mentoring relationships require mutual listening.** Listen generously, learn your mentee's true aspirations and draw out their genuine self, keep an open mind, maintain a learning orientation, and avoid assumptions.

**Be very loyal to your mentee.** Organizations use mentoring to retain their high potential employees, to help them achieve their potential contribution to the organization, and to inspire

commitment. In my experience, the best mentors achieve all three by fully and selflessly committing to the mentee. To me, a mentor is not there simply to help uncover their protégé's strengths, but to explore their underlying interests, help them find their professional identity, and make a difference to that person beyond simply serving as a career counselor. Mentors are people committed to helping others become more complete versions of who they are, and that takes being "all-in" for your protege. Consequently, I have also found that I need to be frugal with my mentoring. I don't mentor a lot of people but, those that I do, should get a lot out of me.

**Be honest with your protégé.** A really good mentor can let their mentee know if they are not a good fit for a job, can help an ambitious employee maintain realistic perceptions of their mobility, and can help a valued employee pursue a different role in the organization or even move on from the organization. Conversely, a high potential mentee should understand how channel their potential to maximum benefit, both to themselves and the organization.

Effective organizations know that people perform better, advance faster, and stick around when they have effective mentors. That's why smart organizations have embraced the concept of mentoring. Technically, mentoring is a professional relationship in which an experienced person helps a less experienced person develop specific skills and knowledge, thereby enhancing the less-experienced person's professional and personal growth. However, good mentoring is more than a training program focused around the mentee gaining job skills or a quick path to advancement.

I think of mentoring both as a powerful form of leadership and as a serious responsibility to another person. When we mentor someone, we commit to helping them reach their potential and come closer to the person they want to be. Consequently, mentoring needs to be taken seriously and done well. I recommend that, if you intend to be someone's mentor, that you focus on the principles of helping your mentee identify and release what is within them, focusing on the relationship, seeking mutual benefit, being humble in your mentorship, focusing on the whole person, listening, being loyal, and honesty.

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*See page 11 for an announcement of IAWF's new Mentoring Program, or visit [www.iawfonline.org/what-we-do](http://www.iawfonline.org/what-we-do).*



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