

The heART of mentoring

By James P. O'Shaughnessy, Esq.

Editor's Note: Over the past several years we have written about the necessity of having a [innovation] mentor. The mentor role is relevant to both the innovator or maverick and the innovation effort itself. We refer to this role as the innovation midwife (as published in Research•Technology Management, January 2005). Thanks to our associate and colleague, Jim O'Shaughnessy, this issue is devoted entirely to what it means to be a mentor, particularly a mentor of maverick innovators, and is intended to stimulate some contemplation on what you may be in a position to do regarding succession as it relates to creating sustainable innovation streams in and through our host companies.

Mentoring, as traditionally practiced, seems to be in decline: a decline that hurts mentors, mentees and their organizations. Formerly, mentoring arose quite naturally. Today, when mentoring is considered, the mentor is often "assigned" and the process is confused with on-the-job training.

Yet the notion of assigned mentoring is an oxymoron. The essence of mentoring is a personal interest in and mutual commitment to the success of the mentored. This essential interplay is unlikely to arise by moving people around an org chart. This personal relationship in mentoring is necessary, but insufficient. More is required to distinguish it from mere wishful thinking.

Studying the theories and practices popularized by authors such as Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi (*The Knowledge-Creating Company*, Oxford, 1995), we have come to appreciate the importance of socialized tacit knowledge. (Recall Nonaka's SECI model in which socialization of knowledge is the action for transferring tacit to tacit knowledge.) Mentoring, like apprenticing, is an important and honored tradition for passing along tacit knowledge gained over one's career span to enable its productive application by another. The mentor's knowledge and experience are not simply perpetuated. They take on new life

as the mentee internalizes and adapts this learning. This then begs the dual questions of what types of knowledge are passed along and how to do so when mentoring?

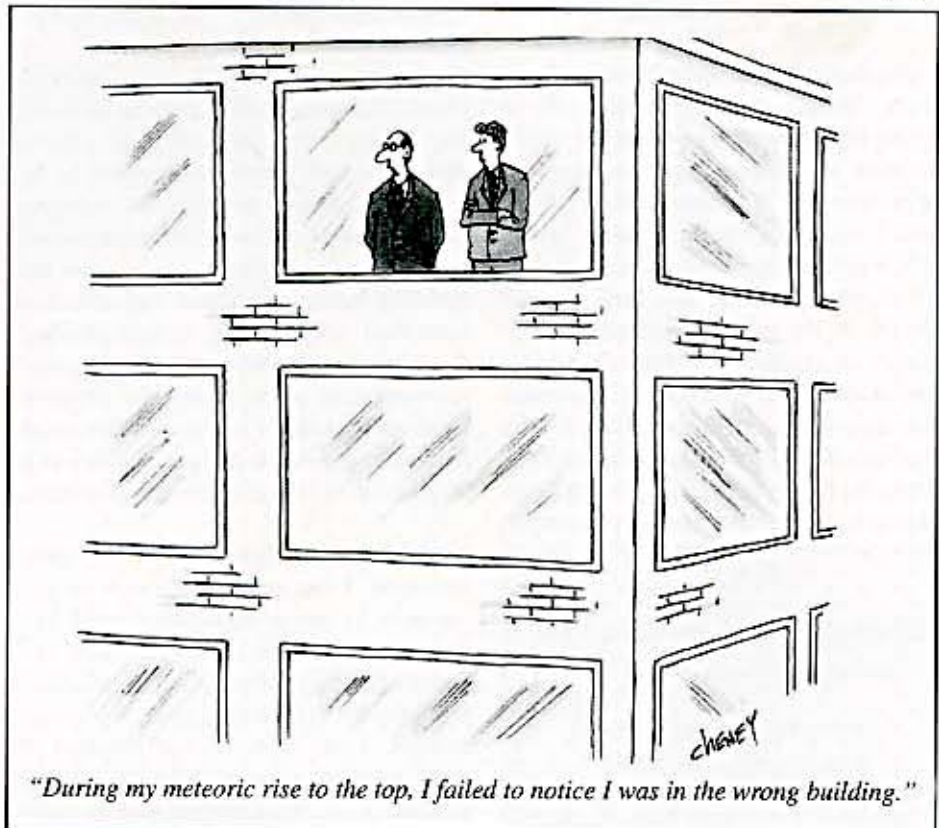
I have been privileged to mentor several men and women as they developed in their respective professional careers. In all cases it was their intelligence and dedication that enabled their success. I can take no credit for those results. I applied a gentle hand in directing their labors and energies. For most, gentle guidance was all that was required. Knowing how and where that hand is required makes all the difference.

Successful professionals present two essential personas to clients. There is technical mastery of the subject matter rooted in professional competence. That's the obvious element and where mentoring tends to concentrate. Yet, I found it is the area needing the least help. Subject matter

expertise springs at first from knowledge and analysis. Following formal education where those skills initially are set in place, these are generally learned on one's own—reading, studying and introspecting over the principles that will guide professional judgments. While I would from time to time engage in interesting discussions and debates over subject matter, it was to point out faults in reasoning over those principles or simply for the enjoyment of the debate itself. In any event, smart people get it and get it quickly and thoroughly.

What they cannot get so easily on their own is the second element, the "perceptual persona." This is one's ability to project professional competence to those who must rely on his or her professional judgments or opinions. This ability to project and engender confidence-in-the-competence evolves largely from experience.

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rience. For the professional, experience is the pathway to intuition and insights. For the client or consumer of proffered judgments or opinions, the professional's experience establishes a foundation for trusting those judgments or opinions thus making them practical and effective. The hackneyed phrase, "been there, done that," actually means something in these settings. Consequently, the focus of my mentoring laid heavy emphasis on this element of professional development.

Put another way, a professional lacking substantive expertise will quickly be unmasked. Perfect advice that is not followed because the recipient of that advice doesn't trust it isn't worth much at all. Accordingly, the successful professional needs to heed the development of both traits—attaining substantive competence and delivering it. Inasmuch as this second element springs strongly from experience the mentee initially lacks, we confront the classic Catch-22: it's difficult to acquire experience when it takes experience for its successful acquisition. Here a mentor can accomplish much.

Traditionally, I have been a story-telling mentor. Telling someone what to do in varying circumstances goes only so far in providing an effective basis for developing professional judgment. Telling stories about a variety of situations better brings to life what has happened in actual circumstances, both good and bad. Smart people then fill in the gaps. Additionally, commentary on substantive points is more impressionable when married with a relevant contextual story, getting more bang for the mentoring buck. Providing meaningful opportunities for the mentee to gain the value of his or her own experience is even better.

Several years ago I knew well in advance that I would be leaving the position I then occupied. I identified my likely successor from our group. He had all the substantive and analytical skills required to do a good job. He lacked at that time two attributes necessary for success: honed leadership skills and the "projection persona" mentioned above. I told him confidentially I would be departing and that we had the intervening period to burnish those attributes.

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On the spot, we made commitments to each other: if he agreed to engage in the process and stay, I agreed to leave once complete. This mutuality was essential. I didn't want to train someone highly mobile and frequently recruited if he was likely to leave. He didn't want to become prepared to advance in his career if I was likely to hang around blocking that advancement.

Leadership opportunities came readily. There were many projects where he could lead a team and gain valuable experiences. We collaborated as required as he progressed through projects and engaged in after action reviews. We extrapolated from his project leader experiences to the differing leadership talents required of a functional team leader. Complementing this work, he enrolled in a leadership summit conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership. And, of course, we discussed frequently the role and characteristics of a leader, both in project and functional teams.

While I was confident I had the ideal successor, I was concerned about his acceptance by senior managers once I had departed. I was the person to whom senior management turned when high stakes problems or opportunities arose. An abrupt handoff would ill-serve our interests if suddenly there were someone else in that position where management had no concrete basis for trusting his judgments and

opinions on matters essential to corporate success. In this sense I considered myself mentor to my successor while steward to the company in wholly inseparable roles.

Our solution was to work closely in several highly important and highly visible projects. At first he would present elements of our findings and I would expand on them. Progressively, he took on greater responsibility for the presentation of our conclusions until finally they were his presentations of his results as I consciously moved into the background. He became experienced in handling more complex problems and confident in their explication to a rough crowd of senior executives. Over time and measured exposure to his presentations, they grew confident in and entirely comfortable with his professional judgment. The transition became very smooth and has since proven highly successful.

Sharing experiences, sharing the opportunity for meaningful experience and sharing the credit for work well done all contribute in equal measure to successful and mutually rewarding mentoring relationships. I am extraordinarily proud of each person I have had the opportunity to mentor and the success they have achieved, born out of their own intelligence and hard work with a gentle nudge here and there from me. It is a commitment born out of the mentors I had along my professional journey and my way to repay their dedication to my career. I hope this process will continue to be given forward many fold.

I once heard a man describe his children (*and innovation*) as the means by which he would project himself into a time he would never see. Mentoring is not parenting and should never be confused with it. These men and women are professional colleagues. However, at that professional level, the analogy is entirely comparable. What we give lives. □

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