

# The Mentor as Partner

By Chip R. Bell

**M**y mother-in-law had a five-and-dime-store parakeet named Pretty Boy. Over the years, she taught Pretty Boy to sing a bunch of songs. One day, she ordered a new vacuum cleaner. It came with a tube-shaped attachment she thought perfectly suited to clean Pretty Boy's cage. You know where this story is going! The phone rang, and Pretty Boy ended up in the vacuum cleaner bag. Panicked, she tore it open and found the poor bird alive but totally covered with dust and dirt. She rushed him to the bathtub and turned on both faucets, almost drowning the hapless creature. Realizing the error of her solution, she grabbed the hair dryer to blow him dry.

A few days later at a church social, the editor of the local newspaper heard of her catastrophe and sent a reporter around to get this unique human-interest story. As the reporter concluded his interview, he asked my mother-in-law, "So, how is Pretty Boy now?"

Without expression, she answered, "Pretty Boy doesn't sing anymore. He just sort of sits and stares."

We live in times of turbulent change. Far too many employees hired to "sing a bunch of songs" are almost daily traumatized by downsizings, reorgs, mergers, and just plain old uncertainty. Some end up like Pretty Boy, sitting and staring. Customers experience traumatized employees through rigid Rules "Я"Us frontline behavior. Managers witness compliance instead of commitment, inflexibility rather than creativity, resistance in lieu of responsibility.

There is one group of employees, however, who sing in the midst of turmoil. Thriving on discord, this group turns dissonance into harmony. They are the perpetual learners in the organization. Philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote: "In times of massive change, it is the learner who will inherit the Earth, while the learned stay elegantly

tied to a world that no longer exists." Learners are not only happier employees, but they're also less likely to disconnect or depart in the face of change and confusion. Increasing the number of singers isn't likely to quell the chaos; massive change is here to stay. Nor does calm come through adding more training programs or expanding the tuition reimbursement policy. It entails fundamentally altering the role of leaders from corporate parent to compassionate partner. It involves having all leaders add learning coach or mentor to their repertoire.

*Mentor.* The word conjures up the image of a seasoned corporate sage conversing with a naive, still wet-behind-the-ears young recruit. The conversation would be laced with informal rules, closely guarded secrets, and "I remember back in '67..." stories of daredevil heroics and too-close-to-call tactics.

Mentoring has had an almost heady, academic sound, solely reserved for workers in white collars whose fathers advised, "Get to know old Charlie."

But what is mentoring, really? Simply put, a mentor is someone who helps someone else learn something that he or she would have learned less well, more slowly, or not at all if left alone. Notice the power-free nature of that definition. Mentors are not power figures; they are learning coaches—sensitive and trusted advisors.

The traditional use of the word *mentor* connotes a person outside one's usual chain of command who "helps me understand this crazy organization." All mentors are not supervisors or managers. But all—I repeat *all*—effective supervisors and managers should be mentors. Mentoring must become that part of every leader's role that has growth as its primary outcome.

Organizations can't afford to rely on mentoring programs for system-wide singing. Though such programs can be helpful, they're inadequate for creating a learning organization. In the words of Arie De Geus: "Your ability to learn faster than your competition is your only sustainable competitive advantage." Every leader must mentor and mentor, especially those associates whose performance they influence.

Mentoring employees isn't easy. How do you convey an insight goal from an in-charge role? How does a supervisor or manager encourage someone to experiment, make mistakes, and try new behaviors—all important to learning—from an “I'll be doing your performance review” position? Overcoming that authority-power obstacle to learning can happen only through a partnership relationship.

### The gifts of learning

Mentoring from a partnership perspective is fundamentally different from the classical “I'm the guru, you're the greenhorn” orientation. Mentoring from a partnership perspective means “We are fellow travelers on this journey toward wisdom.” Stated differently, the greatest gift a mentor can give his or her protégé is to position that protégé as his or her mentor. A learning partnership doesn't just happen; it must be created. And the mentor must take the lead.

The main event of mentoring entails giving the gifts of learning: advice, feedback, focus, and support. Such gifts, however, may not be welcomed by the recipient. No matter how generously bestowed, a gift isn't always received with glee. Think back to the last time that someone said to you, “Let me give you some advice” or “I need to give you a little feedback.” You probably did more resisting than rejoicing.

Smart mentors create a readiness for the main event of mentoring. A protégé is more likely to experience the benevolence of a gift if it's delivered in a relationship of safety, advocacy, and equality. Mentoring from a partnership perspective entails four stages:

1. leveling the learning field
2. fostering acceptance and safety
3. giving learning gifts
4. bolstering self-direction and independence.

The first two stages are aimed at creating a readiness for the main event: gifting. The final stage is all about weaning a protégé from any dependence on his or her mentor.

Stage 1: Leveling the learning field. The first challenge a mentor faces is to help a protégé experience the relationship as a true partnership. Leveling the learning field means stripping the relationship of any nuances of power and

command. It entails surrendering to the process of learning rather than controlling or driving it. It requires removing the mask of supremacy and creating kinship or *rapport*, which comes from its French derivation meaning “a bringing back” or “connection renewed.” The success of a mentoring relationship can hang on the early mentor-protégé encounters; good starts affect good growth. The tone created in the first meeting can determine whether the relationship will be fruitful or fraught with fear and anxiety. Quality learning won't occur until the shield has been lowered enough for a learner to take risks in front of his or her mentor. That takes *rapport*.

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The custom of bringing wine to a dinner party or launching a speech with a joke make the point that openings can be rocky but are important. *Rapport* building begins with the sounds and sights of openness and authenticity. Most people approaching a potentially anxious encounter raise their antennae: Will this situation embarrass me? Will this person take advantage of me? Will I be able to be effective?

The mentor must be quick to transmit a welcoming response with open posture, eye contact, and a personal greeting. Those gestures communicate an attempt to cultivate a level playing field. Mentors who convey power by peering from behind a desk, crossing their arms, and making the protégé do all of the approaching make a grave error in not beginning to build this important relationship with a foundation of ease.

Some mentors give a gift (in the broadest meaning) to signal a level field, such as “How about a cup of coffee?” But think how much more powerful is a statement such as “Here's an article I thought you'd find useful.” That signals an equal, helping relationship. It strips the specter of sovereignty from the relationship and focuses

on crafting a learning partnership.

Stage 2: Fostering acceptance and safety. Great mentors who are effective at communicating acceptance don't speak as if they're testing a protégé, being judgmental, or acting as a parent. Great mentors show their acceptance through attentive, dramatic listening. When listening is their goal, they make it the priority; they don't let anything distract. A wise leader said, “There are no individuals at work more important to your success than your employees...not your boss, not your customers, not your vendors.”

When a protégé needs you to listen, try imagining that you just received a gift of five minutes with your greatest hero (for me, it would be Abraham Lincoln). Think about it! If you could have five minutes—and only five minutes—with Moses, Mozart, or Mother Teresa, would you let a call from your boss, a customer, or anyone eat up part of that precious time? Treat your protégé with the same focus and priority.

Listening done well is complete absorption. Do you ever watch Larry King on CNN? His success as an interviewer lies not in his questions but in his terrific listening skills. He zips right past the interviewee's words and gets to the message, intent, and meaning. The mission of listening is to be so crystal clear about the other person's message that it becomes a “copy and paste” execution from the other person's brain computer to yours.

A good example has to do with one of my biggest challenges as a parent in trying to listen without having an agenda. When my son would express his concerns, convictions, or curiosity, I'd usually feel the urge to make a point, teach a lesson, or advise caution. When I finally gave up trying to be a smart daddy and more of a mirror, he began to open up and, most importantly, feel heard. When he'd ask, “How would you...?” I'd try to remember to have him tell me what he'd do before offering my opinion. When he'd voice concern, I'd try to communicate through my actions that his message got through before I delivered an answer, especially when my answer was likely to be different from the one he expected.

The adage “You're not eligible to change my view until you demonstrate you understand my view” serves in two ways. One, it helps you focus on being heard, not on making points. Two, it tells

a listener she or he is important.

Protégés feel a mentoring relationship is safe when the mentor is receptive and validates their feelings. The goal is empathetic identification. An “I am the same as you” attitude promotes the kinship and closeness vital to trust. Empathy is different from *sympathy*, which comes from a Greek word that means “shared suffering.” Relationship strength isn’t spawned by “misery loves company”; it comes through the “I’ve been there” identification.

A reflective response can be as simple as a personal story that lets a protégé know that you appreciate her or his feelings. A mildly self-deprecating anecdote particularly connotes acceptance. Above all, the best way to demonstrate acceptance is through sensitivity and a degree of humility. If you feel awkward, say so. If you feel excited, say so. The sooner you verbalize your feelings, the faster a protégé will become equally open.

Mentors don’t just listen; they listen dramatically. They demonstrate through their words and actions that what their protégés say is important. When people feel heard, they feel valued. When they feel valued, they’re more likely to innovate and take risks. Only through trying new steps do they grow and learn. If your goal is to be a great mentor, start by becoming a great listener.

Stage 3: Giving learning gifts. Leveling the learning field and fostering acceptance are the stages that lay the groundwork for the main event: giving the learning gifts of advice and feedback. Great mentors give many gifts: support, focus, courage, affirmation.

Someone once asked famed South Carolina football coach Lou Holtz what he considered to be the toughest part of his job. With his typical “Aw, shucks” charm, he shrugged off the question but did concede that it was “teaching lessons that stay taught.” Mentors have a similar challenge. Resistance and even resentment from protégés to advice and feedback can hinder teaching lessons that stay taught. One frustrated supervisor comments, “I tell them what they ought to do, but it seems to go in one ear and out the other!”

Frame your advice giving by letting a protégé know the intent of your mentoring. It sounds like this: “George, I want to talk with you about the fact that your last quarter call rate was up but your sales were down.” For advice-giving to

work, it’s vital that you be specific and clear. Ambiguity risks leaving a protégé more confused than assisted.

In addition, make certain the protégé is as eager to learn and improve as you are to see him or her learn and improve. To determine that, take a broad perspective. Is the issue at hand yours or the protégé’s? He or she just might be correct. If performance is a factor, be sure to have objective information—as a tool, not as proof. If all else fails, delay the conversation until the protégé demonstrates a greater readiness.

Ask permission to give advice. That’s the most important step. Your goal is twofold: 1) to communicate advice without eliciting resistance and 2) to retain ownership of the challenge in giving advice and feedback. It can sound like: “I have some ideas on how you might improve if that would be helpful to you.” The goal is to communicate in a way that

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doesn’t make the protégé feel controlled. State your counsel in the first person singular. Phrases such as “you ought to” only reap resistance. Better to say “what I’ve found helpful” or “what worked for me...” A protégé is more likely to hear such advice without the internal noise of resistance.

Think of it this way: Advice is about adding information; feedback is about filling a blind spot or gap. The blindness factor makes feedback a tricky gift indeed. Advice is expertise that a protégé may have or could acquire. “You (the mentor) are telling me (the protégé) something you know that, in time, I might or will acquire on my own.” But with feedback, the issue is, “You (the mentor) are telling me something you know that (given your perspective), I’ll probably never acquire on my own (and that makes me mad).”

The issue associated with advice is potential resistance; the issue with feed-

back is potential resentment. How does a mentor bestow a gift that by its basic nature reminds people of their inability to see it? How do you fill a hole in perception and have the recipient focus on the gift, not the gap?

The mentor’s goal is to help a protégé become receptive to feedback, by creating a climate of identification, such as making comments that have an “I’m like you, I’m not perfect” message. It doesn’t have to be a major production, just a sentence or two.

State the rationale for your feedback—not a plea for subtlety or diplomacy but a petition for creating protégés’ readiness for filling the gap. Help them get a clear sense of why the feedback is being given, that you want to give it. Never have a protégé wondering “Why is she telling me this? or “How in the world can I benefit from this information?”

Assume that you’re giving yourself the feedback. We know that we hear such information more accurately if delivered in a way that’s sensitive and unambiguous. However, there’s another dimension to effective feedback giving: It should have the utmost integrity, be straight and honest. Frankness isn’t about cruelty; it’s about ensuring that the receiver doesn’t walk away wondering, “What did he *not* tell me that I need to hear?”

It’s instructive that *feedback* begins with *feed*. Truly, optimum gap filling is the kind that happens in the spirit of nurturing. It’s also fitting that *advice* originates from the Latin *concilium*, meaning “to call together.” *Counsel* and *consult* have the same origin. If we were to blend those definitions, we’d get the perfect description of a learning partnership—“to feed together.” Stage 4: Bolstering self-direction and independence. “What is the good in good-bye?” asks the pop song. All mentoring relationships must come to an end. How do we manage *farewell* with a focus on *well*?

Effective mentoring relationships are rich, engaging, and intimate. As such, ending them isn’t without emotion. No matter how hard we try, there’s a bitter-sweet aspect. A healthy mentoring relationship involves separation as a tool for growth. An effective adjournment of a mentoring relationship paves the way for the successful inauguration of the next mentoring relationship.

Celebrate with fanfare and stories. It needn’t be a big party; it can be a special

meal together, a drink after work, or a walk in a nearby park. The point is that it's an event associated with the closure of the mentoring relationship. That rite of passage is a powerful symbol in moving on to the next learning plateau. Laugh; give the protégé sincere praise. He or she now needs your blessing more than your brilliance, your good wishes more than your warnings. Avoid the temptation to dispense one last caution. Your kindest contribution will be a solid send-off rendered with confidence, compassion, and consideration. Talk about opportunities to remember, reflect, and refocus on. Let them bridge the discussion toward the future. Then, let some time pass before follow-up. The quickest way to undermine independence is to follow up with a protégé too soon. Let at least a week pass, maybe longer. Setting your relationship free requires time. But you should follow up. Partners follow up with partners.

In the final analysis, growth implies closure and culmination. Mark the moment by managing adjournment as a visible expression of achievement and happiness. There's an expression in golf of "playing over your head." It means that a golfer is playing at an unexplained level of excellence that seems the momentary norm. Effective mentoring is a relationship of a mentor and a protégé who seek to honor their alliance by "learning over their heads." □

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