

# The Art of Mentoring

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Not all mentors are managers, but most effective managers act as mentors.



Panning for gold is a lot like mentoring.

It is not always easy. Panning for gold works like this. First, you put a double handful of sand in a heavy-gauge steel shallow pan and dip it in the water, filling it half full. You gently move the pan back and forth and let small amounts of yellow sand wash over the side.

The objective is to let the black sand sink to the bottom of the gold pan. But impatience or strong-arming the way the pan is shaken means the black sand escapes over the side along with the yellow sand. Once only black sand is left in the pan, you are rewarded with flecks of gold. The gold resides among the black sand.

Mentoring can be like panning for gold among the sand. Insight is generally not lying on top ready to be found and polished. If it were easy pickings, the help of a mentor would be unnecessary. It lies beneath the obvious and ordinary. It is lodged in the dark sands of irrational beliefs, myths, fears, prejudices and biases. It lurks under untested hunches, ill-prepared starts and unfortunate mistakes.

Helping the protege extract insight takes patience and persistence. It cannot be rushed or strong-armed with the force of the mentor. It must be discovered by the protege with the mentor's guidance.

As mentor, you are in charge of getting the protege to properly shake the pan. You help the protege learn to recognize the treasures of insight and understanding and not be seduced by "fool's gold" — achieved by rote and temporarily retained only "until the exam is over." The way you help the protege handle the dark sand is central to the acquisition of wisdom. That is the essence of mentoring with a partnership philosophy.

The concept of a mentor has had a checkered path in the world of work. The typical mental image has been that of a seasoned corporate sage conversing with a naive young recruit. The conversation would have been laced with informal rules, closely guarded secrets, and "I remember back in '77 ..." stories of daredevil heroics and too-close-to-call tactics. Work-based mentoring has had an almost heady, academic sound, reserved for workers in white collars whose fathers advised, "Get to know ol' Charlie."

In recent years the term mentor became connected less with privilege and more with affirmative action. An organization viewed as a part of its responsibility enabling minority employees through a mentor to expedite their route through glass ceilings, beyond old-boy networks and the private winks formerly reserved for WASP males. Such mentoring sponsors sometimes salved the consciences of those who bravely talked goodness but became squeamish if expected to spearhead courageous acts. These mentoring programs sounded contemporary, and some were of great service; many were just lip service.

But when the package is unwrapped and the politically correct is scraped away, what's left? A mentor is defined in the dictionary as "a wise, trusted adviser ... a teacher or coach." Such a simple definition communicates a plain-vanilla context. Mentoring is that part of a leader's role that has learning as its primary outcome. Bottom line, a mentor is simply someone who helps someone else learn something that would have otherwise been learned less well, more slowly or not at all. Notice the power-free nature of this definition; mentors are not power figures.

The traditional use of the word "mentor" denotes a person outside one's usual chain of command — from the junior's point of view, someone who "can help me understand the informal system and offer guidance on how to be successful in this crazy organization."

Good leaders do a lot of things in the organizations they inhabit. They communicate a clear vision and articulate a precise direction. They provide performance feedback, inspire and encourage, and, when necessary, discipline. They also mentor. Once more, mentoring is that part of a leader's role that has growth as its primary outcome.