

# Mentoring Makes a Difference

by

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Mentorship is a buzzword these days. It seems to have different meanings for different people. Some consider it a form of counseling, communicating, or learning by example from someone usually senior to you, while others call it leadership. But, whatever you want to call it, it is something that certainly can be beneficial to any organization. It is a proven approach and valuable tool for leaders.<sup>1</sup> However, there seems to be some mystery surrounding mentorship. Maybe that is due to its different meanings; therefore people are unclear about this new tool. This paper will try to take some of the mystique out of mentoring by reviewing the basics and relating them to the Air Force. It will address **what** mentoring is, **why** should the Air Force have a mentoring program, **who** should be responsible for mentoring, **when** to mentor, **where** mentoring can take place, and **how** to mentor someone.

## What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is the presence of caring individuals who provide support, advice, friendship, reinforcement, and constructive examples to help others succeed. Mentoring can mean the difference between success and failure.<sup>2</sup> A mentor is a person of greater knowledge or wisdoms who shares this experience to help develop abilities of those junior to them, also called protégés. Mentoring helps prepare officers, enlisted, and civilians for increased responsibilities by encouraging job competency, military education, professional development, higher education, and serving the needs of the Air Force and our nation. Mentoring encourages people by promoting communication, and personal and professional development.<sup>3</sup> In his address to Virginia Military Institute Corp of Cadets, General Hornburg said, "A mentor is an individual who advises and challenges you to do your best on both a personal and professional level. Everyone needs a mentor, and leadership is where mentoring starts."<sup>4</sup>

Mentoring can occur in different settings: informally by a supervisor or superior, or formally where an associate is deliberately paired with a mentor and there is an established goal of developing specific skills and competencies of protégés.<sup>5</sup>

There are concerns by some that cronyism or sponsorship could develop, and that is always a possibility, but a good supervisor will use all available resources. They recognize the value of all members in their organization, and understand no one can accomplish their job alone. They have reached their level of leadership by learning from others, and usually desire to teach and provide these same opportunities to those who are willing to learn, their protégés.<sup>6</sup> Most commanders realize cronyism or sponsorship only limits their own resources, misplaces loyalties, and leads to

the loss of future great leaders. General Hornburg said, "Mentoring isn't about a "good old boy" network. It's about helping people grow and think for themselves. It's an opportunity to connect with the past and contribute to the future."<sup>7</sup>

## Why Mentor?

Air Force Policy Directive 36-34 states: "Mentoring is a fundamental responsibility of all Air Force supervisors."<sup>8</sup> However, mentoring should take place because everyone gains when there is a healthy exchange of information. Not only does the mentor and protégé benefit from this exchange of ideas and information, but the Air Force as an organization will benefit greatly. As indicated by an ancient Chinese proverb:

"If you want one year of prosperity,  
grow grain,  
If you want ten years of prosperity,  
grow trees,  
If you want one hundred years of prosperity,  
grow people."<sup>9</sup>

Leaders realize those junior to them are watching and learning from them even if it is at a distance. However, with the amount of information and knowledge available to everyone, plus the downsizing of our forces, leaders need to accept the task of intentionally training those junior to them. "Distance learning" will never be as beneficial as one-on-one mentoring.

If left to learn at a distance, protégés will apply their perceptions of what they see and hear to the issues of their unit. They will have to decide for themselves the best way to handle different situations. The danger with this is "their perception" may not be reality, because they may not have all the facts. Therefore, open communication with senior officers will ensure the right lessons are being learned, and correct information is being disseminated.

Additionally, it is important that protégés learn the art of decision-making. A great by-product will be better unit cohesion. Once protégés understand the whole issue, they will be able to support the commander's decisions, and when feasible be able explain it to others. Whether people agree or not, once they understand the issues they are less likely to gossip or cause dissention within the organization. Accurate information and communication always improves morale and unit cohesion.

The new generations now entering the military are different than previous generations. The Baby Boomer generation thinks and perceives things differently than officers from Generations X and Y. Newer generations are more confident in their abilities, perceive loyalty differently, want more balance between work and family, and are not intimidated by rank.<sup>10</sup> In the past, communication between ranks was much less frequent due to the hierarchical nature, but with today's e-mail and internet capabilities, junior officers are well informed of issues, and are now able to interact more frequently with senior officers.<sup>11</sup>

This interaction will serve to meet one of the main needs of the new generations. When Generations X and Y grew up, they were latchkey children, and most were either from a single parent family or had both parents working. Thus, the traditional nurturing environment enjoyed by the Boomers was not a part of life for the new generations.<sup>12</sup> Mentoring appeals to the new generations desire for relationships. Generations X and Y are loyal, but their loyalty is based on a bond of trust. And this trust can best be achieved through a mentorship program. Building trust will not only benefit both the senior and junior officer, but more than likely the Air Force would benefit and retention would probably improve.

### **Who should Mentor?**

You. It is important to remember, the senior leader of an organization such as a wing or group is not the only leader. Commanders, supervisors, and other leaders are responsible for the development of those junior to them.<sup>13</sup> There are many officers on a base or in a unit, and all have varied experiences. Therefore, it should not be just the senior officer of a unit who is responsible for mentoring, but each person on base should have a role in mentoring. A model of this can be found at Air University. Officers from various schools meet with junior officers from other schools, and discuss issues of interest. This provides "ownership" for the higher-ranking officers while also developing a network of contacts and information sources for everyone. No one should feel like they are "going it alone" and by developing this atmosphere of interaction between all ranks, a sense of belonging to something special should develop and this can only result in a stronger and better Air Force.

Whereas mentoring tends to be directed at teaching the junior officer, it actually can and should extend to everyone within a unit. All supervisors, civilians, enlisted and officers should be mentors. Because everyone that enters the Air Force regardless of rank or grade needs helpful guidance and assistance in order to perform their duties to the best of their abilities, and all ranks and grades have valuable experiences that should be past on to the younger generations.

### **When to Mentor—Finding the Time.**

One of the problems of instituting mentorship in the Air Force is that our leaders are already so over whelmed with other important requirements that mentoring seems to be just one more thing to add to their already demanding schedule. How can one make time for "mentoring"? I would argue that to some extent mentoring is already taking place without "credit" being given to the mentor. And, mentoring could be instituted in the Air Force with very little effort or additional time.

For instance, there is a group of junior officers that are almost accidentally being mentored on a daily basis; they are the aides, protocol officers, speechwriters, and executive officers. All these are vital positions, and due to the nature of their job, they have daily contact with officers more senior to them. These junior officers observe leadership in action. They learn how decisions are made and what questions to ask. They see first-hand how lives are impacted, how politics play into situations, and many more such issues. Each of these officers to some extent are being mentored, either formally or informally. The senior officer needs to recognize this and take advantage of it by allowing the protégé to ask questions, and discuss issues when

the opportunity avails itself. These experiences alone are very valuable to the junior officer and will eventually benefit the Air Force as well.

It does not have to be just at the top levels that daily contact and one-on-one discussions occur. This can and should apply at the smallest unit level. Supervisors of all ranks and in all positions can and should mentor those junior to them. Modern technology has actually made it easier. With e-mail, a protégé can seek advice or guidance anytime, and if it is not an emergency, the mentor can answer the questions and provide thoughtful advice at their convenience. Thus, mentoring can take place just about anytime.

Actually, mentoring occurs all the time. Each time you have a discussion with another military member, at a minimum informal mentoring is taking place as you are providing insight based on your own experiences. Therefore, it is imperative that information provided is thoughtful and will be beneficial to the individual as well as the organization.

Whether a mentor sets a regular time on their schedule daily, weekly, or monthly is not as important as being accessible, and prepared to listen and respond to their protégé when needed.<sup>14</sup> Mentoring is not effortless and time will be required. Both parties must be active participants and work out a schedule that is best for both of them.

### **Where is the best place to Mentor?**

Some who have been in the military will say mentorship in the Air Force died when alcohol awareness became a big issue, because Officers' Call at the Officers' Clubs were discontinued. Each base and unit is different, but these "get-togethers" whether weekly, monthly, or quarterly provided an avenue not only for the commander to brief important issues but also allowed very valuable interaction between all ranks in the officer corps. This alone was a chance to observe leadership, and offered an informal setting which allowed open and honest discussions. This in-turn added additional benefits such as the feeling of being a part of something special, and having a sense of belonging. Reinstating Commander's Calls is one option.

If the fear of alcohol and driving under the influence is still uncomfortable, an alternative could be a luncheon, which could provide this same informal setting with an environment of interaction for all officers, thus providing opportunities for casual conversation and a cross-flow of information. This networking alone could pay great dividends for the unit, be enjoyable, and everyone would benefit.

One possibility for getting lunch conversation started, could be discussing a previously announced book. As professionals, we cannot know enough about our chosen military profession.<sup>15</sup> The mentor can recommend a book for everyone to read, then during lunch allow protégés to discuss the book and its merits. Additionally, time should be provided to allow for discussions on current issues, as well as a question and answer session.

Other options where mentoring could take place include bringing back "mandatory fun" activities. Events such as Dining Outs, social gatherings, ceremonies, etc., most of these could be scheduled during the workday when they would not interfere with family and personal time.<sup>16</sup>

## How to Mentor

It is important to understand that the development of protégés is an ongoing process for everyone. Mentors should relate personal and professional experiences to protégés. They should practice positive communication skills and ensure protégés do the same. Air Force core values should be discussed and exemplified, and most of all, spending time with those being mentored provides the greatest benefit for both the mentor and protégé.

Generally, mentors fill four roles; they are advisor, coach, facilitator, and advocate. As an advisor, the mentor should encourage two-way communication and feedback and assist protégé with career and performance goals. As a coach, the mentor helps to clarify developmental needs, recommends training opportunities, and teaches skills and behaviors. In facilitating, the mentor should assist the protégé in establishing a network of professional contacts and help them identify resources for problem solving and career progression. As an advocate, the mentor could represent the protégé's concern to higher management levels concerning specific issues, arrange for the protégé to participate in high visibility projects, and serve as a role model.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Mentors are not expected to have all the answers. Sometimes just listening attentively is all people need.<sup>18</sup> But, mentoring can mean the difference between success and failure.<sup>19</sup> Mentoring is a fundamental responsibility of all Air Force officers. It helps protégés reach their full potential, thereby enhancing the overall professionalism of the Air Force. Additionally, when an interest is shown in others, the Air Force is able to retain her most valuable asset—people.<sup>20</sup>

By understanding the "what, why, who, when, where, and how" of mentoring there should be no mystery about providing assistance to junior Air Force personnel. If the Air Force is to continue to be the best in the world, it not only needs superior weapon systems, but personnel who are advanced in their knowledge and skills, because caring mentors took the time to listen, learn and advise to the best of their abilities.

## The Difference<sup>21</sup>

There were two airmen who didn't know what to do  
They came into the Air Force and were proud to wear the blue  
Quickly they realized they didn't know it all  
And soon they must learn or they would fall

But who was to teach them how to go?  
Where were they to go in order to grow?  
Around them they looked and what did they see?  
One found a mentor the other one was left himself to be

The one with the mentor seized the day  
He learned quickly and found experience does pay

The protégé' listened and the mentor taught him a lot  
And through his successes he never forgot

The second who had to go it alone  
Did his best but felt forlorn

He did what he could and learned as he went  
But in the end he was totally spent

Now the protégé is a mentor, too  
His successes and lessons are not few  
He shares what he knows and learns from the young  
And praises for his mentor are sung

So now the Air Force has only one wearing the blue  
But it should have been two  
With experiences and happiness in their heart  
Because someone cared about them from the start

## Notes

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