

LEADERSHIP: THE ESSENCE OF BEING A MENTOR

by Raymond V. Sozzi, Sr.

When it comes to the so-called secret of success, here's the most important thing to know: *There aren't a lot of secrets.* In my experience, the formula for success and happiness largely revolves around well-known factors like ability, education, effort, and attitude. But there's one more crucial variable that has benefited countless successful people: *mentors.*

When they encounter obstacles—personal and professional—successful people often turn to their mentors for advice and counsel, gaining a renewed passion and unrelenting energy to pursue their dreams and, just as importantly, a greater likelihood of success. That's because a mentor can bring the uncommon perspective of successful experience coupled with a motivation to share that insight in pay-it-forward fashion to help you harness *your* talent and effort.

At key inflection points in my life and in my career, I've been exceptionally fortunate to lean on mentors (both personal and professional) who have helped me make sense of some key decisions and who have unlocked important doors. I think that makes me all the more acutely aware that we have a responsibility

to give back to the next generation—particularly to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds—who are looking for guidance and direction as they make their own choices. As we have all seen far too often, life is not necessarily fair. Mentors are the people who are always there to extend a helping hand. They make a significant difference—one person at a time—and improve our society.

Like many people, I had my own fair share of obstacles as I was growing up: I worked multiple jobs simultaneously and left friends behind each day to commute long distances to a better high school. However, mentors and role models along the way helped me develop leadership skills that supported me throughout my life, and I have tried my best to take advantage of these opportunities. That's why I've started The Everest Leadership Academy (www.everestla.org) to replicate these fortunate mentoring interventions on a broader scale.

The Academy is a nonprofit organization offering programs and services to disadvantaged teenagers from seventh grade through college who are pursuing lives that are worthy of their untapped potential. In other

words, we're creating a mentor-centric environment that combines leadership camps, guidance programs, workshops, summer work opportunities, scholarships, and initiatives to empower families to determine the best options for their children.

Develop the Best in Others

Whether you're in high school trying to select AP classes and apply to college or you're an up-and-coming executive on the fast track, it helps to have a guide: someone who's traveled that route before you, who knows the pitfalls and understands the challenges. It means we can learn from their mistakes and from their successes.

In my experience, mentoring is not unlike the opportunity to coach a young athlete—someone who has talent and potential and who can rise to excellence with the right environment, circumstances, and advice. In my opinion, great mentors offer two very important requirements:

- *Trustworthiness*—Trust is essential to a mentoring relationship. A person needs the ability to discuss sensitive topics, knowing the conversation goes nowhere else.
- *Experience*—A mentor's credibility is partly based on a track record of success. There's no substitute for the lessons and experience that come from success—and, yes, failure, too.

The right mentor plays an invaluable role, helping you develop self-confidence, expand your network of friends and coworkers, improve your leadership skills, and avoid the common pitfalls experienced by people who've traveled the trail ahead of you.

In my teenage years, I was fortunate to meet—and listen to—many mentors who provided valuable advice. They let me use them as sounding boards to discuss school options, classes, and subjects to study—and many other decisions that required good common sense.

When my career was in full swing, I had the opportunity to become a mentor to the generation following in my footsteps. In 1999, I joined a well-known growth

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private equity and venture capital firm as an executive-in-residence. My job was to help executives at the firm's portfolio companies avoid trouble spots, make smarter decisions, suggest new ideas, and grow in their careers and in life.

Pay It Forward: What Makes Mentoring Worthwhile

The joy of being mentored comes from sharing the perspective of someone who has traveled similar roads. *You get smarter faster* than if you try to do it all yourself (and inevitably fail where others before you have failed). By contrast, mentors are role models who have been there and done that, offering timely counsel drawn from experience, wisdom, and networks of people.

So what's in it for the mentor? From my own experience, I really love mentoring—talking to young students, interacting with them, and unleashing the talents within them. These relationships are inherently gratifying because they give us an opportunity to pay it forward and contribute to the next generation's success.

Leadership: The Essence of Mentorship

I believe leadership is both innate and learned. It can be a developed skill—just like skiing or playing the piano. Although everyone has different levels of talent,

we *all* can learn to lead—and leadership is the essence of mentorship. Role models have a very significant influence on our leaders. More often than not, those mentors are family members, teachers, coaches, and colleagues.

In my career, I made it a point to get immersed in the organization, and I relished the opportunity to lead and mentor others through *empathetic toughness*. Think of it as Peace Corps meets Marine Corps: *You have to care enough about people to demand their very best*. In addition to caring, trust motivates people to take risks, to go beyond mere obedience to authority figures. The more people trust and the more they are trusted, the more they'll deliver.

As a mentor, I've always liked what Sir Winston Churchill once said: "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." The mentor's job is to help the mentee find that opportunity.

In many ways, leadership and mentoring are a juggling act, and they start with you. First, you must identify and surround yourself with high-quality people, communicate with them, and trust them. That creates the conditions that help others make the right choices and excel. For a mentor to earn respect and trust, it's important to give respect and trust. I've found that the best example to give is this: In bad times, take more than your share of responsibility for anything that goes wrong. In good times, it's better to pass around the praise. The old saying is true: It's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets credit.

Lessons That Mentors Can Share

The power of mentoring extends far beyond mere people skills to encompass *life* skills that we can—and should—apply in our daily living in our homes, communities, and civic institutions. They demonstrate the ways to engage, communicate, and motivate one another to better our lives. Let me share with you a few examples of mentorship lessons I've learned and that I try to pass along to the next generation coming up behind me.

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Know Who You Are and Be Who You Are

As I wrapped up my bachelor's degree in finance and accounting at Iona College, I naturally applied to many accounting firms for an entry-level position. As an afterthought, I applied at IBM. I passed the accounting test, interviewed with numerous people, and was offered a job.

Before I made my decision, I visited IBM's headquarters in Armonk, New York, and toured the facilities, where I saw row after row of desks, seemingly to the horizon. The 6- to 12-month rotations in multiple departments gave me serious reservations. In my bones, I knew the size and culture of IBM wasn't a fit for me, my personality, or my ambitions. After rejecting Big Blue, I joined the exact opposite: a small accounting firm. Soon, my entrepreneurial side was spurring me to think of different opportunities to spread my wings. You have to know who you are, and you have to be who you are.

Be Honest

As a leader, be conscious of the essential importance of fairness, honesty, and integrity—even when the situation is tricky. Here's what I mean.

I had just joined a sizable computer graphics company as the division chief executive officer (CEO) and was about to meet all employees at a company meeting. The parent company's CEO cautioned me not to disclose the true condition of the company, worrying that it would be too demoralizing. I knew that if my first impression lacked transparency I would never be an effective leader or mentor.

When the question and answer session opened up, the first question was, “Is the company experiencing difficulties?” As I was about to answer, the CEO signaled me to be discreet. Instead, I responded candidly: “I’m afraid that, yes, the company is indeed, having difficulties.” The next question from an employee was,

“Is a RIF (a layoff) possible?”

“Yes,” I answered. Next, someone in the back of the room stood up and said she was one of the company’s original employees.

“Thanks for being honest,” she said. “I’ve seen many presidents come and go over the years, but you’re the first one to be honest with us.” She sat down, and everyone stood up and applauded.

Honor Your Commitments

I was at a company where it was customary to pay year-end bonuses to key employees. Barbara, who reported to me, easily exceeded her goals, so her bonus would be very large. I soon learned her bonus was rejected. I immediately approached my boss, the founder, who acknowledged she deserved the bonus, but he decided he wasn’t going to pay it. I told him that if Barbara’s bonus wasn’t paid immediately, I would resign. Shortly thereafter, Barbara got her bonus. This was an easy call: As a leader, you must honor your commitments.

Be Empathetic

A mentor must be empathetic, too. I was the CEO at a company that was acquired by a larger firm. On the day the transaction closed, we summoned all employees to watch a videoconference announcing the acquisition. In astonishingly poor language, the executive from the acquiring company grouped our employees into three categories: *stay*, *terminated*, and *to be terminated in six months with retention bonuses*. It was an extremely upsetting presentation.

I asked for the microphone and proceeded to clarify the message—there and then. I felt it was essential to express this message in more human terms. Good mentors and leaders are acutely aware of others’

attitudes and feelings and the nuances of their communication.

Don’t Fail for the Wrong Reasons

The best way to avoid regrets? Make the best decision you can at that time, knowing you will make some bad decisions. Regrets come when you look back and say, “I could have ... I should have ... and yet I was persuaded by someone or something else.” Although failure can be a prerequisite for success, don’t fail for the wrong reasons. Don’t take on responsibility and accountability without authority. Be confident and strong enough to make tough decisions, and be prepared to accept the consequences—good and bad.

Be Responsible

When it comes to developing mentors and leaders, I think the military is unsurpassed. Now, I recognize that not everyone is cut out for the military life, but for some people, it can provide excellent opportunities to develop the utmost in accountability—to your superiors and to your fellow soldiers and sailors.

I had just completed basic training, and normally I would have been assigned to advanced artillery training at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. Instead, my military occupation status was changed to communications, and I was transferred directly to Ft. Ord, California, a staging area for troops prior to deployment to Vietnam.

I was the first to arrive at Ft. Ord, about a week before training was to start. I met with a first army sergeant who had served three tours of duty in Vietnam. He looked through my file and suggested I consider an

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acting sergeant role, heading a platoon of about 40 soldiers. The Vietnam War had stretched the U.S. officer's corps, and there was a significant shortage of officers and staff sergeants.

But when the troops arrived, I recognized the magnitude of the responsibilities and challenges I faced. Most of these kids—and possibly me—were going to a war in Southeast Asia, and some of us weren't coming back. I didn't yet understand how to lead a group of young adults, but I was very willing to accept the challenge.

I felt a great responsibility to ensure my platoon received an education in advanced training to improve their survival rate in combat. I conducted classes in the barracks every night in preparation—a practice that was unheard of in the military. One night, the base colonel paid an unannounced visit. In shock at seeing soldiers studying, he quietly approached me.

“How on earth are you able to get this many young men to sit quietly and study army combat practices?” he asked.

“Sir, it's actually quite straightforward,” I replied. “I simply got the group together and explained the statistics of life expectancy in battle. The life expectancy of a forward observer [a communications soldier in enemy territory who calls in enemy positions for bombing] is often measured in minutes. I told them that knowing what to do might save their lives, and I guess that was a compelling reason.”

What made that—and other—mentoring engagements work? The same principles that make any mentoring relationship successful. The first characteristic is a mutual interest; there must be value and benefit for both the mentor and mentee, where each has skin in the game. Second, the mentee must sense your vested interest in his or her success. He or she needs to know you care. That doesn't happen with a simple checklist or formula; it requires a passion to make a difference in other people's lives and a belief in the value of mentoring.

Conclusion

The truth is, mentoring happens in our lives a lot more frequently than we might realize. Yes, we sometimes have formal, structured relationships (guidance counselors, academic advisors, or paid career coaches, for instance). However, I suspect that, more often, mentoring enters our lives in far less formal ways that we might not even recognize. It's the influence of a sports coach, a trusted neighbor, or a more experienced colleague who offers the insider's perspective with a timely comment or piece of advice. And it's important to recognize that *we* have that same power with others we come in contact with. As you encounter others, embrace that power to be both a mentor and mentee.



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