



Observing bluebirds train their offspring to fly can offer surprising techniques for effective mentoring.

The Bluebirds' Secret

Mentoring With Bravery and Balance

☞ Bluebirds are wonderful mentors! ☞

There is a bluebird house in an oak tree six feet from my wife's and my bedroom window. The same pair of bluebirds returns to the tree each spring to build, populate, and empty a nest. This past spring, their parenting made me reflect on how instructive bluebird flying lessons could be for human mentors.

BY CHIP R. BELL

Bluebirds don't just hatch eggs and depart. They get young birds from the security of the birdhouse to the independence of flight.

Let's depart from the world of bluebirds for a while to recognize that we have entered an era in the world of enterprise in which revolutionary changes render skills and knowledge obsolete almost overnight. Peter Vaill's term *permanent white water* has been used to characterize the feel of the workplace. Similarly, success comes through creative adaptation and innovative breakthroughs rather than the replication of tried (tired) and true (not new) ideas. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" has been replaced by, "If it ain't

become a key source for real-time employee learning. But combining an in-charge role with an in-sight goal calls for balance. That's where the bluebirds come in.

Finding the teachable moment

Bluebirds know when their fast-growing offspring are ready to be pushed from the nest because they have genetically coded weaning instincts. They watch for signs of maturation: restlessness, wing strength, and the eagerness of a young bird's lunge toward the birdhouse exit even when there is no worm dangling from mama's beak.

Bluebird parents often perch some distance away from baby bluebirds and call out to them as though to gauge their reaction time—how fast *did* Junior respond to the chirp? A parent bluebird might perch atop the birdhouse and peer down the entrance, even though it would be easier to observe from inside. But the bluebird

parent perhaps knows that in order to get a true picture, it must balance a comfortable and familiar close-up examination with a more dangerous and diverse perspective.

Baby bluebirds and people need teachable moments. A chief complaint of protégés about their mentors is, "She wasn't on hand when I really needed her." Such key opportunities are called, "teachable moments." The timing of a teachable moment is important: It's a combination of the learner's readiness to learn, the quickness with which learning can be applied, and the special conditions likely to foster or support learning.

So, what should mentors do to match teaching with timing? And how do mentors demonstrate the appropriate amount of attention? Too much attention can make a protégé feel smothered; too little can make him feel abandoned.

Stay vigilant. Seek opportunities to foster discovery. Whenever you communicate with a protégé, ask whether learning can result.

Keep a lookout. Watch for signs of apa-

thy, boredom, or dullness—any of which may indicate a learning plateau.

Ask A and listen for B. For example, ask, "How would you describe the challenge in your job?" But listen for the answer as if you had asked, "How would you describe the growth deficit or learning deficit in your job?" It's usually easier for protégés to talk about whether they're challenged than it is for them to discuss a learning deficit.

Watch protégés at work. As bluebird parents watch from a distance, keep in mind that your goal is to determine whether it might be a good time to intervene as a mentor.

Support without rescuing

The morning one baby bluebird took its first clumsy flight from the birdhouse to the nearest bush, both parents were on hand for the occasion, proud and no doubt anxious. As the wobbly fledgling took short, awkward bursts of flight, one parent was always in the tree nearby chirping encouragement. When our cat, Taco Bell, came around the corner, one parent flew within a few feet of Taco, distracting her long enough for the young bird to reach safety. It was a beautiful display of bravery and vital, well-timed support by the parent. Still, the student pilot was left to do its own flying.

Similarly, mentors provide support and encouragement as protégés work to master shaky new skills. The challenges for all mentors are: "When does too much support become rescue?" and "When does too little support become callousness?" Many mentors tend to take help to the level of interference. Too often they say, "Let me just show you how to do that" when they should be asking, "What do you think you should do next?"

The following assemble-it-yourself statement may help you find the right balance between helpful support and unhelpful rescue. "If I were honest, I would say that I tend to offer help because

- ▶ I don't want to see a protégé repeat mistakes that I've made."
- ▶ I can't afford too many errors in the name of learning."
- ▶ I don't want to see a protégé hurt, embarrassed, disappointed, or discouraged."
- ▶ I feel the need to show protégés



☞ *Many mentors tend to take help to the level of interference* ☞

broke, break it." Almost overnight, employees can go from being a champ to a chump unless they stay perpetually honed and forever ready. High-level knowledge requirements are moving to lower levels in the organization, meaning smartness can no longer be the purview of bosses only.

All that implies a requirement for learning organizations—that growth, learning, improvement, and everlasting experimentation are woven into their cultures. "The ability to learn faster than your competition," says Arie De Geus, "may be the only sustainable competitive advantage."

Employees not in a perpetual state of growth will be unable to cope, adapt, and succeed. And waiting for the next opening in a much-needed training class can be costly. Mentors

how competent and skilled I am.”

▶ If I don't show protégés how, they will never become competent.”

If there is one lesson that bluebirds can offer, it is the living illustration of a teacher's courage to let learners fail. Mentors, like human parents, want learning to be painless. But the most significant growth happens through the discomfort of grappling with a new skill. Our bluebirds dived courageously at our menacing cat as the bluebird student pilot fluttered awkwardly. The parents seemed to be protecting their youngster at risk to themselves. The lesson: Learners dare to risk when they see mentors take risks.

Avoid perfection

The greatest gift a mentor can give protégés is to demonstrate authenticity and realism. Conversely, the biggest barrier to mentoring is an environment with expectations of perfection and the implication, “Why can't you be as good as I am?” There is nothing wrong with mentors showing off to protégés,

as long as what they show is their genuineness—clay feet and all. Consider the following suggestions:

▶ Tape your mentoring sessions to determine whether they contain controlling language—such as, “I want you to....” “You should....” Don't use the patronizing royal *we* as in, “We must take our medicine.”

▶ Listen to see whether you take as many risks as protégés to be real and open. Do you sound like an expert or another learner?

▶ Eliminate anything that may communicate power or distance. Mentoring from behind a desk can be more intimidating than sitting at a 45-degree angle to a protégé without barriers. Power can be an obstacle when learning is the objective. Take steps to literally and symbolically minimize the power of your role or position.

▶ Be open to alternative views and unique interpretations. The path to excellence zigzags between extreme views. Help protégés refine their views by honoring extreme ideas, while ask-

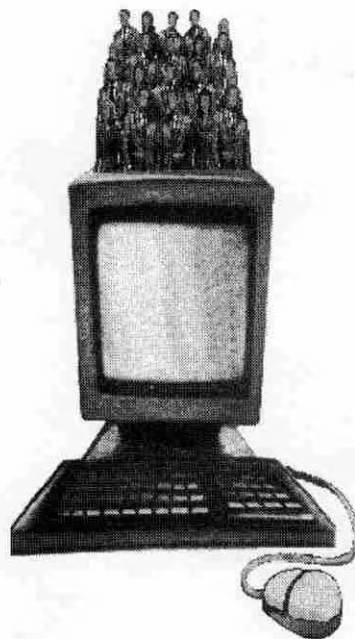
ing questions to encourage the discovery of a balanced, effective position.

▶ Take learning seriously, but not yourself. Laugh with protégés, never at them. An occasional “I made that same mistake” can mitigate their apprehension and promote the necessary risk taking for learning.

At the moment, our bluebirds are empty nesters. Their protégé has joined the world of other adult bluebirds hunting tasty bugs, dodging curious cats, and perhaps serving as the flight instructor for a new generation. Like with bluebirds, the ultimate gift of a human mentor is to allow protégés the freedom to find their own way. ■

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