

# Changing Mentoring Perceptions

by Tom McGee



Rarely do people move ahead without significant help from others. From time to time, we all find ourselves needing to bounce ideas off of someone or looking for guidance from a colleague who has walked this path before us. Many organizations are encouraging an age-old practice to address this modern dilemma: mentoring. Mentoring provides a way for us to gather and process information in a practical and useful manner, where we can integrate our new knowledge and skills into our current job responsibilities. In my experience as a professional in the mentoring arena, one common barrier is a hierarchical and restricted view of mentoring. For the power of mentoring to be unleashed on a personal and organizational level, we need to change our perception of what mentoring is.

## Eye of the Beholder

When people think of mentoring, they often think of one person in a supervisory or senior position grooming a junior colleague to one day take over that position. This type of grooming mentoring certainly exists, but this narrow definition does not encompass the full range of what mentoring can be. Mentoring can be:

- Deciding for yourself that you have a skill or knowledge gap and then going out to find someone who can help you address it—not waiting for someone to offer you the help.
- Looking for an expert at any level in the organization, not just someone in a more senior position than you.
- Seeking guidance and insight for a limited topic or need, not necessarily looking for a lifelong advisor.

In fact, a new perspective of mentoring moves away from the idea that people can only have one mentor at a time, and instead opens up the possibilities for having multiple mentors, all at the same time, and all meeting different needs. Rather than having one mentor who is grooming you to ascend to his/her role, a better model is to have a network of people who can guide, help, and teach you — all of whom have your development in mind and any of whom can advise you as needed. Defined as “network mentoring” by Mara H. Wasburn and Alexander W. Crispo of Purdue University, this new way of thinking about mentoring offers a more egalitarian and open development process. Multiple mentors can be from different parts of the organization

and at different levels. Some could even be from outside the organization. They could be from different countries, have different backgrounds, be different races, genders or ethnicities. In short, they could be anyone. If they have the skills and knowledge you wish to acquire, and they are willing to help, you have found a mentor.

Through these knowledge networks, learning is not limited to only mentees; mentors can learn in these relationships as well, and in fact are encouraged to pursue their own development through their mentoring relationship. It is human nature that when we teach someone, we re-engage in learning ourselves. Mentors can learn and gain just as much from mentoring as mentees can.

Triple Creek Associates developed a Mentoring Levels™ model (see Figure 1) in the late 1990s as a simple conceptual diagram to change the way people perceive and practice mentoring. This model helps depict mentoring as a flexible personal development strategy.

Each of us can create an individual knowledge network that addresses our most pressing developmental needs. Not every relationship needs to be a highly intensive, career-guiding relationship (Advocacy) that requires high levels of accountability and trust. Some relationships may be more focused on developing certain skills, with the mentor playing a teaching or coaching role. These skill level relationships may be more short-term, ending when we feel we have enough mastery of the skill. Or maybe we engage in a reverse mentoring relationship, where we ask a new hire to teach us some latest technology program or share with us some new business theory they learned about in school. These relationships often exist at the informational level and can be quite short-term in nature, ending when we have received the needed information. Regardless of the type and duration, the important thing to remember is this: Every day is filled with learning opportunities, and this tiered approach to mentoring can help put those experiences into context.

## Assembling Your Team of Advisors

To assemble a personal team of mentors, you need to look beyond senior leaders or people whose job you aspire to, and instead look to the wide array of people around you who have expertise and experience that you can learn

from. To embrace this new perception of mentoring, you need to shift your thinking to a more collaborative, developmentally focused view of mentoring, one in which you are creating an individual knowledge network.

With the expanded scope of mentoring in mind, you can now begin assembling your personal team of advisors. To help you capture your thoughts on paper, draw a table with two columns. Label the column on the left “Current Key Issues.” Label the column on the right “People I Know.” Once you have that finished, you are ready to start brainstorming about your development needs and who can help you fill them.

First, in the left-hand column, list a few areas of your personal and professional development that you would like to explore. This list can include career choices, skills you want to develop or hone, and information you need to gain more expertise in.

Next, in the right-hand column, list people you know whom you admire and respect. Don’t worry about matching them up at this point; just think broadly about current and former coworkers, colleagues, friends, bosses, teachers, etc. Try to come up with a list of at least eight to 10 names.

Finally, reflect on each person: what they are like, what experience or expertise they have that may be helpful, what you admire about each, and the like. Keep in mind that someone does not have to be an “expert” in your area of need to be helpful. Sometimes, having a mentor who can ask probing questions without the clutter of knowing a lot about the issue can be very helpful in clarifying your own thinking. As you reflect, draw lines from the person on the right to the needs you think they can fit on the left. In the end, your worksheet should look something like the one in Figure 2.

At this point, you should have a number of people you could approach about being one of your mentors. You don’t have to immediately ask all of the people on your list to help you, but do get started with someone on the list, perhaps the person you feel most comfortable with or the person whose name is connected to the development issue that means the most to you. *No matter how you choose to go about*

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it, be sure you take that next step and actually ask someone.

This is the most difficult part of mentoring for most people—actually asking. Keep in mind that research shows mentors benefit just as much from the relationship as mentees. You are never imposing by asking. However you do need to be clear on your needs and expectations. Triple Creek's latest research found that investing one to three hours a month on mentoring produced highly satisfying relationships for participants, but spending 30 minutes or less produced less satisfactory relationships for both parties.

### Best Practice Blueprints

To help you get started, consider these suggestions:

- Don't use the word mentor. People are so indoctrinated with the grooming view of mentoring that the moniker "mentor" may scare them, bringing up visions of lifelong commitments. Instead, try a more casual approach where you ask them to be an informal advisor. Succinctly describe what you are looking for and why you are asking this person in particular. For example, "Hi, Andrea. I know you have a full-time job and family obligations, but you still manage to find time to coach softball. Would you be willing to have coffee sometime and help me think through some similar issues in my life?" See what develops from the first meeting.
- Use email and the phone. It is sometime less scary for both parties to use distance technology than to meet face-to-face. Again, you want to succinctly describe what you are looking for and why you are asking this person for help, not lay out the whole mentoring plan. A simple email might look like this: "Sherry, I know it has been a while, but I was thinking about people I respect and your name came to mind. I am facing some decisions and career choices, and you helped me a great deal when I worked for you. Would you be willing to talk to me on

the phone to see if you could possibly help me on an ongoing basis for a few months as I work through these career decisions?"

- Suggest small commitments at first, but do ask for at least an hour of their time each month. If any of these relationships feel helpful after the first meeting, suggest a small commitment, such as trying the relationship out for three months, with a bi-weekly half-hour call or face-to-face meeting planned. Remember, investing one to three hours a month produces very satisfactory relationships.

While these suggestions are written for individuals getting started with mentoring, some of you may also be wondering how you can encourage mentoring in your organizations. To begin with, encourage a broader view of mentoring, like the one highlighted in this article. This is critical to creating a mentoring culture in which people proactively seek out helpful development relationships.

Larger or geographically distributed organizations may want to consider leveraging technology to create an environment where assembling a network of mentors is made simple and more straightforward, and where learning and knowledge transfer across the enterprise is accelerated. Many organizations are using web-based mentoring systems to facilitate learning, match participants, expand mentoring to everyone, and create a mentoring culture.

Lastly, share stories with people about your own mentors and how you came to view them as such. Show through your example how mentoring can be. Helping people see the simplicity of it will help them see the possibilities of putting together their own team of advisors.

Creating individual knowledge networks is a new approach to the time-tested practice of mentoring that addresses the complex and changing needs of today's workers. Broadening the view and use of mentoring can close the knowledge and skill gap that many workers feel and can help organizations build a workforce that is informed and engaged.

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*Triple Creek Associates helps organizations build cultures of learning and development through web-based mentoring programs. Their flagship web-based mentoring product, Open Mentoring®, is a fully supported, comprehensive Software as a Service (SaaS) solution that allows organizations to auto-match, manage, and measure mentoring relationships built around customized learning projects. Triple Creek currently brings web-based mentoring and support to more than 100 market-leading organizations with users in 56 countries. They are the official mentoring provider for CCASTD and offer free mentoring resources, such as a monthly newsletter with exercises, online at [www.3creek.com](http://www.3creek.com).*

Figure 1



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#### Information Level:

- Resourcing
- Advising
- Enlightening

#### Skill Level:

- Teaching
- Coaching
- Modeling

#### Advocacy Level:

- Guiding
- Consulting
- Sponsoring (Advocating Career)

Figure 2

