

# How to Be an Effective Mentor

Making devoted disciples.

Erik Johnson

Even though Rodger and Lynne Schmidt were planning to go to Africa as missionaries, they found themselves asking, "Is this really something we should be doing?"

At the same time in the same city, another couple was also wrestling with their call, though from the other end of a missionary career. Now retired, this couple was asking, "After 41 years as missionaries in Africa, who are we? Our home and life work are on another continent. What is our life all about?"

God (through a mentoring program at Denver Seminary) brought these two couples together. It was a great match. The Schmidts' call was confirmed, and the retired couple discovered significance in their new role as mentors.

"We felt encouraged, they felt validated," Schmidt says. Both couples experienced the benefits of mentoring.

Why do the trades have apprenticeships and medical professions require internships? Because personal attention from experienced practitioners helps learners master essential skills, attitudes, and knowledge. This, of course, is no surprise to Christians familiar with the mentoring relationships of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth, Paul and Timothy, and Jesus and the disciples.

## What is a mentor, really?

A mentor is "a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction," according to The Uncommon Individual Foundation, an organization devoted to mentoring research and training. It reports that mentoring is the third most powerful relationship for influencing human behavior, after marriage and the extended family.

Randy MacFarland, who helps train mentors as vice president of training and mentoring at Denver Seminary, says, "When we consider the fragmentation of the family, the speed of change demanding the constant learning of new skills, and our mobile society separating extended family members, the need for mentoring increases."

The Uncommon Individual Foundation identifies three things people need to succeed: a dream, someone who believes in them, and determination. MacFarland says, "Now, we certainly add the whole matter of God's call and empowerment. But we often forget how powerful it is when someone believes in us." That's what mentors do, and it shapes lives.

"I started thinking about mentoring relationships in our church when young parents of infants asked me, 'Who can we talk to? We don't know what we're doing!' " says Don Payne, who was pastoring at Southern Gables Church in Littleton, Colorado, at the time. "Or I'd hear from a

young family, 'We're not doing well with our finances and we really need some help.' Networking my contacts in the church, I did some matchmaking—younger couples with more seasoned veterans."

### **How the mentor benefits**

Lots of people would like to *be mentored*, but those willing to *mentor* are harder to find. What are the benefits of being a mentor?

One advantage of mentoring is the sense of significance you receive. As Don Payne says, "In vocational ministry you often wonder if what you're doing is making a difference, or if your efforts are just being dumped into a black hole. But in a mentoring relationship, we're usually dealing with people hungry to grow, eager to learn, and there is a more visible return on our investment."

A second benefit is personal growth. As a mentor discusses character issues with a mentoree, both are forced to look at their own character issues.

Rodger Schmidt, who not only continues to be mentored but also mentors others in a student ministry at Galilee Baptist Church in Denver, says, "I can't look at someone else's life without evaluating my own. I have people looking to me for answers. It holds me to a different level of accountability. They're evaluating my life. It is very beneficial.

"For example, I often tell my mentorees, 'Ministry is not about me; it's not about me.' Well, one day I was under a lot of pressure, and I was frustrated, distant, and grumpy. As I began to share my frustrations about the ministry and how I was not able to concentrate at home because of all the things that needed to get done, my mentoree looked me square in the face and said, 'Is it about you or is it not?'

"I was not modeling my philosophy very well and he felt free enough in our relationship to say, 'This is where I thought we were headed. Is it true or is it not?' He became very honest with me. I had to learn the lesson I was trying to instill in others!"

### **In the beginning**

What does a mentor actually do? At first, the tasks are:

**1. Set the tone.** Once contact is made between mentor and mentoree, it is up to the mentor to create an environment where trust blossoms. One way to deepen that trust is simply to tell your story. This opens doors and generates discussion. Sharing some of your struggles has a way of taking the relationship to a deeper level.

The setting is usually informal. Some mentorees become like another member of the mentor's family. They spend time at their home playing with their kids and eating meals. Other times a mentor will simply invite a mentoree along on ministry occasions.

"One of my mentors took me on pastoral visits," says Randy MacFarland. "I learned important things just by going along.

"Another mentor was a model of servant leadership. As I was church planting, I could call him any time I was facing a new challenge. Whether it was asking him where to stand when officiating a funeral or seeing him pray through the church directory, by watching his life I experienced whole new dimensions of ministry.

"I believe every child needs to hear the words that Jesus heard at his baptism 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' David was one of those individuals who communicated that to me on numerous occasions. He was a male figure who verbalized his love for me. This made a huge difference in my life."

**2. Clarify expectations.** A safe place for this kind of learning requires three things: openness, hospitality, and boundaries.

Mentors do not want mentorees to expect too much or too little. Both problems can be avoided if expectations are discussed openly. Everything from "Is there homework?" to "Who pays for coffee?" should be agreed upon ahead of time so there will be mutual understanding. Unrealistic or unexplored expectations can come back to haunt you later.

Then agree on meeting length, frequency, time, place, purpose, and level of accountability. Pray together and commit to praying for the relationship between meetings.

"A mentoree may expect you to be empathetic and offer a shoulder to cry whenever they feel the need. Well, that may not be your best contribution as a mentor," says Don Payne, who now trains mentors in suburban and rural churches. "Or the mentor may expect something that the mentoree is unwilling or unable to give. In the beginning, both need to say, 'This is what I think I can give, this is my gift mix, this is my experience range. My life is like a box—there's a lot of stuff that's outside this box, but you're welcome to whatever is inside.'"

### **Sharpening your mentoring skills**

Once the relationship is established, the mentor does several things.

**1. Maintain trust.** After trust is established, it must be maintained. This means being honest, open, and transparent. In addition, mentors should keep to the point, follow through with commitments, be available and flexible.

It also means appropriate confidentiality; private information stays private. It may take months for mentorees to open up, but it takes only a minute to shut them up with inappropriate sharing.

At the outset mentors and mentorees should discuss the kinds of information that would be appropriate to share (1) with anyone, (2) with other mentors, and (3) with each other only.

"Trust," says Don Payne, "grows out of humility. When a person does not presume to know what's in my head and is willing to hear me out, that engenders trust in me. I tend to hold at a distance people who seem to make prejudgments about what I need or what I need to hear." Attentive listening is the key.

In addition, mentors learn as well as teach. Mentoring relationships are not one-way, hierarchical relationships. While it's true that one has more experience than the other, the "life sharing" goes both ways. Thus, an additional responsibility of a mentor is to "accept the mentoree's influence." This too builds trust.

**2. *Have an agenda.*** At the top should be the mentoree's questions. But be flexible enough to recognize teachable moments. Jesus engaged his mentorees in hours of "debriefing" after healings and miracles and public debates. If mentors today send mentorees on risk-taking, faith-stretching, kingdom-building adventures, there will be plenty to talk about!

"When I was at Southern Gables Church," says Don Payne, "I mentored an incredibly bright seminary student. He had been an intelligence officer in the military before becoming a student, and 'openness' was very difficult for him. Life was tightly measured. Though he had the right theology of grace, he found it difficult to live by grace. The slightest mistake devastated him.

"We were reflecting on this one day, and I said, 'In ministry you will do stupid things, and the only response to doing stupid things is, "Hey, that was stupid. Now I know not to do that again.'

"For some reason that brief interchange was liberating for him. In God's providence, what is ordinary to one person can be pivotal to another."

**3. *Offer your network.*** Much of effective ministry is not what you know but who you know. If the mentoree asks, "Who knows something about this?" and you don't, then your assignment is "Who knows somebody who knows something about that?"

**4. *Offer perspective.*** By virtue of their extra years, mentors have something mentorees do not: experience. A mentor should therefore offer mentorees the gift of perspective.

A student once told Janet McCormack, chaplaincy training center director, "What I really like about you, Chaplain Janet, is that you focus on the purpose of ministry when I get lost in the details."

That's what mentors do—keep things focused on why we're doing what we do and who we're doing it for.

"It is beneficial for many international students," says Terry Burns, missions training center director, "to simply hear, 'You're going through a lot of stuff right now.' It helps them understand that what they're going through is difficult. We provide perspective."

**Asking good questions**

One of the most important duties of a good mentor is to ask the right questions. A mentor is not "the answer person," but rather, "the one who gets the mentoree to do helpful self-reflection."

Sometimes questions identify a deeper issue.

"A student I was working with identified his need for exercise," said Randy MacFarland. "As I probed further, he discovered that lack of exercise was a merely a symptom of a deeper issue: struggles with time management. This came out because I recognized that his effective youth ministry and relational style made setting boundaries very difficult. We discussed his roles and goals and how he might manage his time better. Once a mentor picks up the threads in someone's life you can really offer help."

Other times questions lead to personal fears that need to be confronted.

"Let's say the mentoree works in a hospital emergency room, and a woman comes in who has been terribly battered," says Janet McCormack. "If the mentoree comes back and says, 'I just choked. I couldn't even talk to this person,' well, that would be most people's normal response."

"Ask why. There are many possible reasons. I'd ask, 'What was going on inside of you when that happened? What were you thinking about?'"

"You may hear, 'I remember when my mother was beaten,' or 'I can't imagine a human being doing that to another human being,' or 'I wanted to beat him.' Their answers suggest how to lead, how to teach."

It is beneficial if the mentoree also asks questions. Payne says, "We encourage students to come with a fairly clear idea of what they need, and to come to each session with a well-prepared question or two to ask the mentor."

Questions also challenge assumptions.

"We just talked to a student yesterday who wants to teach in Pakistan but doesn't want to learn the language," says Terry Burns. "They speak English in Pakistan so he's getting a seminary education to teach Bible there in English. I said, 'That's an interesting assumption. Do you realize that although they speak English they don't think in English? They think like Pakistanis with a different worldview, a different perspective. Is it realistic to assume that you can do ministry there the way you do it here?' His assumptions had to be changed."

### **Push in the right direction**

Mentors often nudge their charges in directions that at first feel uncomfortable.

For example, youth ministry interns sometimes chafe when scheduled to work in the nursery, attend board meetings, or write reports. They want to do the "teen things" they're already good at. Why make them work with babies or boards? To stretch them. Wise mentors suggest, "Let's see what else you're good at."

McCormack trains her chaplain mentorees that way. She tells them, "You may be inexperienced here. You may prefer one-on-one counseling, but if you've never organized a social event for singles, now's the time to try. You may not like it, and that's okay. You need to stretch. I won't let you fail. If things fall apart, I'm here to catch you."

As MacFarland says, "One of the life-long lessons in the Christian life is learning dependence upon God. Taking risks and working outside of our previous experience promotes growth and dependence upon God."

### **Competent to confront**

A final skill mentors should hone is the skill of correcting. Mentors are like mirrors helping mentorees see what's preventing them from being all that God wants them to be. "I'm not going to attack their character," says Burns. "I just want to hold up the mirror and say, 'Do you see this?'"

If the mentor has built a relationship of trust and safety, the mentoree is more inclined to accept correction. They will think, "My mentor cares for me so I can hear what they're saying."

On one level, all Christians are accountable to follow Christ with integrity. But in a mentoring relationship, we have an even greater platform for accountability. If a mentoree's actions or work habits are inconsistent with their stated goals and commitment, the mentor needs to mention it.

Payne describes his role this way. "To pirate a phrase from a mentor of mine, I want to 'make a clean wound.' A clean wound is direct, not through the back door, a subtle dig, circuitous, or sarcastic. Those are jagged wounds.

"A clean wound is also a wound that I own. I never confront beyond my own willingness to stay alongside the person and become part of the solution after I've made the wound. Clean wounds heal, jagged wounds don't."

"I have had to confront hospital chaplains," says McCormack, "who find themselves visiting patients only from their own denomination, or avoiding those who are terminally ill and seeing only those who are going to be healed. I remind them they are there for all the patients. I confront their lame excuses."

### **Those in a hurry need not apply**

Mentoring is not for the impatient. While it is one of the most effective means of developing effective Christians, it is also time-consuming.

"In a culture that presses for instant results by following a few key principles," says MacFarland, "the mentoring process can seem slow. But there is no short cut for equipping people to become theologically astute, godly in character, and competent in ministry."

The seemingly slow pace of mentoring is offset by its universal suitability for people of all ages, all races, and all nationalities. And all of life.

"Mentoring is a ministry never confined to vocational or organizational boundaries," says Don Payne. "A person can retire from a pastorate or a program, but as a mentor you're never without a ministry."

And since no one ever outgrows the need for increased character and competency, the need for mentoring continues. We all need a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.

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#### **Questions Mentors Ask**

- How is your ministry affecting your own relationship with God?
- How is your sense of God's call being clarified?
- Where are your skills being tested?
- Where is your character being tested?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your future ministry?
- How can I help you?
- What evidence can you point to of the presence and power of God in your ministry?
- How is your relationship/communication style impacting your ministry?
- As you assess your growth, where do you see areas you need to work on? What are your felt deficiencies?
- What are some new things you could try?
- What are some things we could do that would help you to be more a person of integrity?
- What pain have you experienced and what were some of the effects of that pain?
- How has that shaped who you are?
- How might God use your past to prepare you for ministry in the future?

— Let's pretend that God knows what he's doing in your life, even though things haven't worked out as you'd hoped. What might he be teaching you through that?

### **Building Confidence**

Most people approach any new task—whether parenting or pastoring—with trepidation. Can I even do this? Thus a mentor serves as a confidence builder.

In my second assignment as an Air Force chaplain, people were dissatisfied and morale was terrible. The commander asked me, the newbie, "What do you see going on?"

The psychiatric social worker in me had seen some unhealthy ways they were doing things, so I gave my slant on the situation. When I finished, I waited for him to take charge. Instead, he said, "And what are you doing about it?" My mouth dropped! I thought to myself, What am I doing about it? I'm just new! But I said, "Okay, here's what I'm going to do."

I told him and he said, "That's great, Janet. What do I need to do about it?" I was floored again! I was expecting to learn from him, but he assumed I had something to offer him! He pushed me through my discomfort. It was a real confidence booster."

—*Janet McCormack*

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