

Successful Mentoring in a Correctional Environment*

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“The greatest gift is a portion of thyself.”

—Emerson

IT BEGAN simply. A few weeks after starting my career as a correctional officer I found myself gravitating toward a fellow officer with about 3 years of experience working in the institution. He wore his uniform professionally, handled inmates firmly, was never late for duty, and was always the first or second officer on the scene of an emergency. The officer and I worked the same shifts, usually within the same security posts, and had the same days off. While I frequently went to him with questions and concerns about my new career and its responsibilities, I soon realized that he was “keeping an eye” on me, gently but firmly correcting my missteps (there were many during my probationary year) and shoring up my confidence when I need it. I noticed that when I was confronting an inmate, he seemed to be in the background, watching the interaction, seemingly prepared to step to my aid should the need arise (as it did a number of times).

Throughout the next few months we had an unspoken, yet clearly defined, relationship. He had assumed the responsibility of being my mentor, my first in a new career field. While I had similar relationships while serving in the military (in addition to being a protégé—someone who is mentored—I also had served as a mentor to other service personnel), not until years later did I clearly recognize the importance of such associations. I credit my first mentor for helping me get past my first year in corrections without serious mistakes and for helping me establish a professional work ethic that remained with me at all the correctional facilities to which I later was assigned.

The word “mentor” is ancient. It was first used in *The Odyssey*, written by Homer in 800 B.C. Ulysses, gone to fight in the Trojan Wars, leaves his son Telemachus in the care of his friend Mentor. Mentor becomes the friend, protector, and educator of the boy, guiding him into adulthood. Successful mentors in an organization often perform the same roles—helping the new employee mature and succeed in the organization.

Types of Mentors

While all mentors share the common goal of helping the employee prosper, mentors normally focus on one of two responsibilities: the protégé’s job-specific growth or career enhancement and development.

My first correctional mentor was concerned about my learning the specifics of the role and responsibilities of being an officer—what were the proper techniques to use when interacting with inmates, which inmates were more dangerous or manipulative than the others, what were the culture and values of the staff, institution, and agency. He helped me become part of the organizational culture and create an identity in the correctional environment.

Besides pointing out which staff members were trustworthy and which were not, explaining how to read a correctional roster, and introducing me to fellow officers in the correctional services department, he also helped me establish the foundations that led to me becoming an effective correctional officer. His mentoring did not replace formal training. It supplemented the topics taught with “real world” application. He discussed subjects not normally taught in the classroom.

After about 10 years in corrections, I found my second mentor (rather, he found me), a highly placed member of the correctional agency who involved himself in helping me understand and achieve the second mentoring responsibility—career enhancement and development. Even now, after almost 20 years in corrections and dozens of supervisors and managers, I still consider my second mentor (now retired) to be the finest manager and leader I ever worked with. A warden, this individual projected all of the traits (discussed later in this article) that make a successful mentor and leader.

My protégé/mentor relationship with this individual started the same way as the first—simply. One day I was working for him as a department head, and a few months later a relationship had been forged that led him to mentor me on career development issues. He coached me on various aspects of my job, served as a confidant when I lost patience with certain aspects of

*Opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the U.S. Department of Justice.

the organization, discussed the political realities of operating a maximum security facility, opened doors for me to help my career advancement, and served as a role model whom I deeply respected and whom I knew possessed integrity and trustworthiness in a sometimes capricious environment.

The difference between my two mentors was significant—they were miles apart in status in the organization, pay grade, length of service, and experience. They also looked at organizational philosophies differently. However, they had many of the traits commonly defined as necessary for being a successful mentor. And these two relationships also had one very significant thing in common—both of them came about informally.

Choosing a Mentor—Formally or Informally

Informal relationships are the more natural mentoring process. In the informal process, usually a protégé seeks out a mentor through the use of a set of conditions established by the seeker. The protégé uses his or her perceptions of a person's trustworthiness and comparability with the protégé himself or herself to decide if the person would be an appropriate mentor. If the mentor/protégé relationship forms, it is normally an unofficial relationship between a junior and a more senior employee who will work together to achieve a specific purpose set by the protégé, such as learning technical skills or enhancing the protégé's career.

A recent *New York Times* article¹ cited a 2-year study by the Center for Workforce Development that indicated that during a typical workweek, "more than 70 percent of worksite training took place informally, with employees sharing information with one another." The study went on to state that

informal learning initiatives have their roots in the concepts of teaming, which many companies adopted more than a decade ago, and more recently, of mentoring. In the team approach, management sets the goals and workers decide the membership of each team and its methods. Informal learning goes a step further by leaving it to the workers to teach and set goals themselves, handing over much more responsibility for their own training.

However, a formal mentoring process can be successful *if managed and structured correctly*. While it is difficult (some would say near impossible) for an organization artificially to "match up" a successful protégé and mentor pair, the key benefit to the organization is that the organization plays a role in determining what values, norms, cultural anchors, and traditions are passed on from one organizational generation to another (which may or may not be a good thing).

Formal mentoring involves a great deal of time establishing certain career objectives, goals, and steps and completing management-generated paperwork and documentation. The "natural" interaction between

two persons is replaced by mechanical processes. Informal processes require a certain high degree of trust between the two individuals, which happens naturally over a period of time. The formal process is created with set time frames and schedules. If it is not structured properly, employees will see it as just another impotent "feel good" management program. An organization advertising a mentoring program to its employees must have a comprehensive strategy in place to address the needs of both mentors and protégés and not just create a paper project of memoranda and reports.

While this author believes that in most organizational settings informally establishing a mentoring relationship is better for all concerned than the mechanical process of a formal approach, in either case the selection of any protégé and mentor must be based on genuine interest, preference of participants, and a sense of partnership and mission. Many of the same traits to be discussed are found in both informal and formal mentoring relationships; however, the remainder of this article will focus on the methods and processes necessary for an organization to establish a successful formal management mentoring program.

Formal mentoring programs cannot and must not replace standard training programs. As Murray noted,²

Some organizations look to mentoring as a way to avoid the formidable task of developing unskilled managers and supervisors. This solution is short-sighted at best and creates monstrous problems because one then has to work around the managers who lack basic people skills.

Key elements for a successful formal mentoring program can best be described as the linkage between three organizational elements—management responsibilities, the mentor's interest and skills, and the protégé's interest and ability to learn. Each will be discussed in turn.

Management Responsibilities

When management establishes a formal mentoring program, it should do so for the right reasons. Management must provide necessary resources for the program to succeed. Kram³ notes the following as organizational obstacles to a mentoring program:

1. "A reward system that emphasizes bottom-line results and does not also place a high priority on human resource development objectives creates conditions that discourage mentoring."

When a warden or agency head considers only the technical ability of staff and places little emphasis on developing staff resources, mentoring and coaching become distractions from the job rather than enhancements to it. Where advancement through the ranks only is viewed from a technical expertise or political

view rather than from a management development perception, mentoring programs will fail. In this light, mentors who fail to receive recognition and rewards themselves for their skills, abilities, and interest in a mentoring program will view their role of working with protégés as of no value. Mentoring in this environment will fail.

2. “The design of work can interfere with building relationships that provide mentoring functions by minimizing opportunities for interaction between individuals.”

This is normally not a problem if time is scheduled for mentor/protégé meetings. Correctional work is not isolated to the extent that employees have little contact with their coworkers—on the contrary, the work of corrections involves significant team interaction. However, at institutions and correctional agencies where staff turnover is high, little time is scheduled for mentoring responsibilities, or the mentor is of such seniority that the protégé has difficulty scheduling meetings, the mentoring program carries significant burdens.

3. “Performance Management Systems can encourage or damage mentoring programs.”

Evaluation systems, if not geared toward building human resources and if focused only on technical responsibilities, will create a system that hampers mentoring programs. Performance evaluation systems should concentrate on performance feedback, career planning and development, and employee needs. As a management tool, the right evaluation system can be used in conjunction with any formal mentoring program.

4. “The culture of an organization—values, informal rules, rituals, and behavior of the leadership—can make mentoring useless or damaging to a protégé.”

Any “sink or swim” management philosophy, where new employees are tossed out into the correctional environment with little or no management support, is in direct conflict with mentoring responsibilities. In a correctional environment, such a philosophy is a disaster waiting to happen. Additionally, agencies that use closed communication systems, or foster mistrust between employees and management, or reward leaders who are poor role models, untrustworthy, dishonest, or ineffectual will have an inferior environment for mentoring.

5. “An individual’s assumptions, attitude, and skill level can interfere with developing mentoring relationships.”

Protégés must trust management and mentors for the process to work. A protégé who distrusts the leadership of the agency, questions the motives of the mentor, or challenges the basic philosophical foundations on which the organization is built will not be a good candidate for a mentoring program. Also, mentors who are cynical, angry at the organization, at odds with the mission of the organization, or see no advantage to a formal mentoring process will create an obstacle in the program that will set the protégé and the program up for failure.

The Mentor’s Responsibilities

Mentors often are described as sponsors, coaches, teachers, guides, counselors, and role models. They are that and more. Depending on the employees (new worker, mid- to late-year careerist), mentors often do many of the following:

- Provide information on the mission, goals, philosophies, and behaviors of the department, division, institution, and agency (for the new employee);
- Help teach the technical responsibilities of the position (for the new employee);
- Provide feedback on the protégé’s performance (for the new or mid-career employee);
- Provide information on matters of trust and integrity concerning persons with whom the protégé will be interacting (for the new or mid-career employee);
- Coach (for the new or mid-career employee);
- Provide a role model for the protégé to observe (for the new employee);
- Provide introduction to upper-echelon employees in the organization (for the mid-career employee);
- Make recommendations to higher-level staff concerning career advancement for the protégé (for the mid-career employee); and
- Serve as a confidential colleague (for the new or mid-career employee).

The Mentor’s Traits

A mentor should have most of the following characteristics:

- Interest in the protégé
- Sensitivity and understanding of the protégé’s needs and development

- An open, direct, and genuine personality
- Excellent interpersonal communication skills
- Time to be available for the protégé regularly
- A commitment to the employee and the agency
- Ability to maintain confidentiality
- Honesty
- Responsiveness
- Objective and clear thinking
- Awareness of the political ebb and flow of the organization
- Access to organizational networks

A mentor carries a heavy responsibility and must approach the commitment to act as a mentor in a skillful, thoughtful manner. Most of the items on the above list are based on common sense and require little explanation. However, some need to be discussed in greater detail:

Time. If the mentor/protégé relationship fails, it is likely that it did so because the mentor or protégé was not dedicated to the relationship and gave insufficient time to it. Effectiveness of the relationship correlates directly to the protégé's access to the mentor. Meeting for 20 minutes once a month is not mentoring. Passing each other in a hallway and saying, "Hello, how are you?" is not mentoring. Calling the protégé 5 minutes before the end of the work week to inquire how the week went is not mentoring.

Mentoring requires an energetic, fluid, and sincere interaction between participants. Mentors must avail themselves to protégés regularly and frequently. The point of the mentoring relationship should not be on filling out forms required by the organization to gauge how wonderful the program is (if the focus is on record-keeping, the mentoring program is likely not going to be wonderful), but on helping achieve the goals that benefit the protégé, the mentor, and the organization.

Confidentiality. The protégé must be able to trust the mentor if the relationship is to succeed. If the protégé is experiencing difficulties with a current supervisor, the protégé should feel comfortable discussing the issue with the mentor without worrying that the information will be carried back to the supervisor.

In a March 1998 survey conducted by Accountemps, executives from the nation's 1,000 largest companies were asked what was the single greatest benefit of having a mentor. Sixty-four percent said that serving as a confidant and advisor was. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to serve a protégé as a confidant without the necessary trust and confidentiality that follow along with that relationship.

Objective/Clear Thinking. Mentors often must play the "devil's advocate" to help the protégé make the most effective decisions. Mentors must look at the organizational environment realistically and not feed a protégé's unreasonable expectations. When a protégé is caught up in an organizational problem and operating on emotion rather than clear thought, the mentor should be in the position to bring the protégé back on track.

Awareness of the Organization's Political Environment. The mentor must understand the political ebb and flow of the organization to better serve the protégé. Who is in, who is out, what are the current philosophies of top management, and where the social/political/ethical land mines lie are all topics of concern to the protégé. Such topics help protégés in their continuing culturization into organization.

Access to Organizational Networks. Mentors help protégés move up in the organization by introducing them to key players, discussing their abilities with other managers, and connecting them to inter-organizational communication networks. While program descriptions often state that mentors are not to assist protégés in job promotional opportunities, the reality is that, depending on the mentor, protégé, and situation, that is exactly what the mentor's (and protégé's) goal is.

The Protégé's Traits

A successful mentoring program also hinges upon the attitude, learning ability, and values of the protégé. These traits can best be described as:

- Is committed to the organization;
- Is willing to learn, strive, and succeed;
- Has good interpersonal communication skills and a positive attitude;
- Is ambitious and ethical;
- Is an active learner, receptive to feedback and coaching;
- Has an investment in his or her organization and career and is willing to assume responsibility for his or her own career advancement; and
- Is focused and highly motivated.

As previously noted, protégés can be either at the entry level or highly experienced in their career. In the formal process, protégés must identify what goals and outcomes they wish to pursue with mentors—such as career development or promotional achievement.

Link Between Organization, Mentor, and Protégé

The organization must provide an environment in which the following elements of the mentor/protégé relationship occur:

- **Mutual Respect.** The protégé must recognize and respect the knowledge and skills of the mentor. The mentor must recognize the goals of the protégé and respect the protégé's aspirations to increase his or her professional development.
- **Trust.** The protégé and mentor must respect and trust each other. Confidentiality is the cornerstone of this link.
- **Partnership and Camaraderie.** The mentor and protégé are a professional team dedicated to reaching mutually agreed-upon goals. This partnership is reflected in the active work and decisions toward attaining goals, developing strategies and tactics, and networking. The mentor also provides friendship and counsel to the protégé.
- **Communication.** The mentor and protégé must communicate regularly. Meetings, work site visits, and lunch-time chats all play a role in developing and maintaining the relationship. The mentor gives the protégé the opportunity to discuss problems and concerns and set goals at these meetings. The mentor normally provides clear, objective, and analytic guidance.
- **Time.** For the relationship to work, the mentor must make time for the protégé. Meetings may occur in many different forums, but should allow for meaningful, effective, and purposeful communication. Organizational leadership must support the time requirements necessary for a successful mentor/protégé relationship.

Ending a Mentor/Protégé Relationship

Mentor/protégé relationships end, either through successful conclusion or through the consequence of a dysfunctional association. As with most mentoring relationships, both of mine came to an end as a result of my moving on in the organization. The protégé typically will "outgrow" the mentor. If the relationship continues, a problematic association may form, what Shea calls "Empty Vessel Mentoring."⁴ Shea describes the mentor believing that he or she still has a fountain of wisdom to pour into the protégé's vessel—but the protégé believes that the vessel is full.

Detaching from the mentor can be accomplished by establishing formal goals, strategies, and objectives early in the relationship. The protégé and mentor

should be able to clearly determine that the protégé is achieving the agreed-upon objectives. When objectives are met, the formal relationship can begin to evolve into a less constrained one. Detaching also can be accomplished by showing growth. The protégé should be able to show career growth and development to the mentor as the learning process and relationship continue to develop. The protégé must be able to show that learning has occurred as a result of the mentor's interaction and start to move away from the relationship when the mentoring process is no longer of significant value.

Not all mentor/protégé relationships are meant to be. Sometimes a bad match is made. Keeping such a relationship alive is not a good idea. A poorly established mentoring relationship can interfere with career goals of both the mentor and the protégé and create organizational problems, morale issues, and resentment. If a mentoring relationship is not working, the protégé or mentor should terminate it as soon as possible using good communication skills and a caring attitude so as not to adversely affect the morale of the individual involved.

Multiple Mentors

One aspect of formal mentoring often overlooked is a multiple mentor program. Such programs involve a number of mentors, usually of different expertise and specialties, who work as a group with one or more protégés. Loeb⁵ discusses this unique idea, noting

Just as you have to manage your own career and be your own CEO, so you have to create your own board of advisors. These multiple mentors should be the people you can trust and turn to—individually—for counsel.

Correctional agencies, with their numerous specialized staff—yet all with a common focus—appear to be an ideal environment for multiple mentoring programs.

Conclusion

Corrections frequently has had difficulty attracting and maintaining a professional workforce. The correctional work environment is not an easy environment to work in or recruit into. Additionally, employees and job applicants are more sophisticated now than in past years. They have a multitude of options to choose from when deciding where to work. Individuals look to organizations for more than just a paycheck. They want to work at agencies that foster the development of human resources and support such growth initiatives as formal and informal mentoring relationships. They want to be treated as individuals, not as cogs in an organizational machine, and they want to have assistance in preparing for career advancement. As Chartrand⁶ pointed out,

“A good job with an average salary can have hidden value if the company offers training, in-house expertise, mentoring programs, links with business schools, and a flexible attitude toward employees changing departments to earn broad experience.”

Correctional agencies can prepare their staff for greater responsibilities, utilize the skills and knowledge of experienced staff, and create a team-building enterprise through the formation and support of a well-run, properly supported mentoring program. When considering establishing or supporting a mentoring program, or becoming a mentor, the words of Robert Louis Stevenson offer guidance: “We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend.”

NOTES

¹Susan J. Wells, “Forget the Formal Training. Try Chatting at the Water Cooler,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1998.

²Margo Murray, *Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991.

³Kathy Kram, *Mentoring at Work*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988.

⁴Gordon Shea, *Mentoring: Helping Employees Reach Their Full Potential*. New York: American Management Association, 1994.

⁵Marshall Loeb, “The New Mentoring,” *Fortune*, November 27, 1995.

⁶Sabra Chartrand, “There’s More Than Money to a Good Job,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1996.