

Building Stronger Links: Informal Mentoring Strategies for Effective Mentoring

There are five key areas of guidance the mentor can provide to the potential new leader: 1) personal development, 2) communication skills, 3) creative problem solving 4) dealing with uncertainty, and 5) political skills. Suggested strategies for teaching each of these skills are highlighted in the descriptions which follow.

REFERENCES: SEE Sources # 2-9, 14, 21

■ Teaching Personal Development for Leadership ■

Positive Attitude

Encourage the new leader to approach life and goals with enthusiasm and optimism. Encourage acceptance of self and others.

Valuing

Mentors and new leaders need to have clear understandings of their own personal values. The definition of success needs to be identified for each person. For example, the mentor may focus more on volunteer activities than on family. This may fit the mentor's values. The new leader may value family time first and may feel identification as a new leader is not an honor or success if it takes away from family time. It's critical for each party to be clear about what's really important to them.

Open-Mindedness

Encourage the new leader to hear all ideas or viewpoints before making a decision. The open-minded creative side is the kind of thinking needed when doing creative problem solving and when working with people.

Interrelations

Develop a relationship of caring, sharing and empathizing.

Discovery

Model the exploration of new ideas, directions, or possibilities.

Confidence

Low self-esteem causes the person to demean one's own accomplishments and having others do so as well. The mentor can identify for the new leader the significance of their involvement to the group goal.

Recognition of Individual Strengths

Identify skills and unique characteristics of the person and help them build upon them so they can contribute to the leadership team. Then identify what he/she needs from others to make up for weaknesses.

Teaching Communication Skills

The mentor's job is to teach reflective listening and assertive questioning. New leaders can learn these skills from a mentor who role-models these skills.

In reflective listening, one person sends a message (sometimes nonverbally) and the other person reflects back to what was heard or to get clarification of what was meant. The listener tries to capture the main ideas in what was said, including their interpretation of what was said.

To teach this skill to others, "walk through" the following steps with the person. These steps help a person clearly separate what happened from interpretations, desires, and actions. Ask questions at any step to get clarification and clear meaning. The steps are as follows:

STEP 1. Observe

- Describe what was detected through the sense, without adding interpretation:
- For example: *I see...*
I hear...
I touch...
I smell...
I taste...

STEP 2. Interpret

- Make an interpretation of the data described in Step 1. This includes impression, conclusions, assumptions, evaluations, etc.
- For example: *I think this means....*

STEP 3. Feel

- Articulate your feelings about the interpretation and data.
- For example: *I feel good/bad...*

STEP 4. Want

- Articulate your preferences, wants, wishes, plans.
- For example: *I intend...*

STEP 5. Act

Take action!

An Example Using These Steps...

"Sue, I saw in the minutes of the last meeting that you were going to contact other members of this group no later than June 1 to work at the event. It's now July 1 and the festival is this Saturday [Step 1: Observe]. We are behind schedule in recruiting the volunteers, and many may already have other commitments [Step 2, Interpret]. I'm concerned about ending up being short of volunteers on Saturday to run our booth [Step 3, Feel]. I want the volunteers to be recruited today so please begin calling [Step 5, Act]."

Teaching Creative Problem-Solving Skills

Leaders can look at a situation from many points of view, and can generate options. Leaders also know the value of collaborative problem solving which allows both parties to bring perspectives to the situation. Tips for increasing creativity in problem solving include these areas.

Don't Fall in Love with One Way - Look for the Second Right Answer

There is *not* ONE “right answer.” This opens the “rules” of thinking to really explore several alternatives before pursuing a plan or selecting an alternative.

The Answer You Get Depends on the Questions You Ask

Invite people with different levels of experience to be part of the problem-solving team to look at a problem. The “dumb question” may provide valuable insights.

Look for Similar Characteristics with Other Situations or Problems

Look for metaphors to describe the problem, and how that might affect thinking on this problem.

Periodically Inspect Ideas, Procedures and Philosophies of the Organization

It is helpful review organization culture to see if it is contributing to creative problem-solving. Find out “why did this project come to be?” And then ask “Do these reasons still exist?” If the answer is “no,” change or eliminate the program or procedure.

Develop New Ideas First, Then Evaluate

Premature evaluation can prevent conception.

Ask the “What-IF” Questions

Encourage others to ask “what-if” to identify new possibilities.

Allow Free-Time to Play

In time of relaxation, new possibilities have space to enter our minds. Play also helps us think with the inquisitiveness of children.

■ Teaching How to Deal with Uncertainty ■

Leaders with limited experience and confidence need to know how to deal with uncertainty and overcome a fear of failure. This fear results in dependence upon others and consequently discourages a sense of competence and independence on the part of the new leader. For a new leader to be a risk-taker, he/she needs to have an atmosphere that is conducive, encouraging and supportive. Techniques to use with others are included here.

“Blue Skying”

Before going into a new situation, encourage the new leader to imagine the worst thing that could happen if the strategy about to be used would “flop.” Usually the new leader discovers the probable consequences are not nearly as bad as imagined.

Objective Evaluation Method

Identify the most important criteria to be met by the action to be taken. Then identify criteria which would be nice, but necessary to achieve by this action. This helps the new leader keep in perspective the level of performance (perfection) desired by the action.

Viewing/Visioning

Ask the new leader to imagine the situation as their role model (or someone else they trust and admire) might view or approach the problem.

Establish (with the new leader) That You Trust Their Judgment

Select portions of problems you feel the new leader is ready to tackle. Identify for the new leader their past experiences which have prepared them to deal with the problem, and therefore, why you feel they can do the job.

Balance the Leadership Team

Once the new leader can realistically identify their strengths and weaknesses, they can identify skills necessary to be added to the team to complete the project. Strategize who to recruit and how to recruit that person. By balancing the skills needed to do the job, risks will be lowered.

Build Awareness of Opportunity

Ask the individual to identify what’s going on in the environment which tells them that now is the opportune time to act on this problem. The environment can be interactions with people, changes in the community, new laws, etc. This helps them “do their homework” before taking on the risk.

Build Opportunity Out of “Error”

There are two benefits of error (“failure”). First, you learn what doesn’t work; the second, the failure gives you an opportunity to try a new approach. Help the new leader identify what they would do differently.

■ Teaching Political Skills ■

Understanding Values

Each individual and group has a set of values. Leaders need to have a clear understanding of their personal values and the values of the organization. Differences in personal values (*sometimes reflected in differences in sexes, ages, residence, nationality, race, etc.*) need to be respected.

Leaders need to know how to focus the energies of the group on projects, activities and goals that fit with the shared values of the group.

Politics of an organization, however, often deal with the personal value differences or personality styles of individuals.

Being Informed

Help a new leader by sharpening their abilities to interview and observe members of the organization to gain an understanding of their personal values and preferred work styles. Work with them to identify strategies which have worked in the past to involve, recruit, or receive approval from these individuals to foster achievement of the organization.

Through this process, you will also be helping the new leader to know the formal and informal decision-making systems and power structure of the organization.

Being Involved

Being a citizen of the community always is always good for organizations. Most organizations want employees that give back to the community in a variety of ways. This may mean volunteering, belonging to civic groups, leading a committee or taskforce in and out of the organization. Heads of departments are often looked at for their leadership skills and utilizing their skills in visible ways for the organization and community helps build relationships. Encouraging upcoming leaders to become involved is a positive trait to develop.

Having Influence

Every person has the opportunity to influence. Influence can be intentionally formal or informal and can happen in a variety of settings. We can influence others at work and in our private lives each time we decide to communicate and/or share ideas. It is up to individuals to determine what role they want to play in influencing others. As leaders build relationships, they will find their influence can help an organization reach its goals.