

BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS TO MENTORING

If you know mentoring is a great way to develop leadership, why aren't you doing it?

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I recently ran a workshop on mentoring for 200 people. At the start of the session, I had everyone split into two groups: those who were currently in a mentoring relationship moved to the left side of the room, those who wanted to be but weren't moved to the right. I'd like to say I was surprised to see about 80% of the people in the room shift to the right, but I wasn't. This was just another reminder of the barriers to mentorship that so many of us face.

There has been much written and said on mentoring in the past few years. Like the people in that workshop, you probably know it is a proven, cost effective way to develop leadership skills within your organization. So what was stopping them? Probably the same things that are stopping you.

When I talk with people who aren't involved in mentoring, three common barriers surface. Junior people are often uncomfortable approaching a potential mentor. They worry that it's too much to ask or fear possible rejection. Senior people may not see the value they can add to a mentee. Even people who mentor informally often discount the importance of what they are doing. Then there's the statistical reality that there are simply more junior people searching for a senior person to mentor them than there are senior people.

Sounds daunting, doesn't it? And yet there's that other 20% on the right side of the room. They didn't let these barriers stop them, so why should you?

Mentees, check your wallflower worries at the door

If you want to be mentored, the onus is on you to approach a potential mentor. Understandably, this can be an intimidating task. Few of us feel we deserve to ask so much from someone. Keep in mind that your mentor has as much or more to gain in this mentoring relationship as you do. Developing others is a critical leadership skill that we all need to practice, and mentoring is a great way to do that. Mentors find that helping mentees steer their career toward their passion, and setting them up for success is a tremendously rewarding experience.

Once you've got up the confidence to ask, be prepared for a few common roadblocks. You may need to persuade a potential mentor that they have things to offer (see next section). If he or she simply doesn't have a lot of time to spare, consider a less traditional arrangement. Perhaps a "mini-mentoring" relationship, such as a single meeting or phone call, will be manageable. E-mentoring can also be an effective alternative.

Still can't make it work? Remember that at the very least you've given someone a huge compliment just by asking.

Mentors, trust that you have something to give

In talking with current and potential mentors, I encounter a common “I’m not sure I have anything to offer” theme. They worry that they aren’t senior enough or don’t have the right skills. In truth, you’d be hard pressed *not* to add value to a mentee’s life.

By sharing your experiences (good and bad) you teach and inspire. By listening, you give your mentee the opportunity work through important issues and ideas that might not otherwise be given voice. By baring witness, you hold your mentee accountable for what he or she wants, and that accountability is a powerful tool for building real momentum toward goals.

The bottom line: you don’t need special experience or training to affect someone’s life as a mentor—you just need to do it.

Everybody, lose the old mentoring paradigm

Even if we could convince every senior person to mentor, there would still be too many junior people in need of mentoring. You can’t change statistics, but you can let go of the image of a one-to-one partnership between a senior and junior person.

Instead, consider peer mentoring. A critical component of any leadership development programs, peer mentoring brings together small groups of people from all levels of the organization who face similar challenges. Alternating between the role of mentee and mentor, everyone in a peer group has the chance to work on developing him or herself, as well as others. When you do feel you need help from someone with more experience than those in the group, invite an outside expert to a session as guest mentor.

This model not only solves the problem of senior mentor shortages, but also fosters leadership skills through mutual risk-taking and shared learning. Before you know it, you might just be one of those senior mentors that everyone is looking for.

This column is written by Deborah Rasmussen for the “Leadership Lessons by Dr Rosie Steeves” column in BIV. Deborah and Rosie can be reached at info@refineryleadership.com.