



# MENTORING:

## TEACHING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A LEADER

BY TERRY LITTLE

**RECENTLY I CHAIRED A PANEL INTERVIEWING CANDIDATES TO FILL AN S.E.S. POSITION WITHIN THE MISSILE DEFENSE AGENCY. WE INTERVIEWED SEVEN CANDIDATES: SIX FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AND ONE WHO HAD RETIRED FROM PRIVATE INDUSTRY. FIVE OF THE CANDIDATES, ALL GS-15S, WERE UNACCEPTABLE FOR THE POSITION. THE SIMPLE REASON WAS THAT THEY DIDN'T COMPREHEND WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A LEADER. AND THE SAD TRUTH IS THAT NO ONE EVER TOLD THEM. THEY NEEDED MENTORING, BUT NEVER GOT IT.**

### LET ME COUNT THE WAYS...

No one that I know in a senior position got there without some mentoring along the way. Usually they've had informal mentoring, and usually it started early in the career with more than a single mentor. But there are many different ways to get the benefit of mentoring. It can be done in a way that is formal, informal or in a way I like to call "informal-informal."

It's been my experience that formal mentoring programs almost never work, and there are varying reasons for this. One is that such formal programs demand a pervasive management commitment across an organization that almost never exists. Many senior people give mentoring lip service but are unwilling to spend the time that it takes to do it. Notice I said unwilling rather than unable. Many so-called leaders fail to recognize that mentoring is as important as anything they do and more important than most of what they do.

The second reason formal programs fail is that they tend to be cumbersome and unwieldy. Everyone clamors to become part of a formal mentor program; they view it as some sort of right or important square to fill. This leads, in turn, to a bureaucratic selection process where paper matters more than real accomplishment. The truth is that many people can derive no benefit from mentoring, because they think they already have all the answers, because they have limited potential, or because they view mentoring as just a way to get a better job with higher pay. Mentoring needs to be selective.

### STEPPING UP

My strong preference is for informal mentoring; I want to pick whom I mentor. For instance, in my current job I have selected seven people within the Agency. How did I select them? I used my own observations, and the opinions of others whom I respect, to identify GS-15s

with high potential to become SESs. Only one of those people actually works for me and there are two that I frankly don't like very much. That's OK because not all high potential people work for me or are to my liking.

And why did I choose GS-15s instead of GS-12s or GS-13s who might be in their more formative years? The answer is two-fold. Number one, mentoring takes a lot of time and effort, and I have limited time and energy. I would rather do a reasonable job mentoring a few than a pitiful job mentoring many. Number two, mentoring is everyone's responsibility and not just the responsibility of those in senior positions. Put another way, every GS-13 has an affirmative responsibility to mentor those below him or her in the pecking order. The same is true for every grade level. Part of my role in a senior position is to communicate my expectation to those below me that they have a mentoring responsibility for which I hold them accountable.

#### AN INFORMAL GATHERING

So how do I do my informal mentoring? I meet with each person I mentor regularly—nominally once a quarter. I also meet with everyone I mentor as a group once each six months. In between, I send articles or suggested readings, as well as some words of counsel that come to me. To me and to them it's critical that these things be predictable and personal—something they can count on and that means something to them as diverse individuals.

When we recently met as a group, we discussed the importance of maintaining unbridled passion about our work, while avoiding counterproductive displays of emotion. We tried to come to grips with how to maintain our dignity and grace in the face of adversity. We also addressed the importance of focusing on the job-after-next as a guide star for deciding what to do now. In the cases of the individual meetings, I typically answer any questions and give direct feedback on areas where each person may need improvement. For instance, I told one individual recently that his manner of dress (casual, with a short sleeve shirt, no tie and relatively disheveled hair) impacted his ability to influence people and left a bad first impression. He argued that his manner of dress shouldn't matter. I countered that whether it should or shouldn't matter is irrelevant. It does and he should do something about it if he wants to lead. I told another person that she did too much talking when she should

be listening. I gave her several examples. Both people thanked me for the feedback and related that no one had ever given them such constructive feedback in their entire careers. Perhaps it was easier for me to do this since neither of the persons worked for me, but I think it's a pretty sad commentary that neither of these two had ever had the benefit of the most basic mentoring tool: timely, constructive feedback.

#### WHAT KIND OF ROLE MODEL ARE YOU?

Finally, my favorite mentoring is what I call "informal-informal" mentoring. I like it because it's unconscious and natural for the mentor (especially valuable for a lazy one like me) and because those getting the mentoring don't even know that it is happening. Its working is simple. As we progress up the career chain, our behaviors become more and more visible to an increasingly larger number of people. We are not conscious of it, but others take their cues from those higher up the bureaucratic pyramid than they are. They observe our behaviors and make judgments about it. Is it something worth emulating? If so, how can I adapt that

behavior to my unique personality? Is it something to avoid? If so, how do I sensitize myself so that I don't do it unconsciously? Much of what we turn out to be as individuals is a derivative of what we have learned from observing others—not from what others have told us, what we

have read and so forth. When others seek to emulate us, we have mentoring at its finest. Each person may have his or her own style that precludes direct "copycatting." But when one sees basic leadership principles working effectively in real life, it can have a profound effect.

I believe that mentoring is so important and so neglected that I intend this article to be the first in a series I will write on the subject. For the readers, my hope is that these will contain an idea or two that may provoke you to become better mentors. •

**WE DISCUSSED THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING UNBRIDLED PASSION ABOUT THEIR WORK, BUT AVOIDING COUNTERPRODUCTIVE DISPLAYS OF EMOTION.**



**TERRY LITTLE** is the Director of the Kinetic Energy Boost Office at the Missile Defense Agency. One of the most seasoned program managers in DoD, he is also a regular contributor to *ASK Magazine*.