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Reflections on the Art of Mentoring

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I know that there are probably many articles on the subject of mentoring. Many of these articles have been written by colleagues, or recognized experts in the field of management. However, I have not read these articles and in advance I apologize for not reading them all or using them as references in the following essay. I come from a school of thought about management that believes that good managers are not made. They are born.

This is not to say that we can't learn things about management. The fact is, we learn a great deal from others when we hear stories about what works and what doesn't. With this essay, I am not trying to make a scholarly contribution to the field of management. This is merely my own reflection on the art of mentoring.

Principles of Management and Mentoring

For the purposes of this article, management is understood to be an activity that is directed at growth: growth of the enterprise, growth of product or service and growth of all the individuals involved in the enterprise. As related to law libraries, this means that managers are responsible for "growing" their libraries—not for growth's sake, but because this is the nature of libraries. Ranganathan's Fifth Law of Library Science is "The library is a growing organism."[1] I think that this law embraces more than the mere collection and facility growth. It also means that our library services must also grow in order for them to remain meaningful and relevant to patrons.

People also grow. In addition, people thrive in challenging environments in which they are stimulated, appreciated and encouraged. As a result, I define mentoring as: helping those whom we supervise to develop their professional skills increasing their satisfaction and confidence. Mentoring is for employees who strive for excellence and who strive to grow into positions of responsibility. Such employees must be assisted so they can mature into leaders of the future. Mentoring should not be seen as an optional special activity of leadership. It must be considered an obligation.

If we are to truly serve our profession, our libraries and the colleagues whom we supervise, we must create opportunities for professional growth. The process itself is varied. It can be formal or informal. It can happen intentionally or by accident. However, the result is always the same; an experienced professional imparts some measure of wisdom, experience or insight into a less experienced colleague.

What Is Mentoring?

Anyone can be a mentor. The head of a department, director of a library, a colleague or even a librarian in different library can mentor a colleague, acquaintance or friend. Catalogers can mentor other catalogers or reference librarians—and vice versa. It is also possible for younger people to mentor older persons. The keys are the levels of experience and maturity. Maturity in this instance means the process of gaining increased knowledge and wisdom in the professional position to the point where performing the job is no longer a question of guesswork, even educated guess work. Doing a job well and making informed professional decisions is determined by knowledge and experience. There is, too, a confidence about a mature professional that also a factor. An experienced and mature professional always has something of value to give newer colleagues.

How Does It Happen?

There are three ways that people are mentored. First, there is the supervisor/subordinate relationship. Second, mentoring relationships often will spring up between colleagues who either work together or have worked together in professional association contexts, such as on committees, or professional programs. These relationships are often the result of "chemistry" and mutual attraction, people seem to be drawn together. I call this the colleague/friendly relationship model. Finally, there exists a teacher/student relationship where a teacher takes special interest in a student's professional development. These relationships seem to share many characteristics with the colleague/friendly relationship model, but tend to be somewhat more formal, at least in the beginning.

This article will focus exclusively on the first form of mentoring, supervisor/subordinate. This relationship is the most common and the least understood as a form of mentoring and, therefore deserves the greatest amount of attention.

Supervisor/Subordinate Mentoring

Role Models. The most common mode of mentoring is where supervisors mentor employees. In some ways, this is often an involuntary mode of mentoring, albeit a very important one. Supervisors and managers often overlook the fact that every day we are mentoring those who work for us. Every day we provide models of professional standards of behavior and performance. Even if there are people on our staffs to whom we never (please let this never be so!) or rarely speak, we are modeling a standard of professionalism whether we like it or not. This is an important responsibility and can set the tone for the quality of the workplace and the character of the whole library. This obvious observation has many ramifications. While modeling good professional skills and conduct are important, most of us aren't perfect or capable of maintaining the levels of conduct we wish to model to our colleagues and our staffs.

Effective communication is critical. Often our actions and decisions require commentary in order that others fully understand what we do. For example, are we making decisions to cancel Shepard's citations in print because we are responding to severe budget crises, because we are being cautious about the budget, or because we are convinced that Shepard's in print is no longer a viable format. Any one of these reasons can be legitimate and a good foundation for imparting a good lesson in law library management. By communicating effectively to all staff members we can help them understand what it means to work in the law library and give them a sense of participating in its development. Even if they don't agree with the decisions or the reasons behind them, they are learning something about you and about the challenges of managing law libraries: they grow.

Serving the Staff. There is another often-overlooked aspect of this S/S relationship that is worth pointing out. Most of us grew up understanding that to be the director or supervisor meant that you were the boss. But I think that this top-down idea of management as applied to everyday library operation defeats the purpose of managing a library, that of providing a helpful, efficient access to information. This environment is dependent upon more than the quality of the collection or the aesthetics of the facility. The good will, skills and efforts of the people who work in the library are critical aspects of library service. In order for a library to provide effective services to its patrons, the director or supervisor must be dedicated to serving his/her colleagues by providing them with the best equipment, tools and training necessary to getting their jobs done in the best way possible. After all, if you give someone a job, but don't give him the tools needed to do the job well, you have only given him a job that can only result in frustration, disillusion and disappointment.

Communication. Herein lies a critical link in management and mentoring. In order to best equip staff members there must be clear, candid and open modes of communicating needs from employee to supervisor. It is incumbent on supervisors to ask their subordinates what they need to do their jobs well, with the understanding that the employee's opinions may differ from theirs. In the process of this communication, there can be no doubt that an exchange of ideas will occur. These situations are prime occasions in which the supervisor can teach, or mentor the staff member or group.

This collaborative style of managing facilitates a supervisor's influence on the newer or subordinate staff member. This influence is a form of mentoring, indeed, may be the most common, and therefore arguably the most important, form of mentoring. If they are not seen as mentoring opportunities, they are merely looked upon as management situations in which the focus is more on how a supervisor should deal with a particular request from a staff member, how can the staff member be persuaded to do change their behavior or otherwise modify their needs.

Humility and Confidence as a Management Style
It can be difficult to mentor the subordinate. This is partly because of the closeness and familiarity with which the relationship occurs. However, often the most difficult obstacle to mentoring members of our staffs is our own egoism. For some it is difficult to let those who work for us excel. I have seen this many times in my own professional life when supervisors seem to bristle at my accomplishments—no matter how big or how little. Supervisors must appreciate that when our staffs succeed, it is a positive reflection on our leadership abilities. Part of successful mentoring should be encouraging staff members to get involved, to publish and to seek professional opportunities. This often goes against our natures, as we are wired to seek out opportunities for ourselves. It can sometimes be very difficult to see people on our staffs as colleagues.

Experiment and Play. Another way that we can mentor those who work for us is by encouraging them to experiment with policies and practices. This is another situation where we need to watch our egos. If someone on our staff comes to us and suggests that we should move all pro se legal materials to a special collection at the front of the library—why not work with them and give it a try, even if it goes against your better judgment. More than once my own judgment has been wrong about things like this. But I've been right a time or two, too. In either event, assuming that there is no great expense involved it can be good experience for all involved. The employee knows that his/her ideas are respected and being taken seriously. This process of experimenting with ideas is how good ones are uncovered and bad ones discarded or are improved upon.

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Allowing staff members to actually try out ideas that you may disagree with, or have doubts about, encourages creativity and experimentation. It encourages professional growth and confidence. For example, I worked for a library where each set of Shepard's was shelved with the reporter or subject area it analyzed. A head of technical services wanted all Shepard's shelved together, to make updating them easier. The director is one of the masters at this form of mentoring, and so gave his blessing to the idea. Soon all Shepard's citators were consolidated on the main floor with the National Reporter System. Some time later, when a new head of public services arrived at the library, the whole collection was redistributed again. Then a few years later, it was consolidated again! The fact is, each location had its good points and its bad ones, but each person was allowed to try his or her idea out. Experimentation and intellectual "playing" are ways that we all grow.[2]

The supervisor/subordinate relationship is a key one in which both employees and supervisors grow. The exact situations in which this sort of communication and mentoring occurs cannot be categorically defined. They can happen formally in meetings, casually during the workday or informally over lunches or in the hallways. As we relate to our staffs, we should be always mindful of these opportunities.

That's All There Is To It

In the end, mentoring in the workplace is simply being a good manager. Be interested in your staff and listen to their needs and ideas. Be bold and let them try out some of their ideas—even if you don't like them. If you are the boss, don't feel threatened by the successes of your staff members. Become their biggest cheerleader. Communicate with your staff and find out what tools they need and help them get equipped to do their jobs with excellence. By doing so, we facilitate the professional growth of our staff members and colleagues. We are mentoring them. We also are contributing to their job satisfaction that only enhances the quality of library services that we can offer. This sort of mentoring is not an optional activity; it is an essential part of our jobs.

Endnotes

1. S.R.Ranganathan, The Five Laws of Library Science (Bangalore: New Delhi: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science, 1988).

2. For a good definition of intellectual pursuits as "playing," see John W. Sire, Habitats of the Mind, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000 at p. 27–28).

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