

Mastering Mentoring 5 Mentoring Myths

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



There are some myths about a mentoring relationship that I want to address in this article. The first one is that the mentor should be there to protect the protégé from making mistakes.

The Importance of Mistakes

Actually, human beings learn much more from their mistakes than their successes. Think back at how you learned to walk. You took many a spill on your backside before you could walk with confidence.

If the mentor is too quick with advice on how to do things, it may reduce the number of mistakes, but it will also hamper the learning. I believe the best posture for a mentor is to intervene if the protégé is about to make a serious or hurtful error. We used to call these CTO's (short for Career Threatening Opportunities). But, if the protégé is contemplating a bit of a risky step that may or may not work out, it is better to let the person take the action then do a debrief if it was a bad call.

The idea here is to make sure the protégé captures the learning consciously through a discussion on what went wrong and what would work better in the future.

Asking for Advice

If the protégé is asking for specific advice, then the mentor should share an accurate assessment of the possibilities and even offer a best course of action. The caveat here is to not let the mentor become a crutch for every decision. The mentor is there to teach the protégé to think for herself and learn to deal with risks in a rational way.

Covering for Mistakes

Another myth about mentoring is that the mentor is there to cover for any missteps the protégé might make. That is a formula for lowering the credibility of both the mentor and the protégé. If the protégé makes a blunder, it is a teachable moment for the mentor to demonstrate that integrity demands she admit the mistake and apologize. Believe it or

not , in the vast majority of situations, admitting a mistake will increase rather than reduce the level of trust.

Seeking Opportunities

A third myth about mentoring is that it is a responsibility to always seek out new opportunities for special assignments or promotions. Obviously the mentor will keep the best interests of the protégé in mind, but there is a fine line when it comes to advocating too much.

I once had a manager who was the mentor for a female supervisor. At every possible moment he was advocating for moving her ahead in the organization. He totally overplayed his hand and became an annoyance. Ultimately, other senior managers became aware of the ploy and the protégé was actually disadvantaged by all the hype.

Conclusion

The best way to configure a mentoring relationship is to have the mentor always model best behavior for the protégé. A significant part of the equation is knowing when to step in with advice and when it is better to let the protégé learn by experience. Always be sure to debrief each significant action so the protégé understands the logic behind what is going on in the relationship.

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