

Mastering Mentoring 3 Questions

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Any mentoring relationship will have lots of time to dialog. It is the exchange of ideas that leads to growth for both the mentor and the protégé. The fundamental objective is to learn from each other by a series of discussions. How these discussions are conducted will have a lot to say about the relative effectiveness of the relationship.

Use Questions

Try to slant your verbal expressions to the other person in the form of open-ended questions. An open-ended question is one that cannot be answered “yes” or “no.”

I think it is possible to overdo this advice. I know one consultant who is a former lawyer. He frames up every single thought in the form of an open ended question. It is just in his DNA, like he is incapable of making a declarative statement.. Whenever I meet with this person I come away exhausted as if we are playing some kind of communication jousting match. If you ask him a question, he will respond with another question. It is annoying.

It will be tempting to suggest techniques or actions in a declarative form. The reason is that the effort has the feel of one person teaching another. Let me share a couple examples to contrast the two styles.

Examples

If you are the mentor, you might be tempted to advise the protégé with a statement like, “Never interrupt another person who is in the middle of a thought.” That is good advice, but it might be better to frame it up as follows, “How do you react when someone cuts you off before you have finished your point?”

A protégé might be tempted to say, “We should plan to meet at least once per week.” A more fruitful discussion of timing might start with the question, “How can we tell when it’s time for us to meet physically?”

Vary Your Communication Style

Be a bit flexible, and vary your style of communication so that most, but not all, of your ideas are presented in the form of questions. The flow of conversation should take on the feel of two people who are respectfully exploring the ideas under consideration by doing a lot of listening. Mentors would do well to shoot for conversations being 70% listening and 30% speaking and remember to use all forms of communications.

Keep in mind that not all communication will be face to face, All modes of communication will be used at times in the relationship. Electronic communication is frequently used to coach a protégé. Typically, exchanges using e-mail or texting can be an efficient mode of mentoring. Even body language will become part of the method of conveying meaning between the parties.

Conclusion

A great mentor relationship can last for years or even decades, because both parties are getting benefit from the relationship. If both parties frequently point out their gratitude for the relationship, you are on the right track. Invest in these relationships because they will bring out the best in both people.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online, Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind, and Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

