

Developing the Mentor/Protégé Relationship

An open and honest relationship is key for powerful mentoring.

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During the course of the mentoring relationship, you and your protégé can expect to go through three phases. First, if you are both new to mentoring, you will experience a period of anxiety and uncertainty, not knowing what to expect from the relationship. Next is the honeymoon phase, during which you and your protégé enjoy the excitement of endless possibilities and new opportunities. The final phase is about testing the limits of the relationship. In this phase, both you and your protégé will feel tempted to push the boundaries to see how candid and straightforward you can be in the mentoring relationship. As a mentor, there are some things you can do to move beyond these initial phases and into a deeper, more comfortable relationship with your protégé.

Create a safe environment.

Provide an environment where your protégé can feel free to be honest. The key to creating such an environment is to openly acknowledge your own struggles. By disclosing something personal about yourself—even your failures—you take the initial step toward creating trust. Your own honesty and vulnerability will help your protégé open up and share. Emphasize that the information shared between you will remain in the strictest confidence.

Listen without judgment.

While sharing your own experiences is vital to the mentoring relationship, you must also learn when to set your thoughts aside and focus on what your protégé has to say. Learn to listen without an agenda by resisting the temptation to make a point, teach a lesson, or offer some caution. When you abandon trying to come up with all the answers, your protégé will begin to feel heard and valued.

Focus on learning.

As a mentor, you can gain knowledge from your protégé and the mentoring experience by bringing a learning attitude to the relationship. Let your protégé know that you may not have all the answers and that you can learn from each other. If your protégé sees you as a fellow learner, there is a greater potential for a partnership. Find out what your protégé can teach you that you would like to learn. Or together, investigate an area you both would like to learn more about.

Agree on objectives, not approaches.

A true mentoring mind-set focuses on the learning objective, not the process. Your role as a mentor is to open up possibilities for your protégé, not to provide proven techniques for a given list of problems. It is important to adopt a style in which you offer options to your protégé as a way to encourage him or her to try new approaches. Telling your protégé what to do or how to do it can deprive him or her of a valuable learning opportunity.

Appreciate your differences.

You and your protégé have entered the mentoring relationship with different experiences and different points of view. Recognize those differences while respecting your common needs and objectives. And remember, the more differences between you and your protegee,

the more learning that occurs for you both.

By establishing a deeper mentoring relationship, you expand the depth and breadth of your protégé's growth as well as your own. To sustain the energy in your relationship, continue to share your experiences, remain interested in each other, and celebrate one another's successes.

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