

Mentor

Recreating Community Through the Art and Practice of Mentoring

Mentoring Relationships: Tools for Partner Preparation

This article continues Cr. Zachary's coverage on mentoring relationships. Her first article "Mentoring Relationships : Self-Directed Preparation Strategies," appeared in the January 1994 issue.

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Fran, a "superstar," leader, and change agent, is articulate, bright, energetic, and cutting-edge. Cynthia, a decade younger, is also bright and energetic. When introduced, they liked each other instinctively and immediately connected around their similar interests.

As they began to know each other, Cynthia came to respect and admire everything about Fran: her drive for success, her individuality, and her leadership style. She mentally adopted Fran as her role model of the successful woman of the '80s.

Fran viewed Cynthia as her younger counterpart, her earlier self revisited. She admired Cynthia's ideas and innovations, and especially her eagerness to please and palpable hunger for success.

When Fran invited Cynthia to work with her, Cynthia was surprised, honored, and flattered. "Here was an opportunity looking me right in the face," Cynthia said. "A chance to learn new skills and at the same time to be mentored by someone whom I respect and hope to emulate."

Cynthia worked hard to please Fran. She gave time and energy freely, without limits. The result of the collaboration between Cynthia and Fran was exciting to them both. Their talents complemented each other well, and the products they developed together were impressive. Cynthia was continuously learning new skills. Fran was pleased because she benefited professionally and personally from Cynthia's efforts.

Fran and Cynthia became a team. Over time, however, as Cynthia developed a reputation for the quality of her work, Fran became increasingly possessive of Cynthia's time and effort.

It was seven years before the relationship showed overt signs of wear. Fran's demands continued to increase. Although Cynthia remained loyal and continued to meet and even exceed the ever-increasing demands, she began to resent Fran.

"I owed her so much," Cynthia explained. "I didn't want to hurt her, but I felt like she was extracting everything from me. I was giving her my best and she was swallowing it and me.... At times, I felt like a piece of property that she owned. At other times, I felt conflicted."

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What's Wrong With this Picture?

Some might argue that Fran and Cynthia were never really mentoring *partners*. There was a reciprocity of need, but those needs were never explicitly discussed (and probably never even implicitly examined). In a sense, they used each other to satisfy their personal differing needs and never discussed their relationship or the changes that had been taking place.

There certainly was no negotiation at the “get-go” because the relationship just evolved; there was no real beginning. Like many mentor-protégé relationships, both parties took their relationship for granted:

- There was no active co-preparation of the partners involved in the relationship, which increased the likelihood of the mentoring relationship becoming dysfunctional.
- Assumptions remained untested.
- Changes were ignored and camouflaged.
- The list of undiscussables grew and eventually eroded trust, clouded the relationship, and muddied the water.

The ideal is to create a mutually empowering relationship that allows for growth and development of both parties and the natural no-fault cessation of the relationship when it is appropriate. *Preparation of the relationship by both partners together is critical for the development of mutually satisfying mentorships.*

The four tools included in this article form a preparation tool kit for mentors to use with their protégés in preparing and negotiating a mentoring partnership. Although the presentation of these so-called tools, at first, suggests a certain level of formality, they are presented as a framework for thinking about the relationship. The questions posed and suggestions offered should be an intentional part of a partner preparation process that actively involves both parties, in whatever manner is most comfortable and natural. Thus, for some, these may become actual tools and for others a facilitating guide for discussion.

Tool # 1

The first partnership preparation step is to understand yourself and the individual you are mentoring. Even though you may simply fall into a relationship, just as Cynthia and Fran did, some of their problems could have been avoided if they had been clear with each other about their expectations.

Had Cynthia been helped to recognize and articulate her own needs, and asked to map them out, Fran and she would have paid more attention to the signposts. Perhaps they would have had a more satisfying relationship, because they would have been forced to communicate regularly and evaluate their progress. A discussion of specific information content and style of learning might have helped identify other means (resources) for learning and benchmarks for monitoring their progress.

Before you find yourself in a similar situation, you and your protégé should discuss answers to the following questions. You could do this formally as a prelude to an initial discussion or as a follow-up to the first contact with a would-be protégé. You can use the questions informally as a conversation guide for yourself in pushing your protégé’s thinking to the next step.

Negotiating the Relationship The Protégé’s Perspective

1. What is it I want to learn?
2. What are the options for going about it?
3. How much time do I have/want to devote to this?
4. What is my preferred learning style?
5. What are the steps to be followed?
6. What resources do I need?
7. What is my time frame?
8. How and when will I monitor my progress?

Take the *time* to be sure you really understand your protégé’s goals and specific needs. Consider what it is you need to know and if another resource (human or otherwise) might better meet the needs of the prospective protégé. *Remember*, you may have to say no because you could discover that you cannot meet the needs.

Mentoring Planning Form

Goal(s): _____

Objectives	Tasks	Process	Resources	Target Date

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Saying yes out of a sense of obligation is not the best way to engender trust.

Tool #2

Fran did not prepare herself for her mentoring role with Cynthia. She assumed that role. Cynthia was content to let that happen. She simply assumed Fran's preparedness. Taking the role for granted is one of the most common mentoring pitfalls. Reconceptualizing one's role as a facilitator of learning is as important as having some knowledge of technique and self.

Listed below are some of the most frequently asked questions and some answers you might find useful.

Frequently Raised Questions in Search Of Answers from Mentors

1. What are some things I can do to facilitate the learning of my protégé?

A facilitator is an enabler who, listens, empowers, coaches, teaches, collaborates, aids, assists, expedites eases, simplifies, advances, and encourages.

2. What are some techniques I can use?

- Ask questions.
- Reformulate statements.
- Summarize.
- Allow some silence.
- Listen reflectively.
- Be attuned to and honor difference.

3. What are some of the pitfalls to be avoided?

- Setting unrealistic goals for the relationship.
- Taking the relationship for granted.
- Avoid conflict.
- Being unprepared.
- Coasting.

4. Is there anything else I can do to be effective in my role as a mentor?

- Know (and no) thyself!
- Recognize your limitations.
- Be aware of your own preferred learning style.
- Be flexible and authentic.
- Prepare for your role as mentor. Understand it, and learn from it.

What are the responsibilities of each partner? What are the norms of the relationship? Under what terms will the relationship be terminated?

Be sure there is a mutual understanding of roles and goals, and that you have a working plan. ("See Mentoring Planning Form" on previous page.)

Tool # 4

Readiness, opportunity and support are the major enabling factors of the mentoring relationship (Williams & Zachary, 1990.) Locating yourself and your protégé in relation to these factors at any given moment can help anticipate stumbling blocks. Regular reflection provides continuous feedback and direction. These factors are a reality check on the relationship. Are we (both) ready? What are the opportunities? Is there enough support, given and perceived?

Although Fran had intuitively assessed Cynthia's readiness, Cynthia eventually began to feel a lack of support. The "Enabling Factor" table below might have been a helpful discussion tool for them. Using it, Cynthia and Fran might have discovered what went wrong and how unbalanced their relationship was from the onset. It also can be used as an evaluation tool for your own growth as a mentor. Try this enabling tool. Reflect on your most recent mentoring relationship and see what you learn!

Responsibility of Preparation

Mentors have a vital role to play in generating and preparing the next generation of leaders. It is a role that many assume without active co-preparation of the mentoring partners. Considered intentional preparation benefits both partners.

There must be mutuality in both responsibility *and* preparation. Saying yes does not mean you have to take all of the responsibility. Co-preparation facilitates understanding and clarifies expectation of how you are going to work together.

Mentoring is an opportunity to make a difference in the next generation of leaders while maximizing your own potential as a leader. Reflection of self in that role is an essential part of the continuous process of becoming. f
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Tool # 3

Once you've prepared yourself for your role of mentor, assessed your skills, and considered your role as a facilitator for learning, the next step is to lay the groundwork that will enable you to establish, build, and sustain an effective and mutually satisfying mentoring relationship. This means acknowledging the specific nature of your relationship and regularly evaluating it in order to avoid the pitfalls and to see the possibilities. You will need to work out answers to the following questions:

Enabling Factor	Mentor	Protege
Readiness		
Opportunity		
Support		