

# Professional Mentoring

By Matt J. Nelson, FHFMA, CPA

Throughout our lives we learn through a concept called apprenticeship. From birth through adolescence and then through adulthood, family, friends, coworkers, and sometimes, even strangers, guide us in the development of our knowledge of life and how it works. This knowledge is developed through both formal and informal ways and in many ways provides the basis for who we are and what we do.

Historically, mentoring was based on the concept of apprenticeship as depicted in Homer's tale of Mentor and Telemachus. Mentor was the son of Alcumus on Ithaca, and elderly friend of Odysseus. He was charged by the king to watch over his son Telemachus and his palace while he was fighting in the Trojan War. In modern English the tutor's name has become an eponym for a wise, trustworthy counselor or teacher.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this mentor-protégé relationship was developed based upon the more experienced "mentor" providing guidance and direction to the less experienced "apprentice".

Mentoring is a great way to share knowledge, experience, insight and wisdom. By working with a mentor and learning from their experience, the process of learning can be greatly accelerated. A positive mentoring relationship can provide a great boost to both your professional and personal life and can prepare you to take on the role of a mentor thus creating a legacy of leadership for both you and your organization.

So why is mentoring so important in today's healthcare industry? The problem today is really based on the mergers, acquisitions and consolidations that took place during the 90's. The shrinking management levels forced health care executives to provide more and more services with fewer resources. As middle management positions decreased so did the development process of future leaders. Managers were not given the time or opportunity to learn every aspect of their health care organization and were thus left without the necessary skills to take over top positions when they became available. Therefore, the mentoring process is not only a necessary function; it is a function that is critical to the success of you and your organization.

## Misconceptions of Mentoring

There are many ways and methods of mentoring, but the traditional method in corporate management is having a more experienced executive provide support and feedback to a younger executive. One of the problems in health care is a lack of senior executives that have the time to dedicate a portion of their busy schedule to a mentoring relationship. This is but one of many misconceptions that may keep senior executives from developing a meaningful, fulfilling relationship. Some of the false ideas of mentoring are exposed in the following section.

- **Mentoring just takes too much time.** In reality, only a few hours per week are needed to have a successful mentoring relationship. Also, time limits are usually placed on the process (6-9 months is common) so that there is a definite beginning and end.
- **You have to be really intelligent and outgoing to be a mentor.** The only requirement to be in a mentoring relationship is desire. Even though the main idea of a mentoring relationship is the transfer of knowledge and wisdom from the older, wiser person to the younger, less experienced protégé, usually, both learn something from each other.
- **Mentoring can only be done one on one.** Many times other “senior” individuals can be brought into the relationship so that the protégé is exposed to many different experiences and backgrounds, thereby expanding their knowledge and increasing the learning process.
- **You have to be trained to be a mentor.** There is really no real formal training necessary to be a mentor. It does help to have certain key attitudes and behaviors, but desire to help others is the only true key to mentoring.

### **Being a Mentor: How to Initiate and Maintain an Effective Mentoring Relationship**

*“Tell me and I may forget.  
Show me and I may remember.  
Involve me and I will understand.”  
Chinese Proverb*

Mentoring is about assisting someone identify for themselves their strengths and weaknesses and empowering them to be continually refined. When they reach the point that they can internalize the concepts being taught, then they will reach a level of continuous improvement.

There are no hard and fast rules for a mentoring relationship. Formal mentoring is largely the art of making the most of the situation you are in. The goal for the mentor should be the empowerment of the mentee by developing his or her abilities. To achieve that goal the mentor must make sure that the relationship has structure and meaning. The following will assist the mentor in achieving that goal.

- **Outline a plan of action.** Before every meeting make an outline of what you want to accomplish during that meeting. This action plan should be flexible, but in enough detail to keep the meeting meaningful.
- **Always try to take the first step.** Taking the initiative allows you to plan the meeting time when it is best for you. Then make sure that you always keep that time on your calendar and only change the meeting if a true emergency arises.
- **Set clear guidelines for the meeting.** Setting ground rules for the meeting is very important. There may be some areas that should be off limits in discussing and they should be clearly stated at the outset.

- **Ask reflective questions.** Reflective questioning helps the mentor in guiding communication for insightful learning by the mentee. It provides for a non-threatening interchange to take place where the mentor can impart knowledge and experience in a way that the mentee can grasp.
- **Listen to and understand the mentee.** Learn to understand who the mentee really is and what motivates their thinking and behavior. This will help you to provide the support needed to promote both personal and professional growth. Do this through active listening by allowing the mentee to think aloud and expand on initial thoughts.
- **Review at the end of each meeting.** Review the action plan established for the meeting and make sure that you are on track. Make changes to the action plan as necessary and agree on the next meeting date.
- **Celebrate!** Mentoring should be fun and enjoyable. It is a time to build relationships, relax from the tensions of the day, and watch your protégé build upon their skills and knowledge. What could be more rewarding!

### **Being a Mentee: Making Your Mentoring Relationship Meaningful**

Some of my most rewarding experiences have been when I was a mentee (although I didn't know that was a word at the time!). I felt honored that the person I looked up to for many years would take the time and make the commitment to help me. Therefore, I made sure that I was prepared and didn't waste his time even in the first meeting. Since then, I have researched a tremendous amount of information about being a mentee and provide the following suggestions.

- **Write down what you want out of the relationship.** Always keep the end in mind when you are starting out a mentoring relationship. The best way is to define what you are seeking and what to get out of the meetings. By being able to get this down on paper, you are assisting the mentor in understanding what it is you want and keeping your expectations and the mentor's deliverables in balance.
- **Set clear boundaries for the relationship.** This will include how often and where you meet, what interaction should take place and what can and cannot be discussed. Also, clear rules need to be established for confidentiality. Make sure that you discuss what you want to get out of the relationship and that there both of you have adequate time to accomplish those goals.
- **Be prepared and do your homework.** Be prepared before every meeting. Make sure that you have read any suggested materials, studied your notes from previous meetings and completed assignments. Also stay on schedule with the initial action plan (and its modifications).
- **Answer reflective questions and ask insightful questions.** Look at the rationale for questions being asked and think how your answers may shape your attitudes and behaviors. Also, keep asking questions!
- **Keep a journal.** Just the practice of writing down what you have learned in each session greatly increases the ability to remember what was said.
- **Show your gratification.** Do whatever it takes to make sure that your mentor knows that you appreciate the time and energy they have spent on you.

- **Use what you learn.** One of the best ways to show your gratification to your mentor is to immediately begin using what you have learned in your meetings. This will reinforce what you know and help you to more quickly meet your goals.
- **Celebrate!**

### **Summary**

The future of healthcare financial leadership is in your hands. You should seriously consider becoming a mentor and thereby ensure that you will have a measurable, lasting impact on tomorrow's healthcare financial leaders.

Citations:

<sup>1</sup> "Mentor." Encyclopedia Mythica.

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/m/mentor.html>

[Accessed September 01st, 2003.]