

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

"MENTORS — THE KEY TO DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH"

Guest Commentary
BY MARY C. JOHNSON

We have heard so much in recent years about mentors. . . . What is a mentor? What can one do for you? Are they necessary? How can you acquire one? How can you become one? What do you have to offer?

According to Webster's, a mentor is a trusted counselor or guide. C. Edward Weber, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, defines mentor as a senior person who undertakes to guide a younger person's development, both personal and career. He points out that the role of a mentor is to develop the unique abilities of each person in a way not detrimental to others. The mentor's role is not pulling people up the career ladder, but in developing the individual.

In my mind this sums up mentor very well. My career started as a teacher in the public school systems. After teaching for several years, I was presented with an opportunity to change careers, which I did. I have been in the insurance industry a relatively short period of time. During this time, however, I have had a very successful career. I could not have accomplished as much in the same time frame without the mentor I had. For that I am extremely grateful and want to do the same for others. At the time I did not realize I had a mentor or for that matter was not even familiar with the concept. My mentor probably did not think of himself in those terms either.



Mary C. Johnson

Are mentors really necessary? Most successful business people have had at least one, according to a recent survey of 1,200 persons whose promotions were announced in the *Wall Street Journal*. The survey also indicated that fully two-thirds of rising business people have had mentors. This points to the fact that mentors do indeed exist and can be very beneficial.

What can a mentor do for you? There is so much information about the workings of the business environment that is difficult to obtain without help. There is an old cliché that fits very well here — "it's not what you know, but who you know that's important." A

mentor is that person you know who can teach you how the company operates. You need to know the organization you work for and how it operates. This means much more than an organizational chart. You need to know how to use the information you acquire to plan for your future and to help control your environment. It is important to know who uses what information, how and with what results. This type of knowledge is not readily available without "inside" help or years of experience.

A mentor is more than a disseminator of information. A mentor is that person who helps you grow in other ways. They help you to develop the self-confidence you need to grow in your position. They share their values and ideals with you. They generally are in a position to let those higher up know what a good job you are doing. In other words, they sound your horn for you. They are invaluable for the people they put you in contact with. They make you visible within your corporate structure.

There has recently been an increased interest in mentors and there is a reason for that. Corporate society today has trends that foster the growth of mentors.

In our society today, there is an emphasis on individual growth and our young people are asking for responsibility and freedom. The traditional corporate growth structure of the boss and subordinate

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relationship conflicts with this desire for responsibility and freedom.

The most common form of mentors is one of a senior official guiding a younger person. This type of mentor can give you added responsibilities to help you learn as many facets of the company as possible. The intensity of the mentor-protégé relationship varies and often changes by itself as the needs of the protégé change.

Who Is Your Mentor?

The *Wall Street Journal* survey showed that most people were in their 20's when they obtained a mentor. It also found that 7.8 percent of mentors were professors or teachers; 7.4 percent friends; 5.1 percent relatives; 48.3 percent immediate supervisors; 53.5 percent department heads; 33.4 percent presidents and chief executive officers; and 5.4 percent others. (That adds up to more than 100 percent because many people had more than one mentor.)

No matter where you find a mentor, or at what stage in your life, they all have a great deal to give. What you need to do is open up your mind and learn as much as possible from that mentor about any topic you can.

A particularly bad blunder — for men and women — is to align themselves with the wrong supporters. A stalled, immobile supervisor will not take kindly to an ambitious subordinate. Worse yet, such a supervisor will deny the subordinate visibility and exposure. Visibility because the career climber must see the route ahead. Exposure because the employee must be seen by those who can help their career.

How can you acquire a mentor? This question is not easy to answer. Some companies have an official mentor program for their new executives. These work very well for some but cause a real problem for others. What about those who have not reached the executive level? They need mentors, too. One way to go about

getting a mentor is to find someone you admire and respect within the corporation. Start asking that person questions about the company. Ask them questions about company etiquette. Hopefully, this person will see that you respect his/her knowledge and opinions and will offer his/her help in the future.

Another method to use is to model yourself after another person. Talk to that person as often as possible and use his/her knowledge. Make yourself visible to your model and he/she may respond favorably.

Of course another method is to simply ask someone to be your mentor. The worst that can happen is they will say no. On the other hand you will gain a great deal of respect and perhaps a friend and mentor. I have had this

approach used with me and I respected the person for doing it. It also made me feel very good.

We all have something to offer to someone else. Be gracious and give it freely. Being a mentor is easy if you are sincere and truly want to help someone else grow to their full potential. A word of caution — be prepared for the possibility of that person growing beyond you in position. Let it happen. They will remember you for it, others will know what happened and you should feel good knowing you helped. — *Mary C. Johnson*

Mary C. Johnson is a training manager for Northwestern National Insurance Co., Milwaukee, WI. She is responsible for all levels of training from entry level to management. Formerly, she was an underwriting services supervisor, commercial lines underwriter and underwriting services analyst.



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