

The Measure of a Mentor



WHO WAS YOUR GREATEST MENTOR? PERHAPS IT WAS A TEACHER FROM YOUR GRADE-SCHOOL DAYS, A BASKETBALL COACH OR A PROFESSOR WHO TOOK YOU UNDER HER WING DURING COLLEGE. YOU MAY HAVE EVEN FOUND THAT UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL IN THE OFFICE

where you currently work. Take a moment and write the person's name on a sheet of paper. Look at it closely. What do you feel? My guess is that you are feeling a deep sense of gratitude—possibly mixed with a bit of wonder as to why someone you once barely knew chose to befriend you and show you the way.

Now, ask yourself why you wrote that name and not another. Most likely, what made you put pen to paper was not the person's resume or long list of accomplishments. Rather, it was your mentor's generosity.

Merriam-Webster defines a mentor as "a trusted counselor or guide," similar to a tutor or a coach. But who this "trusted" person should be in the business setting remains in question. Frequently, those we are expected to learn the most from in the workplace are those who also conduct our job reviews. Conventional wisdom has it that being both mentor and manager is a bad combination. It is natural, then, to seek direction from a trusted peer or someone outside the organization entirely.

The power of mentorship is unmatched, when it works—so powerful that many successful companies have tried to harness this force in structured programs. But such success can be elusive; we have all heard stories of mentor relationships that have gone awry.

Typically, it's not a wrong person but a wrong attitude that sends corporate mentor relationships adrift. A common complaint is that many mentors feel they command attention or deserve emulation but do nothing to foster trust. Such self-proclaimed idols approach their understudies and everyone else in the office with condescension: "I've found success. Follow me. Do as I do, and you will go far."

There was a song lyric I heard on the radio the other day: "Love isn't love, until you give it away."

How true. And the same can be said about a mentor relationship. Knowledge, or anything else for that matter, really doesn't exist until it is shared. Intelligent and kindhearted people, who freely share their knowledge and humanity in the workplace, will find the greatest success. Such is the message of an enlightening book I just read: Tim Sanders' *Love is the Killer App*. The director of Valuelab, Yahoo's in-house think tank, Sanders is a fast-moving, grab-hold-of-life advocate of love. His message contains three steps: Learn all you can, expand your network, and share your compassion.

Quoting Mother Teresa, Sanders explains that the greatest disease in the West is being unwanted, unloved and uncared for. "Since people are basically utilitarian, they value others for their ability to fill these basic needs. When you do, you're providing a service no one else in business offers. You become the person who makes other people feel good. It's as if you were selling a product worth a dollar for a penny." Unfortunately, many in powerful positions don't understand this concept. They minimize it, and in so doing they don't tend to be leaders whom others wish to follow, and they don't inspire enduring loyalty.

Sanders' tome should become the guidebook for all mentors. Before you leave the office tonight, send an e-mail to that mentor whose name you wrote on the sheet of paper in front of you. Tell them how much they meant to you. And then pass the spirit along.

Show some love. Give it away. Share the generosity by becoming a mentor to someone in your company. In the end, after all, this is the measure of greatness. How do you want your colleagues to remember you? There are two possible responses: "She always tried to be better than me, and she never let me forget it." Or rather, years from now, someone may write your name on a sheet of paper and quietly say, "She taught me everything I know."

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