

CARING MENTORING

George M. Hillman, Jr.
Dallas Theological Seminary

Importance of a Mentor

We have already established the important role that you (as the intern) play in your own development. However, development does not happen in isolation. The direction of a godly mentor is priceless to a promising leader. Just as with a coach or a trainer in athletics, growth and change does not happen without a relationship with someone who is able to provide resources, assessment, motivation, and accountability. Spiritual formation and personal growth happens best in the context of relationship. Mentoring is a partnership, where the mentor “takes on the responsibility of cooperating with the student in the pursuit of ministerial skills, in the development of a ministerial identity, and in bringing book knowledge into dialogue with the life of the community.”¹

Keith Anderson and Randy Reese, in their book *Spiritual Mentoring*, give the following reminder:

Spiritual formation, education of the heart, in other words, requires something more than traditional Western forms of instruction. It requires a mentorship of the heart, a relationship with a teacher of life who is able to convey what was learned from the teacher’s own faithful mentor, a way of life that is formed, not merely instructions that are given. . . . We come to the realization that we need help, that we are not meant to make this journey solo. We learn to listen to the voices of mentors, not as absolute experts with the final authoritative word but more as the shrewd and discerning expressions of those who have traveled this way before.²

Qualities of a Mentor

It is only natural for both the mentor and you to enter into a mentoring relationship with a person both of you like, enjoy being with, and want to invest in. Your choice of a ministry mentor at a particular internship site is actually more important than the choice of the actual internship site. A fantastic internship site with a poor mentor is worse than an adequate internship site with a great mentor. The number one complaint of students in my office who had poor internship experiences is the lack of relationship with

¹ Regina Coll, *Supervision of Ministry Students* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 16.

² Keith R. Anderson and Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 17-18.

their mentor. The one-on-one time with a caring mentor is the key to the success or failure of the internship.

So is a student supposed to look for Superman or Wonder Woman in a mentor? Of course not. There is no ideal mentor that has everything. Mentors are as unique as the individual relationship. A mentor does not have to be perfect or be an expert to have an impact on your life, but there are some basic qualities that you as a student should look for in a mentor.

Christlike Character

First, a mentor must reflect Christlike character. The heart of leadership is the heart. Being (character) always must precede doing (tasks and skills). Everything in leadership must be grounded in the idea of character and integrity. In both 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9, Paul focuses primarily on character qualifications for spiritual leaders.

A leader's personal spiritual formation and credibility is the underpinning of their leadership. Foundational for any mentor is for them to be a person of holiness, spiritual maturity, biblical knowledge, wisdom, credibility, and consistency who models true servant leadership.

Intern Focused

Second, a mentor must be student focused. I have already addressed this in the last chapter concerning you being a proactive intern. The purpose of the internship is not for your mentor to get cheap help for the summer on their projects. The role of the mentor is to help you in reaching your God-given potential by creating an environment for growth. You should be the core of the learning process and the source for the motivation, ownership, and focus of the mentoring relationships. Find a mentor that is focused on you.

Attentive Listener

Third, a mentor must be an attentive listener. A mentor does not have to have all of the answers to every topic. Many times, the role that a mentor can play is as a sounding board or as a mirror for you. A mentor asks, listens, affirms, and shares with you in a timely manner.

To really be heard by another person is a powerful experience, but it is a rare experience because most people do not listen at a very deep level. Great mentoring "requires masterful listening, attuned and adept, with the ability to maximize the listening interaction. Interaction is the right word, too, because listening is not simply passively hearing. There is action in listening."³

The crux of much of the mentoring relationship is listening, especially the mentor listening to you. The questions that the mentor needs to be asking are:

³ Laura Whitworth, Henry Kimsey-House, and Phil Sandahl, *Co-Active Coaching: New Skills for Coaching People toward Success in Work and Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing, 1998), 32.

- Is my intern on the right track with his/her vision?
- Is my intern honoring his/her values?
- Where is my intern going with his/her development?

The mentor needs to be listening for “signs of life,” for the choices that you are making, and how those choices are affecting your growth. The mentor is also listening for “resistance and turbulence in the process.”⁴ As he or she listens to you, your mentor is able to make changes in the internship process to fit your needs in the relationship. Sometimes changes need to be made “on the fly” as you and your mentor work through the process. A good listener will be able to pick up the signals of the need for change.

Active Teacher

Fourth, a mentor must actively teach. There is information that you want to learn from your mentor. A mentor is one who has mastered the foundations of ministry and can impart both the “art and science” of ministry in a clear way.

Just remember that sometimes the “superstars” in ministry are not the best teachers of how they do what they do. Of course these leaders are excellent at what they do (preaching, teaching, managing, etc.), but they are not able to articulate their process to you. You need to find a mentor who is able to clearly explain why and how they do what they do.

Act as a Resource

Fifth, a mentor acts as a resource. With the unbelievable amount of information out there in the world, it is impossible for you as a student to be aware of the resources that are available for you in ministry. A mentor is able to bring his or her professional experience and personal network to an internship to connect you to developmental resources and ideas.

What kinds of resources? Consider asking your mentor all of the following questions:

- What are the professional organizations that I need to have membership in?
- What publishing organizations focus on my particular ministry area?
- What are the books, magazines and journals that I need to be reading?
- What are the websites with relevant information devoted to my particular ministry area?
- Who are the local, national, and international leaders that I need to get to know?
- What conferences, retreat centers, and training opportunities do I need to attend?

⁴ Ibid., 39.

- What are the “tricks of the trade” that I did not learn at school?

Loves Courageously

Sixth, a mentor loves courageously. A mentor is able to have the perspective to look into your life and ministry and to see where the gaps are and where God is at work. A mentor must be relational, empowering you in a safe but challenging environment. He or she is able to speak lovingly and courageously into your life to correct imbalances in a safe environment. This requires patience, knowing that change does not occur overnight.

Courageous love is the mentor’s initiative, in response to the Holy Spirit’s leading, in relationship to risk personal rejection and address what is holding another person back from experiencing God’s unconditional love. Courageous love involves a relational, intimate, and often confrontational service to others that leads them into closeness with God they would never experience any other way. This kind of love recognizes the flawed foundations of people’s character and the supernatural nature of the task. It takes the initiative, in the Spirit’s power, to enter the messes in people’s lives so they can experience deliverance from sin and participate in God’s purposes for them.

Environment of Trust

Last, a mentor creates an environment of trust. While this is last in our list here, this idea of an environment of trust is actually foundational to much of the work that will take place in the internship and in the functioning of the mentoring relationship. A good mentor is able to create an environment of trust and held confidence. The mentor must also be vulnerable for trust to form. A mutually committed relationship characterized by trust and hope is necessary for change and growth to take place.

You will be looking for a mentor who has been trustworthy in the past with others but trust is not developed immediately in this new relationship. Trust is developed in the little things over time, as both you and your mentor are able to see this trust played out in real time.