



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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# MENTORING AS PARTNERSHIP

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Chip R. Bell

**M**y mother-in-law had a five-and-dime store parakeet named Pretty Boy. Over the years she taught Pretty Boy to sing a number of songs. One day she ordered a new vacuum cleaner. It came with a tube-shaped attachment she thought perfectly suited to vacuum out Pretty Boy's cage. You know where this story is going! The phone rang one day and Pretty Boy ended up in the vacuum cleaner bag!

She panicked. Tearing open the vacuum bag, she found the poor parakeet alive, but totally covered with dust, dirt, and soot. She rushed the bird to the bathtub and turned both tub faucets wide open, almost drowning Pretty Boy! Realizing her extreme over-reaction, she grabbed the hair dryer to blow dry the poor bird!

A few days later at the church social the editor of the local newspaper heard of her catastrophe and sent a reporter around to get this unique human-interest story. At the end of his interview, the reporter asked, "By the way, how's Pretty Boy now?"

Without expression or hesitation, she answered: "Pretty Boy doesn't sing any more. He just sits and stares!"

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## Times of Change

We live in a time of turbulent change. Far too many employees hired to “sing a bunch of songs” are almost daily traumatized by downsizing, reorganizations, mergers, and just plain old uncertainty. Some end up “sitting and staring” like Pretty Boy, and customers experience these traumatized employees through rigid “Rules ’R Us” front-line behavior. Managers witness “sitting and staring” when they observe compliance instead of commitment; inflexibility rather than creativity; and resistance instead of responsibility.

One group of employees, however, still “sing” in the midst of turmoil. Thriving on discord, this group turns dissonance into harmony. They are the *learners* in the organization. Philosopher Eric Hoffer (1998) wrote, “In times of massive change it is the learner who will inherit the earth, while the learned stay elegantly tied to a world which no longer exists.” Learners are not only happier employees, but they are less likely to jump ship at the first sign of rough seas.

An increase in the number of those who still “sing” is not likely to come about by reducing the chaos, because massive change is here to stay. Nor is it likely to come about by adding more training programs or expanding the tuition refund policy. Instead, such a change requires a fundamental alteration in the role of the leader, from “corporate parent” to “compassionate partner.” It requires that all leaders must add “learning coach” or “mentor” to their existing repertoire of roles.

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## The Magic of Mentoring

Mentor—the word conjures up the image of a seasoned corporate sage conversing with a naive, still “wet behind the ears” young recruit. The conversation would likely be laced with informal rules, closely guarded secrets, and “I remember back in ’67” stories of daredevil heroics and too-close-to-call tactics. Mentoring has had an almost heady, academic sound, solely reserved for workers in white collars whose fathers advised them, “Go get to know ol’ Charlie.”

But what is mentoring really? A mentor is simply someone who helps someone else learn something that he or she would have learned less well, more slowly, or not at all if left alone. Notice the power-free nature of this definition! Mentors are not power figures. *Mentors are learning coaches—sensitive, trusted advisors.*

The traditional use of the word “mentor” connotes a person outside one’s usual chain of command who helps him or her to “understand this crazy organization.” Not all mentors are managers. But, all—absolutely *all*—effective supervisors and managers *should be* mentors. Mentoring must become simply that part of every leader’s role that has growth as its primary outcome.

Organizations cannot afford to rely on mentoring programs alone to ensure system-wide “singing.” Although mentoring programs can be helpful, they are, by themselves, simply inadequate to create a learning organization. In the words of A. De Geus and P. Senge (1997), “Your ability to learn faster than your competition is your only sustainable competitive advantage.” Every leader must mentor—and mentor especially those associates whose performance they influence.

Mentoring employees is never easy. There are certain inherent conflicts between the roles of mentor and manager. Mentors have to take a broad view of an individual’s development over the long haul. Line managers may need to have day-to-day tasks completed immediately. How does a supervisor or manager encourage a subordinate to experiment, try new behaviors, and even make mistakes—all important to learning—when both know the inevitable performance review may be just around the corner? Overcoming this powerful obstacle to learning can only happen within a partnership relationship.

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## Creating a Partnership for Learning

Mentoring from a partnership perspective is fundamentally different from the classical “I’m the guru; you’re the greenhorn” orientation. Mentoring from a partnership perspective means, “We are fellow travelers on this journey toward wisdom.” Stated differently: the greatest gift a mentor can

ultimately give his or her protégé is to position that protégé as his or her own mentor. However, a learning partnership does not simply happen. It must be created, and the mentor must take the lead in crafting it.

The main event in mentoring involves giving and receiving a series of “learning gifts”: advice, feedback, focus, and support. However, such learning gifts may not be seen by the protégé as desired. A gift, no matter how generously bestowed, may not always be received with glee. Recall the last time someone said to you: “Let me *give* you some advice” or “I need to *give* you a little feedback.” You probably did more resisting than rejoicing! Protégés are no different.

Smart mentors create a readiness for the main event of mentoring. Protégés are more likely to experience the benevolence of their gifts if they are delivered within a relationship of safety, advocacy, and equality. Mentoring from a partnership perspective entails four stages: (1) *leveling the learning field*, (2) *fostering acceptance and safety*, (3) *giving learning gifts*, and (4) *bolstering self-direction and independence*. The first two stages are aimed at creating a readiness for the main event—gifting. The final stage is all about weaning the protégé from any dependence on the mentor.

### Stage One: Leveling the Learning Field

The first challenge a mentor faces is to help the protégé experience the relationship as a true partnership. Leveling the learning field means stripping the relationship of any nuances of mentor power or command. Such a relationship does not seek control; instead it regards the need to surrender to the *process of learning* as paramount. This requires the creation of rapport or kinship by removing the mask of managerial supremacy.

The word “rapport” comes from French, literally meaning “a bringing back” or “connection renewed.” The success of a mentoring relationship can hang on the early mentor-protégé encounters; good starts impact good growth. The tone created at the first meeting can determine whether the relationship will be fruitful or fraught with fear and anxiety. Quality learning will not occur until the shield has been lowered enough for the learner to take risks in front of the mentor. Rapport building expedites shield lowering.

In the United States, the customs of bringing a gift when visiting a friend, giving flowers on the first date, telling a joke to open a speech, and introducing small talk at the beginning of a sales call, remind us that opening expressions are important. Therefore, how does a mentor build rapport?

Rapport begins with openness and authenticity. Any normal person approaching a potentially anxious encounter will raise his or her antennae in search of any clues that might give an early warning signal about the road ahead. Will this situation embarrass me? Will this person take advantage of me? Will I be able to be effective with this encounter? Is harm or risk awaiting me?

Given this pioneering search for signals by the protégé, it is crucial that the mentor be quick to transmit responses with a welcoming tone and feel. Open posture (for example, no crossed arms), warm and enthusiastic reception, eye contact, removal of physical barriers, and personalized greetings are all gestures communicating an attempt to cultivate a level learning field. Mentors who rely on the artifacts of power (peering over an imposing desk, making the protégé do all the approaching, tight and closed body language, a reserved manner, or facial expressions that telegraph distance) make a grave error in not putting the other person at ease, so important to building a relationship.

Mentors often use a gifting gesture to signal a level learning field. The perfunctory “how about a cup of coffee” is certainly a well-worn gifting gesture. However, think about how much more powerful a statement such as, “I had my assistant locate this article; I thought you might find it useful,” could be as early evidence that this relationship will be power-free. I once had a mentor who kept a supply of his wife’s homemade jellies for visitors, and the gift was always bestowed early in the encounter, not at the end! Strip any nuance of sovereignty from the relationship and focus on crafting a learning partnership.

## **Stage Two: Fostering Acceptance and Safety**

Great mentors who are effective at fostering acceptance avoid testing tones, judgmental gestures, and parental positions. Great mentors show acceptance through focused and dramatic listening. When listening is their

goal, they make it *the* priority. They do not let *anything* distract them. A wise leader said, “There are no individuals at work more important to your success than your employees—not your boss, not your customers, not your vendors.”

When your protégé needs you to listen, pretend you just received a gift of five minutes with your greatest hero. What a great concept! Think about it! If you could have only five minutes with Moses, Mozart, or Mother Teresa, would you let a call from your boss, your customer, or *anyone* eat up part of that precious time? Treat your protégé with the same focus and priority.

Listening done well is complete absorption. Have you ever carefully watched Larry King on CNN? His success as a superb interviewer lies not in his questions, but in his terrific listening skills. He zips right past the interviewee’s words, sentences, and paragraphs to get to the interviewee’s message, intent, and meaning. The mission of listening is to be so crystal clear on the other person’s message that it becomes a “copy and paste” execution command from one brain’s computer screen to another’s.

One of my biggest challenges in striving to be a good parent was simply to listen without an agenda. As my son began to catalog his concerns, convictions, or curiosity, I would usually feel the urge to make a point, teach a lesson, correct an action, or offer caution. When I finally gave up trying to be a smart daddy and worked at simply being a mirror, he began to open up and, most importantly, he felt heard.

When he asked, “How would you . . . ?,” I worked to remember to have him tell me what he would do before offering my opinions. When he voiced concern, I tried to first communicate through my actions that his message got through before I delivered an answer, especially when my answer was likely to be different from the one he thought he was going to get. The ancient adage, “You are not eligible to change my view until you first demonstrate that you understand my view” serves us in two ways. First, it helps us to stay focused on being heard, not on making points. Second, it tells our listeners that they are important.

Protégés feel the relationship is safe when mentors demonstrate receptivity and validation of their feelings. The coaching goal should be a position of empathetic identification. This “I am the same as you” gesture

promotes kinship and closeness, so vital to building trust. Empathy, when appropriately applied, offers a powerful and positive pathway through the coaching process.

Empathy is quite different from sympathy. The word “sympathy” comes from a Greek word meaning “shared suffering.” Relationship strength within coaching cannot be productively built from a foundation of sympathy—the belief that “misery loves company.” Strength comes from identifying “I have been there as well.”

Reflective responses can be as simple as a personal story that lets your protégé know you appreciate her or his feelings. Mildly self-deprecating anecdotes can be particularly good, as acceptance is best earned by humility and sensitivity. If you feel awkward, say you do. If you feel excited, say so. The sooner you verbalize your own feelings, the faster your protégé will be open to expressing his or her own.

Mentors do not just listen: they listen *dramatically*. They demonstrate through their words and actions that the words of their protégés are valued and important. When people feel heard, they feel valued. Feeling valued, they are more likely to experiment and take risks. Only by trying out new steps do they grow and learn. Fundamentally, if your goal is to become a great mentor, start by using what you say to help you fully use your talents as a great listener.

### Stage Three: Giving Learning Gifts

Leveling the learning field and fostering acceptance and safety lay the groundwork for the main event: giving learning gifts. Great mentors give many gifts, such as support, focus, courage, and affirmation. But the two most crucial learning gifts are *advice* and *feedback*. We will look briefly at each, starting with advice.

Someone once asked famed retired Notre Dame head football coach Lou Holtz what he considered to be the toughest part of his job. With his typical “aw shucks” charm, he finessed the question, but ultimately communicated that *one* of the hardest parts was “teaching lessons that stay taught.” Mentors have a similar challenge. Protégé resistance and resentment for advice and feedback create the challenge in “teaching lessons that

stay taught.” As one frustrated supervisor commented, “I tell them what they ought to do, but it seems to go in one ear and out the other!”

Begin by letting the protégé know the focus or intent of your mentoring. It sounds something like this: “George, I wanted to talk with you about the fact that your last quarter call rate was up, but your sales were down 20 percent.” It is vital that you be specific and clear in your statements. Ambiguity clouds the conversation and could leave the protégé more confused than assisted.

Make certain the protégé is as anxious to improve or learn as you are to see him or her improve or learn. What if the protégé either disagrees that learning is needed or is unwilling to learn what you want to teach? First, take a broader perspective. Decide whether this is your issue or actually something your protégé needs to do. If performance is a factor, be sure to have objective information available (as a tool, not as proof). If all else fails, delay the conversation to a time at which the protégé demonstrates a greater readiness to learn.

Ask permission to give advice. This is the most important step! Your goal is twofold: (1) to communicate advice without surfacing protégé resistance, and (2) to keep ownership of the challenge with the protégé. It can sound like: “I have some ideas on how you might improve, if that would be helpful to you.” The goal is to communicate in a way that minimizes the protégé’s feeling of being controlled. State your advice in the first person singular. Phrases such as “you *ought* to” quickly raise listener resistance! Keeping your advice in the first person singular helps eliminate the “should’s.” For instance, the protégé will hear “what *I’ve* found helpful” or “what worked for *me*,” without the internal noise of resistance.

In the way that advice is about *adding information*, feedback is about *filling a blind spot*. The presence of blind spots makes giving protégés feedback a tricky gift! Think of it this way. *Advice is expertise the protégé may have or could acquire*. You (the mentor) are telling me (the protégé) something you have which, in time, I might acquire on my own. But feedback is you (the mentor) telling me (the protégé) something you have (given your perspective) that I will probably never acquire on my own (and that makes you, the mentor, irritated).

Whereas the issue with advice is potential resistance, the issue with feedback is potential resentment. How does a mentor bestow a gift that by its basic nature reminds the protégé of his or her inability to see it? How can you fill a perceptual gap and have the recipient focus on the gift, not the gap?

The mentor's goal is to assist the protégé's receptivity for feedback by creating a climate of identification. Use comments that have an underlying "I'm like you" message. This need not be a major production or overdone, just a sentence or two.

State the rationale for your feedback. Subtlety or diplomacy are not required as much as a way to create a climate of readiness to listen. Help the protégé gain a clear sense of why you want to give him or her some feedback.

Assume, for a moment, that you are giving *yourself* the feedback. We more accurately hear feedback delivered in a sensitive and unambiguous fashion. Another key dimension to effective feedback is that it possess the utmost integrity. This means it is straight and honest. Frankness is not about cruelty; it is about ensuring that the receiver does not wonder, "What is he or she *not* telling me that I need to hear?" Think of your goal this way: How would you deliver the feedback if you were giving *yourself* the feedback. Take your cue from your own preferences.

It is instructive that the word "feedback" starts with the word "feed." Truly the optimum way to see feedback is in the spirit of nurturing. It is also fitting that the word "advice" originated from the Latin word "concilium," meaning "to call together." If we blend these archaic definitions of "feedback" and "advice," we get a perfect description of a learning partnership: "to feed together."

## Stage Four: Bolstering Self-Direction and Independence

All mentoring relationships must come to an end. The question is how to close with a focus on the "what next?" Effective mentoring relationships are rich, engaging, and intimate. As such, ending them is not without emotion. However, healthy mentoring relationships craft separation as a tool

for growth. Effective adjournment of the relationship paves the way to move on into the next mentoring relationship.

Celebrate the relationship with fanfare and stories or in as simple a way as a special meal together, a drink after work, or a peaceful walk in a nearby park. The point of celebration is to clearly close the mentoring relationship. The rite of passage is a powerful symbol for gaining closure and moving on.

The celebration should include compliments and stories. Weave in laughter and joy. Your protégé now needs your blessing far more than your brilliance, your well wishing more than your warnings. Avoid the temptation to lay out one last caution. Your kindest contribution will be a solid send-off rendered with confidence, compassion, and consideration. Lace your final meeting or two with opportunities to remember, reflect, and refocus. Let your recollections bridge the discussion toward the future.

Let some time pass before you follow up. The easiest way to get this wrong is to follow up with a protégé too soon after departure. Let at least a week pass before calling or visiting, maybe longer. Setting your relationship free requires space and time. Should you follow up at all? Absolutely! Partners follow up on partners. The key is not to do it too quickly. Allow weaning time. Let go!

As building rapport was crucial to the successful beginning of a mentoring relationship, adjournment is equally important. Letting go is rarely comfortable, but it is necessary if the protégé is to become a self-directed learner who will flourish and grow out of the shadow of the mentor. Growth implies an upper end: “grown,” which implies closure and culmination. Mark the moment by managing adjournment as a visible expression of achievement and happiness.

In golf there is an expression, “playing over your head.” It means that a golfer is playing at an unexplained level of excellence in which serendipity and the extraordinary seem the momentary norm. Effective mentoring can also be seen as a relationship of a mentor and protégé who seek to honor their alliance by “learning over their heads.” I’ve found that such an occurrence is practiced at its most harmonious level when the two “sing” as a partnership.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter adapted from *Training and Development*, February, 2000.

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## About the Contributor

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A renowned keynote speaker, Chip has served as consultant or trainer to such major organizations as IBM, Cadillac, Microsoft, Motorola, Lucent Technologies, Marriott, State Farm, Merrill Lynch, Ritz-Carlton Hotels, Bayer, Eli Lilly, Royal Bank of Canada, First Union, Aurora Health, Harley-Davidson, and Victoria's Secret. Prior to starting a consulting firm in the late 1970s, he was vice president and director of management and organization development for NCNB (now Bank of America). In the late 1960s, he was an infantry unit commander with the 82nd Airborne Division in Viet Nam. Dr. Bell holds graduate degrees from Vanderbilt University and the George Washington University.

He is the author or co-author of fourteen books, including *Beep Beep: Competing in the Age of the Road Runner* (with Oren Harari); *Knock Your Socks Off Service Recovery* (with Ron Zemke); *Dance Lessons: Six Steps to Great Partnerships in Business and Life* (with Heather Shea); *Managers as Mentors: Building Partnerships for Learning*; *Customers as Partners: Building Relationships that Last*; and *Managing Knock Your Socks Off Service* (with Ron Zemke). His newest book, *Customer Love: Attracting and Keeping Customers for Life* is scheduled for release in 2000. Chip has also written over two hundred articles in such professional journals as *Management Review*, *Quality Digest*, *Training*, *Executive Excellence*, *Training & Development*, *Services Magazine*, *Advanced Management Journal*, *Supervisory Management*, and *Journal of Management Development* (U.K.). Additionally, he has hosted four major training films on service quality and leadership.

