

Mentoring During a Time of Pandemic

By Ken Smith, Transformation Systems, Inc.

We often think about mentoring as a critical tool for those in their 20s, 30s and 40s who need help navigating the ins and outs of career path planning. Consider how this might change for the better during COVID-19.

Mentoring has long been determined to be a great way to foster individual development and career planning among employees. When asked, most successful people will tell you that mentors, whether formally or informally arranged, were very influential in their success. Fundamentally, Mentoring is a method intended to foster senior and junior employee conversations around achieving goals that benefit the employee and the organization.

COVID-19 is causing us to reimagine how we approach daily work especially around traditional interaction. Regardless of where one is on their career path, the ease of having informal conversations is not the same as before. Maybe we need to be thinking about how to broaden the concept of Mentoring to encourage these conversations, even though they may be virtual.

Who needs a Mentor?

Because mentoring is so focused on career planning, over the years, for better or worse, we've come to culturally think of it as best for the junior workforce as opposed to the rest of us. Understandable because the rest of us are often at the pinnacle of our careers and are satisfied with where we are or will be headed. For the rest of us, the benefits of "mentoring" are achieved by different means, e.g. lunch/coffee with a colleague, informal drive-bys, planned one-on-ones, a phone call to an experienced retired government support contractor, and dinner together on travel, among others.

Truth is, everyone could benefit by a Mentor at various points of their career and more-so in today's unusual working environment.

Webster defines a Mentor as...

"A trusted counselor or guide.
a mentor who, because they
are detached and disinterested,
can hold up a mirror to us - P.
W. Keve"

What can Mentors and Mentees talk about?

For junior members of the workforce, the most obvious topic relates to career paths. But that's not the only thing, especially if we use a broader definition of who benefits from a Mentor relationship. Here's a list of topics appropriate for everyone to discuss:

- Organizational goals and objectives
- Career stories
- Critical skills, haves and needs
- Situational issues and related advice
- Measuring individual success
- Health and wellness
- Personal life goals and objectives
- Leadership

How to connect with a Mentor?

Some organizations have programs intended to connect Mentees to Mentors, but often, there is no requirement to use them. What's clear is that the burden of creating such a relationship almost always falls on the Mentee, or the person seeking the conversations. It's understandable that some might feel uncomfortable seeking a Mentor, but the good news is that almost everyone is flattered at being asked and no one will fault you for doing it. Most senior folks are eager to share their knowledge and will find the time or a suitable substitute if they are unavailable. While it's best for your Mentor to be more senior, that does not always equate to a leadership position. Some of the best Mentors are thought leaders who supervise no one but have a wealth of experience. If you are stumped regarding who you might ask to be a Mentor, ask a colleague or your supervisor to recommend someone. Take a look at the following Four Essentials for Effective Mentor-Mentee Conversations for additional tips on picking a Mentor.

Four Essentials for Effective Mentor-Mentee Conversations

Many believe that the Mentor-Mentee relationship's primary value is directed toward the Mentee, but that should not be the case. The most effective relationships are the result of a value exchange "partnership" between the two participants, with the Mentor often benefiting as much as the Mentee. Indeed, the most successful mentoring sessions are those which when over, both participants can say their time was well spent and that they both are better off because of it.

Whether during a time of Pandemic or not, and regardless of where the participants are in their careers, here are four things for the parties to consider to ensure an effective outcome ...

1. Compatibility & Trust

Mentors and Mentees must be compatible. Mentees must be able to trust sharing what may often be sensitive information and Mentors must be empathic in their response while maintaining confidentiality. Likewise, in the absence of something clearly nefarious, the participants must agree that what is said in these encounters, stay in these encounters.

The ability for both parties to feel comfortable during these conversations is a key and early measure of success to come. During a pandemic it's even more important because the connection is often virtual. Using MS Teams or ZOOM is far better than a phone call.

Devoting time during the first session for each participant to introduce themselves will help break the ice. While our careers are important, it is not the only way in which we are defined. Spending some appropriate amount of time to share items of interest outside of work can often add context to future discussions. To further break the ice, some Mentors and Mentees have been known to share their Meyers, Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI) or other comparable personality trait measures.

With the ice broken, be sure early on to set agreed to objectives. What does the Mentee want and what does the Mentor believe they can provide during the time together? In some cases the objective may be a tangible product such as a career path options map. In other cases, it may simply be a need to gain a new perspective on how to address work related challenges and/or specific situations. Reasonable clarity here, even if the objectives change or evolve, is a good way to ensure an effective outcome.

2. Contrast & Differences

It's fair to say that nearly all of us have had many Mentors in our lives, most of them very informal. Some may have been family members and others have been peers. Some may have been around for decades while others just a few weeks. All of these relationships are important and all contribute to our evolution. But when thinking about entering into a Mentor-Mentee relationship, the value improves when the Mentee selects someone who brings something different to the table. Specifically, Mentees should be looking for Mentors who have achieved some level of success through time spent and expertise accrued. Similarly, Mentors should be looking for Mentees who can gain from their tutelage.

Because of the types of conversations that occur, the best Mentor and Mentee relationships are not part of the same supervisory chain and perhaps not even within the same organization. That of course does not mean that employees and their supervisors are off the hook regarding individual and career development discussions.

3. Positivity & Challenge

The best Mentor-Mentee conversations are those that not only analyze the Mentee's current state but also envision one or more future states. Mentor-Mentee conversations work best when the Mentor challenges the Mentee and the Mentee is open to different future paths and possibilities. This type of disciplined analysis pretty much works for any type of challenging topic that could come up during a Mentor-Mentee conversation. When the topic is about career paths, there are tools that can help bring structure to the discussion. Your organization may even have them. A quick internet search will show a variety of planning tools.

4. Reliability & Availability

Effective Mentor-Mentee conversations work best when the parties have a clear understanding of when they intend to visit. There is no hard and fast rule for how many visits to have. Most arrangements are able to produce good results between two and six sessions. Likewise, there is no hard and fast rule for how long a session should last, but again, most sessions tend to last no more than 45 minutes with the possible exception of the introductory session which may need an hour.

Time slots should be agreed to in advance, normally at weekly intervals, but always with enough time for any agreed to "homework" to be accomplished. It's best to pick a standard reoccurring time during a day when the odds of having to change the appointment are low. Visits which end up constantly being rescheduled will definitely affect their quality over time.

Provided agreement in advance, it's perfectly acceptable to communicate by phone or email in-between visits especially if there's a need for clarification. After the sessions are over, periodic Mentor "check-ins," like virtual coffee breaks, are always a nice touch.

To conclude, during these extraordinary times, the concept of Mentoring may take on a whole new level of importance regardless of where one is in their career. Consider whether a Mentor would be helpful and if so, don't be afraid to reach out.

About the Author

Ken is a former member of the Senior Executive Service and currently serves as a senior leader within TSI. He is an expert on leadership and government management systems. His decades long and lauded experience in government related leadership, strategic planning and measurement efforts at all levels is exceptional. Have questions? Contact Ken at KS@TransformationSystems.com.