

# Be a Mentor

*By Myrna Marofsky*

Copyright © 2007-2008 Linkage. All rights reserved.

**Linkage**  
Unleash your full potential.

I was in the restroom of a very nice restaurant and when I shut the stall door and looked up there was an advertisement that read, "Be a mentor and make a difference in someone's life." Having written a book on mentoring "Getting Started with Mentoring" and conducted many related workshops, I laughed out loud. I thought, "How commonplace the phrase 'be a mentor' has become." Then, on a more serious note, I thought, "Are we so desperate to find role models that we need to advertise for them in the bathroom?"

Must we really go to these extremes? I firmly believe that everyone can be a mentor for someone. In fact, I think many of you already are; you just don't have the official card.

The dictionary defines a mentor as someone, usually older and more experienced, who provides advice and support to a younger, less experienced person.

My definition is a bit different. I believe a mentor is someone who is willing to share his or her knowledge and experience in a way that supports another person's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth and development. Some people serve in this role without even knowing it. It's just who they are. In other cases, it's part of their cultural upbringing. And, sometimes, mentoring occurs in a passing interaction with someone in need of help, advice, or just a sympathetic ear.

The one thing all great mentors have in common, whether they know it or not, is that they have a learning focus. Yes, learning focus, not teaching. That means that they are there to help others in need of wisdom and guidance to learn. They act as mentors because they are tuned into the other person's emotional and intellectual needs that indicate this person is ready to learn—they recognize a teachable moment. Then, through their personal relationship, mentors focus on their protégé, not as an expert but as someone who is genuinely interested in learning about the other's experience. In this way, whatever personal or career support the protégé needs will be received in a useful way. Can you hear how that differs from a fix it or teaching approach, which usually starts out, "Well, here is what you should do," or "I had that same situation myself and here is how I..." A learning focus sounds like this, "What was that like for you?" or "What's getting in your way?" or "I had a similar experience that may provide some insight..."

In our orientation sessions for corporate mentoring programs we ask protégés to write a 75-word "Help wanted" ad for a mentor. The ad begins, "Wanted: A mentor who..." Because ProGroup's workplace mentoring programs are most often focused on mentoring across differences, the ad descriptions we see are interesting and sometimes surprising. You might think that a newly hired black female or a young Latino male would want someone from a similar background or culture as a mentor. But that's not what they are saying. Across the board, protégés are most interested in a learning partnership with someone who is a good listener and will problem-solve with them, as well as someone who is willing to share their career successes, failures, near misses, and lucky breaks, and to talk about the lessons learned. They want someone who is ready to have meaningful conversations, and, most importantly, someone who will recognize that they may be struggling because they just don't know the organization's unwritten rules for success—and then they want mentors to be willing to share those rules. Protégés want someone who will help them navigate their career through the corporate culture.

When the mentoring pairs come together and share their work, the conversation gets deep very quickly. Protégés find themselves explaining the reasoning behind the qualities they want in their desired mentor and mentors talk about what they bring to the relationship. From the beginning, mentors understand that they play a key role. At this point, they are ready for a two-way learning partnership.

I mention this activity because today, we find many structured, diversity-related mentoring programs established in organizations as a means of retaining talent from diverse backgrounds.

Some work; however, many do not. Truly great mentors are hard to uncover. Some may be reluctant to sign up because they don't know what they have to offer; others may wonder what they will get out of the time they put into the program. In many organizations, the same people are repeatedly tapped to be mentors. If they don't see anything that benefits them, they become tired of giving, and the program fizzles out, often with frustrated participants on both sides.

Much mentoring angst will be alleviated if mentors understand that they will be part of a learning partnership where two-way conversations yield growth for mentors, as well as protégés. In a diversity context, it takes a little longer to build a trusting relationship, but when both parties indicate that they are trustworthy and establish an honest relationship, we have seen incredible results. Conversations "get real" around the delicate issues of race, gender, generations, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. That's when the learning is rich and fascinating.

So the next time you see a request to "be a mentor," no matter where that may be, consider that everyone can be a mentor to someone, in a formal way or not, for a brief time, or even a lifetime, if a learning focus is truly understood and consistently practiced.

# Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

**Linkage**  
**Burlington, MA**  
781.402.5555  
info@linkageinc.com