

CHAPTER 3

One-on-One, Across the Table

Should you wait for an invitation to the mentoring party? Absolutely not! Be alert for mentoring opportunities with obvious talent. Seize the day! You don't have to wait to be asked...

Once, during my Waffle House career, a talented young restaurant manager asked me, "When is someone going to start developing me?"

I told him, "We're going to begin right now. I'd like a copy of it later, but for the time being, please give me an idea of your self-development plan."

He looked at me with that "deer-in-the-headlights" blank stare.

I said, "You don't have a self-development plan, do you?"

He answered, "No, sir, I don't."

I asked him how he could expect others to invest time in his development if he was not willing to do so himself. I told him, "No

one knows your strengths and weaknesses better than you do. If you are honest with yourself, you have the best chance of maximizing your strengths and shoring up your weaknesses.”

My new mentee and I then worked together to build his own personal self-development plan. This exercise is critical to anyone’s personal improvement for two reasons. First, the act of creating a list of strengths and weaknesses is self-revealing and creates a sense of great self-awareness. Beyond that, the plan is a necessary tool for daily improvement in the life of a seriously engaged mentee.

I was careful to not allow this young man to cheat on the “weaknesses” portion of his plan by saying things like, “I try too hard,” or, “I’m too nice to other people.” Obviously, these are not real weaknesses. They are self-serving softballs that are thrown out when the mentee does not want to look deep for areas that really need improvement.

By the way, this was the first of many, many conversations I had with this young man throughout his Waffle House career. He listened, worked hard, and went on to become a senior player in Waffle House operations.

The importance of a self-development plan is not necessarily intuitive. Sometimes even a rising star with great potential requires an introduction to that need and a push in that direction.

A Powerful Starting Point for Self-Improvement (an Assignment for the Mentee)

I like lists and exercises. I think they help organize the content of a person’s life and help set a positive direction. There are three exercises I find tremendously useful in helping a mentee to sort things out and identify the right paths to take. First would be a candid look at the mentee’s strengths and weaknesses. Second is

a solid plan for self-improvement. Finally, a “personal reality check” helps identify what the mentee feels is really important in his or her life.

The first exercise is where it all starts: a candid, straightforward evaluation of what the mentee is good at and what he or she is not so good at. This is where they “get real” about their strengths and weaknesses. This is the mentee’s inventory of abilities and proficiencies that are there to be maximized and also the shortcomings, flaws, and deficits that need to be shored up.

I think a great way to encourage your mentee to get started with this honest self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses is to follow a dialog that sounds like this:

“The first step to self-improvement and personal success is coming to grips with what we are good at and what we need to work on. Here is a really good way for you to do that. First, sit down by yourself in a quiet space with pen and paper. Draw a line down the middle of the paper. Label the left and right sides of the line (appropriately), STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES. Then just let your thoughts flow on to the paper, what you believe you are good at and where you feel the need for improvement or where you could use some help.

“Now, put the paper in the drawer overnight and look at it the next day. New thoughts and ideas will come to mind, and you can add them to the list. An honest list of strengths and weaknesses is best done in a few sittings, eventually involving the input of people you trust to be frank with you.

“If you have a trusted friend or colleague who will be candid with you, discuss with them the list you have developed and request their opinion about the accuracy of your personal assessment. Then ask for honest insights on what you should add to either side of the list. Absolute honesty and candor is critical here, because

this list drives the second important exercise: your self-development plan.”

Next, it’s important for you, as the mentor, to point out that once a person has developed a solid evaluation of their “assets and liabilities”—that is, what they have to offer and what could hold them back—it’s time to go to work. Just having the list won’t accomplish anything. That person must put together a self-development plan and work hard to acquire the resources and skills to maximize those strengths and shore up the weaknesses. These resources can take many forms, such as books and articles, educational classes, skill-development through personal trial and error, or good advice from respected and more informed or more experienced individuals.

Making progress on even a small self-development list of strengths and (especially) weaknesses can be challenging, even frustrating. So, when I mentor someone regarding their self-development plan, I say, “Don’t try to eat the whole elephant at once. Take it one bite at a time. Pick the one strength and one weakness that interest you the most and go to work on them first. Feel good about your progress with those before you act on the others.”

Those two exercises can be demanding for the mentee, but what he or she ends up with is a critical guide to self-improvement and success.

The third essential assignment for the mentee is a “personal reality check.” This exercise is invaluable for anyone when sorting out options and making high-impact decisions. The “personal reality check” exercise is discussed at length in a future chapter.

There Is No Such Thing as “One-Size-Fits-All” Mentoring

Mentoring is not an “off-the-rack” solution. It’s not about sitting across the table with a small black box containing the secret of a

successful life, ready to share that same valuable message over and over with every mentee. It's not like a routine assignment given by the Economics 101 college professor who stands in his classroom as each wave of sophomore students rolls through to learn the same thing: the difference between microeconomics and macroeconomics.

Successful mentoring is a carefully tailored approach. The mentor evaluates each mentee based upon their particular merits, determining apparent deficits and successfully filling in the gaps, and matching unique, individual needs with appropriate solutions.

Clearly then, the first step in mentoring is *not* to begin handing out advice and dispensing wisdom! The first job (and greatest challenge) of a good mentor is to size up the mentee. It is to assess what that mentor is working with and to evaluate the mentee in terms of what they say they want versus the reality of what is evident they actually need.

It is equally important to evaluate the apparent current potential of the person with whom you are working. You may think it a bit harsh, but I mentally give my new mentee a numerical 1-10 overall benchmark grade where 5 is the average talent level I see in the college or work environment. This is strictly subjective and not to be shared. It gives me a baseline "reality check" on what I'm working with. Some mentors would rather turn a 4 into a 6 (salvation). Others, including me, are more inclined to make a 10 out of a 6 or 7 (construction). Both pursuits are a noble calling.

Corporate chief officers (CEOs, COOs, CMOs, CIOs, CTOs, et al.) are usually more interested in expanding the talents of higher-capacity individuals and replacing, rather than marginally improving, those who are of lower capacity. If you are starting an executive mentoring program, stay tuned. Sherry will address this topic in more depth later on in this book.

The First Conversation: Sizing Up the Mentee

The “getting-to-know-you” stage of mentoring is best done face-to-face in a casual setting. Virtual works but not as well as a live conversation where you can get a sense of energy and body language. Over lunch or a cup of coffee, take the time to explore the mentee’s wants, needs, and potential. This is the point where you decide if the “fit” is right between the two of you and whether the mentee is best helped by you or someone else.

The more you know about a mentee, the better equipped you are to understand his or her motivation and real needs. Background information helps you understand how the mentee arrived to you at this point in time and what they bring to the party. Their current activities and pastimes help you connect through mutual interests, and the mentee’s plans for the future are very telling of his or her self-appraisal regarding reach and grasp.

If your mentee has a high school GED, no interests outside of PlayStation gaming, and thinks the next step is to be the CEO of Microsoft...that tells you something. If they have a highly technical, educational background with few interests outside the IT world and they want to be the world’s best code writer, you can waste a lot of time trying to lead them toward that open sales manager’s position.

So, through casual conversation and some “icebreaker” questions, it is important to evaluate the mentee’s:

- Social skills
- Background/history: family, education, sports, clubs
- Work history
- Technical ability: areas of expertise, certifications, awards
- Civic activity
- Hobbies

- Desires and direction
- Energy and drive (part of the “Eight Great Social Tells” mentioned later)

All that said, here are some good icebreaker questions to ask in the first meeting:

- Where are you from, originally? Where did you grow up?
- Tell me about your family: mom, dad, brothers, and sisters.
- What do/did you like/dislike in high school/college/your last job/this job?
- Do you like what you’re doing? What do you absolutely want to achieve/accomplish in the next three years?
- What do you do for fun?
- What are you working on now? What are you trying to get done? What would you really like to do?
- What are you reading? What was the last book you read?
- Do you have a list of written goals?

Sometimes we find ourselves mentoring older, more experienced businesspeople and organizational leaders. In such cases, questions like, “Tell me about your mom and dad and what you liked the most about high school,” would, of course, be irrelevant. Here are some bonus questions for the professionals you are mentoring:

- What keeps you awake at night?
- What was your greatest business victory? What didn’t go so well (crashed and burned)?
- So, the phone rings during off hours and you know someone has a problem. Before you answer it, who is the face you see in your mind at the other end of the line? (Note: That’s the person they need to either retrain or reassign.)
- What are your company’s top priorities and do they mesh or conflict with yours?
- If you were president/CEO, what would you do?
- If you are the organizational leader, what is your vision of the future and your strategy to get there?

As you go deeper into the relationship with any mentee (young or experienced), you should become very aware of:

- What's their full background (including parents and siblings)?
- What's important to him or her?
- What makes them happy/sad/afraid?
- Are they aware of their own strengths and weaknesses? If not, start here.
- Do they have a personal self-development plan like the one previously discussed? If not, prompt the exercise and follow up.
- Do they have goals? Are they written? Be sure to discuss.
- What are the issues/problems/challenges currently confronting the mentee?
- What does the mentee really want and want to do?
- What is their vision of themselves five years from now? Ask...Who do you want to be? Why? Where? Doing what? What is your definition of a successful career and life for you?

Having a good grasp on the answers to all of these questions will help you really get to know the mentee as a person. This, in time, will help you personalize the plan the two of you create together. Plus, the more you know about the mentee, the more authentic, productive, and rewarding your relationship will be.

Where to Begin the Mentoring Process

After the initial conversation, you should have developed enough information to be able to assess your mentee's current status and upside potential. (Understand that it will be just an initial estimate. You can be surprised—pleasantly or unpleasantly—later.) To be sure you get all the information, your initial assessment should consider a combination of displayed social skills, intellect, drive, and technical ability. I call this package the "Eight Great