

The Model for Great Mentoring

Marshall Goldsmith - 1/16/14

Mentoring is an honour. Except for love, there is no greater gift one can give another than the gift of growth.

If the aim of mentoring is to nurture “mastering” — through a mentoring partnership focused on learner discovery and independence, in a climate that reduces boundaries and encourages risk — what are the steps needed to reach that aim?

Great mentoring requires four core competencies which form the sequential steps in the mentoring process. All four have been selected for their ability to blend effectively. The first letters of these competencies spell the word “SAGE” — a helpful mnemonic. They are: surrendering — leveling the learning field; accepting — creating a safe haven for risk taking; gifting — the core contributions of the mentor; and extending — nurturing protege independence.

Surrendering: Most leaders are socially conditioned to drive the process of learning, but great mentors surrender to it. Driving the process tends to cause resistance, it minimizes the potential for serendipitous growth and it tilts the focus from competence to control.

If there is one word many leaders hate, it is “surrender.” However, by surrender we don't mean losing but instead yielding to a flow greater than either player in the process. The dictionary defines surrender as “to yield possession of.” Mentors who attempt to hold, own or control the process deprive their proteges of the freedom needed to foster discovery.

Surrendering is the process of leveling the learning field. Most mentoring relationships begin with mentor and protege in unequal power positions — boss to subordinate, master to novice or teacher to student. The risk is that power creates anxiety and anxiety minimizes risk taking — an ingredient required for growth. Surrendering encompasses all the actions the mentor takes to pull power and authority out of the mentoring relationship so the protege's anxiety is lowered and courage is heightened.

Accepting: Accepting is the act of inclusion. Acceptance is what renowned psychologist Carl Rogers labeled “unconditional positive regard.” Most managers are taught to focus on exclusion. Exclusion is associated with preferential treatment, presumption, arrogance and insolence — all growth killers. The verb “accept,” however, implies ridding oneself of bias, preconceived judgments and human labeling. Accepting is embracing, rather than evaluating or judging.