

Mentoring Matters

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Interview with

Dr. Frances Kochan

Wayne T. Smith Distinguished Professor at Auburn University

continued from our August Eletter

Culture plays out in mentoring relationships in both subtle and over ways. Its importance cannot be underestimated. To help us understand more about its impact, influence and salience, we interviewed mentoring expert and author,

Dr. Frances Kochan, [Wayne T. Smith Distinguished Professor at Auburn University](#) (Auburn, AL). Her research and publications focus on the cultural aspects of the mentoring relationship, the mentoring process and mentoring programs. This is part two of our interview with Dr. Kochan. Part one appeared [last month](#).

MM: What advice would you give mentors and mentees when the parties come from different cultures?

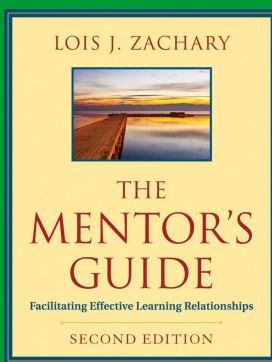
FK: Although cultural differences can cause problems, there are many instances of very successful mentoring relationship between people who have very different cultural backgrounds and values. The research on mentoring is very clear about the need for the mentor to be a caring person and about the need to develop a relationship that is mutually trusting. This is of particular importance when there are cultural differences between the mentor and mentee.

In such a situation, it is vital that they share backgrounds and address the need to let one another know when and if something is done or said that is culturally problematic or difficult for the mentor or mentee to deal with. This may be particularly hard when the mentee comes from a culture that does not question authority or which tends to operate individually rather than collaboratively-but it is imperative that these issues be addressed and that the mentor and mentee do all that is needed to foster trust between them.

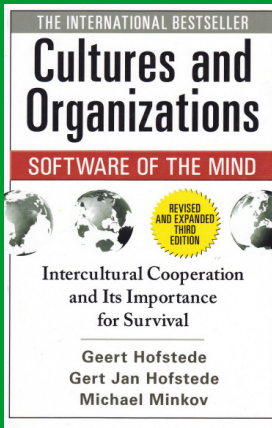
The important things here are honesty, openness, and a desire to learn and grow. It is particularly important for the mentor to learn all that he or she can about the issues that might be faced and to be sensitive to them. They must be open to engaging in deep reflection on these issues and be willing to ask questions that might be sensitive in order to foster growth and endure success.

There may however, be times when a person believes that some cultural aspect such as religion or gender is going to be a barrier to being able to enter into a meaningful mentoring relationship. If this is

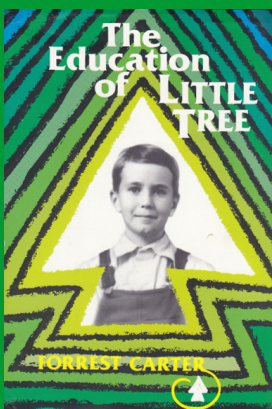
Dr. Frances Kochan Recommends Reading



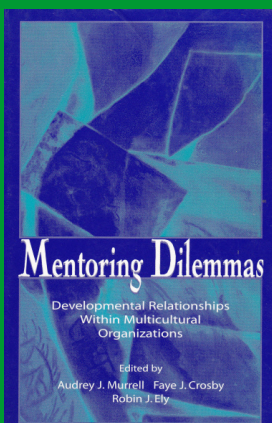
The Mentor's Guide by Dr. Lois Zachary



Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind by Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov



The Education of Little Tree by Forrest Carter



the situation, it might be best for the person to inform those who are responsible for matching know this and not take on this challenge. At the same time, as a general rule, if one wants to grow and learn, it might be better to face this issue and attempt to learn and grow by engaging in mentoring relationships that may permit that to happen.

MM: How can mentors and mentees become more culturally aware and sensitive?

FK: One way to become more culturally aware or sensitive is to expose oneself to other cultures through reading, the arts, travel and simply by conversing with those from other cultures in an open and honest manner. Another is to strive to become a self-reflective person and to delve into one's personal values, attitudes and actions from a cultural perspective. This can be done through journaling, through talking to those who know you best, or from forming open relationships with those who are different in some way and who will be honest with you about areas in which you may need to grow and change. Similarly, the Native American thought about "walking in another's moccasins" before judging someone is a good guide to actions needed to meet this goal.

MM: What books would you recommend to our readers?

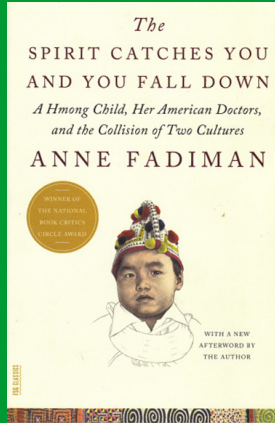
FK: I believe that understanding cultural differences and sensitizing oneself to them requires sharing in those experiences in a variety of ways. One is reading books that bring those cultures alive. An older book that I read early in my career and which I still love is [The Education of Little Tree](#) by Forest Carter. It is a tale that touches the heart and soul and helps make the need to search for cultural understanding real. Another book that brings culture to light for me is [The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down](#) by Anne Fadiman. It demonstrates how a lack of cultural communication and understanding can sometimes bring about devastating results, while at the same time sensitizing the reader to a deeper understanding of the need for all of us to respect one another's culture in order to deepen our own humanity.

In the realm of understanding culture from a more theoretical, yet practical basis, I recommend becoming familiar with Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, [Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind](#). This book provides an excellent overview of the manner in which societies conceive of the basic concepts inherent in our beliefs and values across the globe. As globalization expands, we may see more integration of these values and less demarcations between us, but I think it is valuable to have a broad understanding of the frame of culture and how it is put into operation in order to deal with it within our mentoring endeavors.

Considering culture within the mentoring relationships, I recommend Murrell, Crosby, and Ely, [Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships Within Multicultural Organizations](#). Although it is over ten years old, much of what is written within it is still very relevant. The book delves deeply into what research says about issues related to mentoring and diversity and provides suggestions for examining these issues in a comprehensive, holistic manner.

In terms of understanding and creating a mentoring culture, I have found Lois Zachary's writing on this topic to be particularly enlightening and I recommend [Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization's Guide](#). It presents readers with clear direction on how to analyze and create an environment in which mentoring programs and relationships will flourish.

Mentoring Dilemmas by
Audrey Murrell, Faye
Crosby, and Robin Ely



The Spirit Catches You
and You Fall Down by
Anne Fadiman

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