The Power of Principled, Collaborative Relationships

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Abstract

Mentoring relationships are essential to the long-term success of new teachers. Successful mentoring relationships must focus on personal growth and development of both mentor and mentee within the context of a servant-leadership model. Rewarding and beneficial mentorships are the result of careful planning from the beginning, with open discussions about the purpose and frequency of meetings, goals for the relationship, periodic assessments of the effectiveness of the relationship, and plans to implement adjustments when needed.

Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Jimmy Durante, one of the great entertainers of a generation ago, witnessed a wonderful illustration of collaborative relationships. When he received an invitation to perform in a show for World War II veterans, his schedule was very busy and he could afford only a few minutes. He was willing to perform a short monologue if he could leave immediately for his next engagement, and the show's director happily agreed. At the show, Jimmy’s short monologue drew tremendous applause that grew louder and louder as he extended his routine. After he had been on stage fifteen, twenty, then thirty minutes, he took a final bow and left the stage.

Backstage, someone stopped him and said, "I thought you had to go after a few minutes. What happened?" Jimmy answered, "I did have to go, but I can show you the reason I stayed. You can see for yourself if you'll look down on the front row" (Hansel, 1987, pp. 104-105). In the front row were two men, each of whom had lost an arm in the war. One had lost his right arm and the other had lost his left. They discovered that by working together, they were able to clap, and they did it loudly and cheerfully.

Just like the two veterans, all of us have deficiencies or areas of inadequacies that we may not even recognize. A healthy principle-centered mentorship can help both
mentors and mentees develop confidence in our abilities, our relationships with others, and ultimately our teaching skills.

**Principle Centered Mentorship**

In his book *Principle-Centered Leadership*, Stephen Covey encourages readers to utilize the central principles of *security, guidance, wisdom, and power* as the core in their personal and professional lives. He claims that the development of these four traits is dependent upon the quality of relationships with other people. Therefore, Covey believes that effective mentor-mentee relationships must be based on meaningful conversation rather than simple social interaction, noting that more thoughtfully structured communication can pay great dividends for the both the mentor and mentee.

Effective *Principle-Centered Mentorship*:

1. **Focuses on the growth and needs of the mentee**
   From the beginning, Covey insists that mentor relationships must be focused on developing the mentee rather than on networking or making social connections. In other words, successful mentor relationships require a sense of servanthood from both parties.

2. **Provides guidance on the road of life**
   Covey writes that the role of the mentor is to guide the mentee on a journey towards personal and professional excellence, and that journey will be filled with potential pitfalls. The unique perspective a mentor can offer from having been there and done that can provide tremendous benefits, helping the mentee avoid unnecessary strains and setbacks along the way. Rather than removing obstacles for the path, effective mentors simply enable mentees to navigate around obstacles with a higher degree of success.

3. **Represents an active partnership**
According to Covey, one of the key components to a successful mentorship is activation. He explains that a true partnership cannot develop in a passive environment, characterized by avoiding conflict at all costs. He adds that healthy professional relationships are built on trust and honesty, providing a safe environment in which mentors and mentees can be challenged to improve both professionally and personally. Accordingly, mentees must learn to initiate discussions, articulate questions, and contribute their knowledge, proactively setting the overall direction of the mentoring relationship.

4. Requires authenticity

Covey states that professional relationships often begin as a form of networking, and such relationships tend to remain shallow at best. For example, educators may reach out to others when applying for a new position, seeking a strong recommendation or professional vote of confidence. In this case, the arguably selfish goal of networking would probably not be a strong basis for a mentor relationship. Alternatively, a more authentic basis for mentorship would revolve around discussions of personal character, integrity, and accountability. The mentee would be challenged to reflect upon what is being done as well as why it is being done.

5. Remains fluid in nature

Although formal mentorship networks exist, Covey suggests they are not always the right fit for everyone. He explains that clearly defined parameters for mentor/mentee relationship are often useful in the initial stages of a mentorship, but effective relationships must ultimately remain fluid. Covey reports that the most successful mentorships offer flexibility for the direction of conversation, engendering a sense of openness that is needed for the mentorship to produce meaningful results.

6. Requires an active system of accountability

Consistent with Socrates’ belief that “The life which is unexamined is not worth living” (as quoted by Plato, Morrison-Beck, 1980, p. 83), Covey ranks accountability as one of the most significant benefits of authentic mentoring relationships. Through
a mentor relationship, the motives behind our vision, determination, and priorities for achieving excellence in our music classrooms can be challenged, discussed, and refined. In other words, the mentorship provides a safe mechanism through which we can make piercing examinations of our motives and actions, thereby holding ourselves accountable and keeping our hearts and motives pure.

**Objectives and Benefits of the Mentor Relationship**

When building a new mentor relationship, the first priority is to establish some ground rules about the purpose and frequency of meetings. If the mentor and mentee work on the same campus, meetings can be somewhat informal in nature, occurring almost spontaneously. Conversely, meetings may require more deliberate planning and turn out to be more formal in nature when the two parties do not work in the same location. In either case, the key is to plan meetings appropriately so mutual respect is shown for the time invested in the mentorship and meetings are more than simple social interactions.

Second, it is important to discuss goals of the mentoring relationship. As cited by Broder-Singer (2012), Terri Scandura, Dean of the University of Miami Graduate School of Business, says that those involved in mentoring relationships “have higher job satisfaction, increased loyalty and lower turnover, and [mentoring] can provide social support that reduces employee stress” Accordingly, the objective of a mentor relationship should be personal development rather than personal advancement. In addition, Scandura notes that good mentor relationships require like-minded individuals; mentors can offer the protégé a variety of insights and perspectives that match his or her interests and developmental needs. Once the goals of the relationship have been clearly defined, the mentee’s interests and developmental needs will drive the relationship clarifying the mentor responsibilities.

Third, it is essential to evaluate the format, frequency, and value of meetings, making appropriate adjustments when needed. Mentoring can occur in a number of different formats, such as:
• Formally scheduled meetings with predetermined times and topics
• Informal, more organic relationships, occurring when specific needs arise or advice is needed
• Coaching sessions to develop or refine a specific skill set
• Group mentoring, led by an experienced mentor willing to meet on a regular basis, to discuss common trends, problems, and potential solutions in the professional field
• One-time mentoring, for example with presenters at workshops and conventions dealing with a specific problem or situation
• Distance mentoring, providing an objective, third-party perspective to help the mentee make wise decisions when faced with particularly challenging circumstances

By discussing and defining the parameters of the mentoring relationship at the beginning, the mentor and mentee are likely to enjoy productive meetings and meaningful results

**Personal Growth**

Successful mentoring relationships must focus on personal growth and development within the context of a servant-leadership model. In other words, the goal of a mentorship is to develop the mentee, but both parties should want to see the other receive a benefit from the relationship. *Principle-Centered Mentorship* represents a partnership in which both mentor and mentee are willing to make a professional commitment to each other. Such a commitment involves mutual accountability. Each has the right to examine, question, and appraise the other’s professional activities and motivations, requiring vulnerability, teachability, availability, and honesty.

Benefits of mentor/mentee relationships may be limited by hectic schedules and urgent responsibilities, but benefits can be tremendous if the mentor relationship becomes a priority. When both parties commit to a mentorship based on servant-leadership and accountability, the resulting personal growth and professional development can positively
influence not only the mentor and mentee but also everyone within their work environment
References

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