

Communicators as mentors

BY LIZ GUTHRIDGE



Manager, mentor, or both?
What role do you play?

Mentors are wise and trusted counselors who help others learn – learn new skills, capabilities, proficiencies, know-how, wisdom or whatever.

In an ideal world, the mentor is separate from the manager. However, with today's flattened and lean organizational structures, managers often serve in a mentoring role in addition to their other duties.

That's the premise from the workshop, "Communicator as Mentor: Teaching and Reaching Junior Employees," at the April CCM conference in Santa Fe. We focused on providing practical, actionable ways to help mentor junior staff so they move from writing in the cube to advising at the table.

Panelists included CCM members **Wendy Kouba, Mary Kuhn** and **Michael Hissam**, with facilitation by **Liz Guthridge**.

The participants also shared their ideas to foster a mentoring environment that helps junior staff members grow and flourish.

Highlights of their advice are included here. Also included are comments and suggestions from mentees – specifically up-and-coming communication staff members in

several organizations. I gathered this information independently from our workshop. The combined suggestions from mentors and mentees can provide some food for thought in reaching and teaching across generations.

How to mentor better

Mentoring takes time to do well. And according to Chip Bell, the author of *Managers as Mentors*, it is not an innate skill. For many managers, it doesn't come naturally and for a significant subset, it's not easily learned. Some of the mentees I talked to confirmed this state of affairs.

They expressed frustration with managers/mentors who micro-manage, control, criticize more than they praise, and are authoritative rather than suggestive. They commented that professorial lecturers de-motivate, as well as those who frequently say "I wouldn't do that" or "We've tried that before and it doesn't work."

So how do you mentor better? Consider how you set the stage, work (and enjoy) the relationship, and recognize reality.

Set the stage

Everything you do as a mentor should set the stage for a safe haven for learning. Some suggestions include:

- > Recognize that Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers are so different; look for ways to better understand each other.
- > Establish ground rules, such as "What's said here, stays here."
- > Schedule regular one-on-one sessions to ensure you follow through on your commitment to mentor and provide your mentee undivided attention.
- > Identify together the key skills to work on and build;

be explicit about goals.

- > Promote a foundation of trust by showing personal interest in the individual and his/her success – based on how the individual defines success.

Enjoy the relationship

Above all, recognize this is a relationship between two unique individuals. Your mentee is not a project, although mentor and mentee may work on projects together. Some suggestions to getting the most of the relationship for both are:

- > Respect and listen.
- > Use probing questions, the Socratic "5 whys."
- > Use straight talk.
- > Remember it's not all about you. You don't have to have all the answers. It's okay to refer to others.
- > Have fun, keep your perspective and encourage laughter.

Recognize reality

When everyone is starved for time, it's often easy to multi-task with mentoring. For instance, you're not only teaching, but you're also completing a project (on time and on budget), you're gathering insights for the upcoming performance review, and you're doing succession planning.

Some suggestions to make sure mentoring doesn't get the short shrift, especially with your mentee, are:

- > Try to align the mentee's personal goals with corporate goals to get maximize value for both the person and the company, but don't lose individuality; mentoring is for the individual.
- > Avoid over-engineering the mentoring process; include check-in conversations without a specific agenda or to-do item; have a variety of ways to work, such as

READING LIST

Especially for mentors

> Chip R. Bell, *Managers as Mentors: Building Partnerships for Learning*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2002.

For mentees to help move from the cube to the table

Books

> Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, Crown Business, 2002.

> Marcus Buckingham & Donald Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, The Free Press, 2001.

> Robert Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, Pearson, 4th ed., 2001.

> Michael Feiner, *The Feiner Points of Leadership: The 50 Basic Laws That Will Make People Want To Perform Better For You*, Time Warner, 2004.

> Keith Ferrazzi with Tahl Raz, *Never Eat Alone*, Doubleday, 2005.

> David Henderson and Charles Hooper, *Making Great Decisions in Business and Life*, Chicago Park Press, 2006.

> Peggy Klaus, *Brag! The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn without Blowing It*, Warner Books, 2003.

> Art Kleiner, *Who Really Matters: The Core Group Theory of Power, Privilege, and Success*, Doubleday, 2003.

> David Maister, Charles Green & Robert Galford, *The Trusted Advisor*, Free Press, 2000.

> Terry Pearce, *Leading Out Loud: The Authentic Speaker, the Credible Leader*, Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Magazines/Newspapers/Articles/E-newsletters

> Dr. Lois Frankel, *Get and Keep the Job You Want*, complimentary electronic monthly newsletter of coaching tips, www.drloisfrankel.com

> Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo, "Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2005.

> *Harvard Business Review*

> *Wall Street Journal*

Blogs

> *Fast Company*, also the blog, *Fast Company Now* at <http://blog.fastcompany.com>

> *Seth Godin's Blog*, <http://sethgodin.typepad.com>

being a sounding board, reviewer of work, and discussor of books. With all of these approaches, make sure mentoring feels more like you're building a relationship rather doing a task.

- > Keep a balance between criticizing and praising. Provide honest, straightforward and constructive feedback with specific examples and alternative solutions. At the same time, be considerate, sensitive and aware of the individual's self-image and ego needs.
- > Work toward making the situation mutually beneficial for the mentor and mentee.
- > Face the fact that the match may not work; be sure to detox from bad experiences.

Mentoring remains a powerful way to develop staff, especially if you are thoughtful about the process you use and the person you're mentoring. And yes, while it may be less stressful for mentor and mentee to not have a direct reporting relationship, that situation may not be possible. So either make the most of it, or if it's not working, cut the cord and move on.

Both mentors and mentees talked about the importance of sharing books and resources as a way to learn and gain knowledge. Check out the suggested reading list at right.

Liz Guthridge is Managing Consultant with Connect Consulting Group, which specializes in linking people, ideas and resources to improve communications so everyone in the organization can reach shared goals faster. Liz practices lean communications, which involves using lean methods and principles to communicate more effectively and efficiently to improve business results. She writes and edits The Lean Communicator, a monthly e-zine for Ragan Communications.

Memphis Trivia Answers:

1) a. Johnny Rivers; b. Bob Dylan; c. Dan Penn; d. Jerry Lee Lewis; e. Mott the Hoople. 2) e. 3) b. Graceland was built on a 13-plus-acre site for Dr. Thomas D. Moore. The name "Graceland" originally applied to the entire area, which was established as a Hereford cattle farm in 1861, by S.E. Toof, publisher of the Memphis Commercial Appeal, who named it after his daughter, Grace. 4) c. 5) Jumpin' Jack Daniels, we're pullin' your leg! But a cocktail with your name on it is waiting for you in Memphis come April 2007.