

Mentoring Teachers ... A Partnership in Learning

by Patricia Scallan-Berl

Training advice is easy to find these days. Books, videos, workshops, and seminars are everywhere. But ask a university professor, CEO, or master teacher how they acquired the knowledge and skills to successfully perform their jobs and they will rarely say they were guided by traditional methods of instruction. Rather, today's leaders, whether in the boardroom or the classroom, point to inspiring mentors, who were pivotal influences in helping them recognize and develop their own capabilities to excel (*Wall Street Journal*, 2002).

Within classroom settings, mentors can be the key to unlocking and developing teachers' talents. For many educators of young children, the very essence of teaching is a process of continual inquiry, discovery, and renewal. Yet, most teachers rarely have time in their daily teaching to reflect upon what happens in their classrooms, document their work, or study their own teaching practices. Through regular observations and discussions with a skilled mentor, teachers can begin to refine teaching practices, acquire new competencies, gain insight, and become more confident and effective educators.

Mentors can counter the pull of comfortable and ingrained classroom routines by helping teachers analyze and examine the tacit understandings that have developed around familiar practices (Terell, Klein, Jewett, 1998). With a mentor as a guide, a teacher, whose usual methods may not be working in a particular situation, can step back, reframe, change, or take a more experimental approach in her teaching. Through discussions, observations, and self-reflection, mentors encourage teachers to make new sense out of familiar situations and uncertainties and respond successfully to challenges.

WHAT IS A MENTOR?

The term mentor originates from the Greek mythological hero, Odysseus, who, prior to setting out for an extended journey to Troy, entrusts the education of his son, Temeleus, to his loyal friend Mentor. Odysseus instructs Mentor to tell

the son all he knows. Modern usage defines mentoring as "to coach, tutor, train, give hints, or prime with fact." Training applications in industry and education use the term mentoring interchangeably with coaching. But regardless of the term used, the fundamental concept is the pairing of reflection and apprenticeship, when an older or more experienced individual passes down knowledge of how a task is done to someone who is less experienced.

A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP OVER TIME

The focus of mentoring is on the acquisition of knowledge, core competencies, and career development. Framed within the context of an extended relationship over a longer period of time, mentors create a learning partnership between themselves and the individual, fostering feelings of competency, recognition, learning, accomplishment, and high performance. Through a series of supportive interactions teachers acquire knowledge, perspective, and self-awareness from their direct engagement with a mentor. Mentors, in turn, stimulate the teacher's own introspection, primarily through questions that facilitate insight or change in a teacher's behavior or perception, leading the way to greater skill, awareness, and defined outcomes. Timothy Gallwey, Harvard educator and tennis expert, describes mentoring, "as a way of unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them" (Whitmore, 2002).



Patricia Scallan-Berl is a division vice president of mid-Atlantic operations for Bright Horizons Family Solutions. She is known nationally as a conference presenter and author of articles in child care center management and supervision. She has been a regular contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange* since 1978. In addition to her lovely family, Patricia has a passion for orchids, Springer Spaniels, and travel.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SUBJECTS & PREDICATES

process of inquiry, analysis, and decision-making, rather than to directly transmit knowledge and then evaluate the protege's conformity to it. Mentors encourage self-directed, independent, and collegial interactions over more hierarchical relationships.

Fifth, as individual differences among adult learners increase with age and experience, mentoring is well suited to make use of optimum provisions for differences in learning styles, pace of learning, content, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, urgency, context, career life cycle, and aspirations.

LET THE LEARNING BEGIN...

Gloria Steinem, noted feminist author, asserts, "The first problem for all of us men and women is not to learn, but to unlearn." Mentor relationships are effective because they help us to do just that. They challenge our thinking, causing us to critically reflect upon our current practices, moving us to action and transformation.

Mentoring works because it evolves from core principles of adult learning theory (Bell, 1998).

First, adults are motivated to learn as they develop needs and interests that learning will satisfy. In mentoring, we begin with the teacher's needs and interests as the appropriate starting points for setting goals.

Second, adult orientation to learning is usually life or work-centered. Mentor relationships begin with defining the focus of the relationship around life-and/or work related situations, not academic or theoretical subjects.

Third, experience is the richest resource for adult learning. Mentoring involves active participation in a planned series of experiences. Knowledge and competency are derived from the analysis of those experiences and their application to work and life situations.

Fourth, adults have a deep need to be self-directing. The characteristic style of mentors is to engage individuals in a

GETTING STARTED

The process begins with the mentor inviting the teacher to identify "What do I want to learn, to change, to happen?" The mentor facilitates by helping the teacher explore the current situation and identify what the teacher is doing and what could ideally be done. This *reality check* is achieved through insights the teacher derives from discussions, observations, feedback, and self-reflection.

Next, the mentor and teacher explore the current situation and define a desired goal or outcome. The mentor asks, "What would be the most helpful thing for you to take away from this session?" Once a problem or goal is identified, the mentor encourages the teacher to consider options, alternative strategies, or new courses of action. Questions such as "What can you try?", "What happens if...?", or "What else could you do?" frame the discussions and observations by the mentor. Once a goal is identified, the teacher implements the new plan, evaluates, modifies, and reflects back upon the results.

In facilitating goals or desired outcomes mentors should consider the following:

- An understanding of the principle issues.
- A vision or description of the desired outcome.
- A decision as to which way to proceed.
- A clear idea of the action steps.
- An agreed upon time frame for meeting the goal.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

- An outline for the month that each can follow.
- A defined schedule for meeting.

Effective mentors are excellent observers who possess the ability to quickly assess and understand the teacher's skill level and needs. They are able to target their discussions and coaching to what is important to the teacher, developing rapport, and validation. While some mentors may be responsible for supervising others in the organization, it is best if the mentor is not a direct supervisor of the teacher, since supervisory relationships can easily introduce an evaluative quality to the feedback, hindering open communication and risk taking.

FROM FEEDBACK TO INSIGHT

It has been said, "There is no wisdom like frankness." Leading management consultant and author, Ken Blanchard believes that honest feedback is critical to changing behavior. In the book, *Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute*, Blanchard writes that, "People without information cannot act responsibly. People with information are compelled to act responsibly." Without information, people cannot monitor themselves or make sound decisions. (Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph, 1996). For Blanchard, sharing information through feedback is the first key to empowering people in organizations. It allows the individual to understand his or her current situation in clear terms. Sharing information through feedback builds trust throughout the organization and helps people to gain a greater sense of responsibility and ownership of their situations. Mentors encourage and facilitate the sharing of information by asking questions, probing, and helping to spark ideas that compel the teachers to search for answers and new perspectives.

LEADING WITH QUESTIONS

Effective mentors lead with questions, not answers. In the popular best seller *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins cites numerous examples of CEOs who create successful work climates by engaging their employees through questions. By opening up conversations with questions like, "What is on your mind?" or "What should we be concerned about?" leaders create a climate of open communication that allows the current business realities and struggles to bubble to the surface, be identified, discussed, and understood (Collins, 2001).

Like the CEOs in *Good to Great*, mentors, too, query teachers with open ended and probing questions that increase awareness and understanding. Here are some examples of questions

mentors can use to help teachers reflect and gain insight (Whitmore, 2002):

- What is the hardest/most challenging part of this for you?
- What criteria are you using?
- What would be the consequences for you and others?
- What advice would you give to a friend in your situation?
- What would you gain/lose by doing/saying that?
- If someone said/did that to you, what would you feel/think/do?
- What would success in this challenge look like to you?
- What would be the first step you would need to take? Why?
- What should happen next?

In guiding teachers, mentors are careful to reflect back what they heard the teacher express and summarize points. This ensures correct understanding and reassurance that the learner is being fully heard and understood. Through discussion and analysis, mentors can validate the teacher's perspective as well as bring differing views to the discussion.

CHOOSING A MENTOR

A successful mentor program depends upon creating a climate of mutual trust, patient leadership, and emotional maturity. It requires a shared commitment of both time and goals. The following characteristics are important to keep in mind when choosing a mentor:

Balance — Because the mentoring partnership is grounded in mutuality, interdependence, and respect, emphasis is given early on to role clarity and expectations.

Respect — Partners recognize their differences while respecting their common needs and objectives. There is a spirit of generosity and acceptance rather than a focus on rules and rights.

Truthfulness — Mentors work hard to give feedback in a way that is caring, frank, and compassionately straightforward.

Trust and acceptance — There is a climate of experimentation, risk taking, and freedom to fail. Error is accepted as a necessary step on the path from novice to master.

Optimism — Mentors see teachers in terms of their future potential, not just past performance. They believe that people possess more capability than they are currently expressing (Whitmore, 2002).

SOME TIPS IN MENTORING GEN X

James DeSena, consultant to Fortune 500 companies, offers these tips for mentoring Gen Xers. He suggests that when you mentor this age group, make the coaching more self-directed, self-paced, and self-evaluated. Begin the relationship by finding out what outcomes the individual would like to derive from the mentoring. Focus conversations on asking the right questions rather than trying to coach by offering the right answers. Work to make the training and discussion more interactive, taking advantage of a variety of training formats including face-to-face meetings, e-mail communication, online learning, and other professional development opportunities. Always communicate with the individual in ways that he or she prefers and finds most complementary to his or her learning style.

And remember that goals need to be directed not only at the skills and performance needed in the current situation but also at the skills that are needed and valued in the future. Reinforce and recognize the individual's progress and, most importantly, don't discount past experience. Rather, relate to it and build upon it.

Self-directed — Mentors follow the interests of the learner, monitoring how that relates to the problem or inquiry at hand. By refraining from asserting one's own interests, mentors gain the trust and confidence of the teacher since their interests and needs are respected.

Support — Good mentors don't rescue, they support. They resist the temptation to demonstrate a preferred way and instead steer the learning into a supportive direction through questions and observations. While mentors may on occasion demonstrate a technique, they continually ask themselves, will my demonstrations increase or decrease the learner's independence?

Acknowledgement — Mentors set aside time to reflect on the learner's success. They ask the teacher what made it successful, so that the individual can capitalize on it and experience a positive change process that is self-sustaining (Holliday, 2001).

APPLICATIONS

As a practical form of professional development, mentoring lends itself to a myriad of applications including improving team communications, pinpointing the specific cause for an

undesirable behavior, conducting classroom observations, addressing classroom management issues, implementing a new curriculum, conducting child assessments, resolving staff or parent conflicts, preparing for accreditation, or succession planning.

In responding to the ever present challenges of retaining quality staff and providing continual professional development, mentoring becomes an invaluable tool for developing the human assets within a center. Simply stated, mentoring is about fostering and developing a professional disposition toward lifelong learning.

Mentoring, when executed well, becomes a way of thinking, believing, and being. It is a process through which teachers can become reflective practitioners, capable of mentoring others. More than just a partnership based on good synergy, mentoring can become a catalyst for learning, high achievement, and personal fulfillment.

REFERENCES

- Bell, C. R. (1998). *Managers as Mentors*. Austin, TX: Bard Press.
- Blanchard, K., Carlos, J., & Randolph, A. (1996). *Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- DeSena, J. (2002). Business Consultant and Speaker. Discussion. Jim DeSena, MBA, CSP, is a nationally recognized authority on leadership. He is the author of *Take the Lead and Win* (McGraw Hill, 2003), and president of Performance Achievement Systems, Inc. His web site, www.salesleaders.com, provides free articles, reports, and resources. He can be reached at 800-4321-WIN.
- Holliday, M. (2001). *Coaching, Mentoring & Managing*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: The Career Press.
- Hymowitz, C. (2002). "Effective Leaders Say One Pivotal Experience Sealed Their Careers." *Wall Street Journal*.
- Tertell, E. A., Klein, S. M., & Jewett, J. L. (1998). *When Teachers Reflect*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Whitmore, J. (2002). *Coaching for Performance*. London, UK: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Finding your own mentors: Berl makes a strong case for using mentors for furthering your professional development. Do you have good mentors helping you learn and grow? If not, consider ways to find your own mentors — those more experienced who can help you grow professionally. Start by looking near you — at those people in your environment who might offer new skills, feedback, or opportunities for reflection about your abilities and growth areas. Then, look wider, outside your immediate environment for those who offer compatible or transferable skills.

Assessing your staff's mentoring potential: In order to form successful mentoring relationships, you must know who has the potential and the skills to mentor others. Take a critical look at your staff list with the goal of identifying those with the experience to serve as mentors for others. Select one or two of them to join you in becoming mentors to others.

Do I fit the bill?: Use the characteristics listed on page 36 as a self-assessment for those who choose to learn to mentor with you. After completing this step, discuss your self-evaluation with someone who can help you reflect on the accuracy of your self-view and maybe, in the process, become a mentor to you.

Mentor versus teacher Q-sort: Berl differentiates between mentoring (reflective apprenticeship by a more experienced person) and teaching new skills or knowledge to others. This difference hints at an important component of mentoring — it must be voluntary and mutual to really succeed. To explore this voluntary component of mentoring and to find out who might be able to mentor whom on your staff as well as who could teach, explore mentoring with teachers using a Q-sort technique. Make this a personal, reflective experience, perhaps completing it during discussions of challenges or competency evaluations. Put each teacher's name on a 3" x 5" index card. Ask the teacher you are working with to put the cards into two piles — people they would like to learn new things from and those they would like to be mentored by. Once there are two piles, ask the teacher to put each pile in order — from their first choice of a mentor and teacher to their last. Finally, ask the teacher to identify what she would like to learn from the first person on the teacher list and what areas she would like mentoring in from the first person on the mentor list.

This process will give directors a good idea of who is interested in being taught and who is interested in being mentored — and the opportunity to help connect mentoring pairs who are inclined to work with each other. It will also give you a good idea who staff see in coaching and teaching roles as well.

Learning to mentor: Form a small group of willing mentors and begin the process of learning how to mentor together. Start by reading the articles in this Beginnings Workshop, then move on to learning how to ask good questions, problem solving about frustrations or failed attempts, discussing observations, identifying when a teacher needs teaching vs. mentoring, and so forth. Meet regularly to share your successes and learn from each other. (**Caution!:** Discuss how you will honor the confidentiality of the teachers you are mentoring during these discussions. Make sure that the group avoids the pitfall of comparing the teachers you are mentoring.)

Where to start?: Berl lists many applications for mentoring (see p. 37). Take her list as a starting place for new mentors, picking one application at a time for new mentors to explore. Taking mentoring in small, manageable segments will enhance feelings of competency for new mentors.