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The Good Mentor

As formal mentoring programs gain popularity, the need for identifying and preparing good mentors grows.

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Can you name a person who had a positive and enduring impact on your personal or professional life, someone worthy of being called your mentor? Had he or she been trained to serve in such a role or been formally assigned to help you? I frequently ask veteran teachers these questions. As you might guess, most teachers with 10 or more years of experience were typically not assigned a mentor, but instead found informal support from a caring colleague. Unfortunately, not all teachers found this support. In fact, many veterans remember their first year in the classroom as a difficult and lonely time during which no one came to their aid.



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Much has changed in the past decade, however, because many school districts have established entry-year programs that pair beginning teachers with veteran, mentor teachers. In the majority of such cases, the matching occurs before they meet and establish a personal relationship. This prevalent aspect of school-based mentoring programs presents special challenges that are further exacerbated when mentor teachers receive no or inadequate training and only token support for their work.

Qualities of a Good Mentor

During the past decade, I have helped school districts design mentor-based, entry-year programs. In that capacity, I have learned much by carefully listening to mentor and beginning teachers and by systematically observing what seems to work, and not to work, in formal mentoring programs. As a result of these experiences, I have identified six basic but essential qualities of the *good mentor* and the implications the qualities have for entry-year program design and mentor teacher training.

The good mentor is committed to the role of mentoring. The good mentor is highly committed to the task of helping beginning teachers find success and gratification in their new work. Committed mentors show up for, and stay on, the job. Committed mentors understand that persistence is as important in mentoring as it is in classroom teaching. Such commitment flows naturally from a resolute belief that mentors are capable of making a significant and positive impact on the life of another. This belief is not grounded in naive conceptions of what it means to be a mentor. Rather, it is anchored in the knowledge that mentoring can be a challenging endeavor requiring significant investments of time and energy.

What can be done to increase the odds that mentor teachers possess the commitment fundamental to delivering effective support? First, good programs require formal mentor training as a prerequisite to mentoring. Veteran teachers unwilling to participate in a quality training program are often indicating their lack of dedication to the role. Second, because it is unreasonable to expect a teacher to commit to a role that has not been clearly defined, the best mentoring programs provide specific descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of mentor teachers.

Third, good mentoring programs require mentors to maintain simple logs or journals that document conferences and other professional development activities involving the mentor and mentee. But such record-keeping devices should keep paperwork to a minimum and protect the confidentiality of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Finally, although the majority of mentor teachers would do this important work without compensation, we must not overlook the relationship between compensation and commitment. Programs that provide mentors with a stipend, release time from extra duties, or additional opportunities for professional growth make important statements about the value of the work and its significance in the school community.

The good mentor is accepting of the beginning teacher. At the foundation of any effective helping relationship is empathy. As Carl Rogers (1958) pointed out, empathy means accepting another person without making judgments. It means setting aside, at least temporarily, personal beliefs and values. The good mentor teacher recognizes the power of accepting the beginning teacher as a developing person and professional. Accepting mentors do not judge or reject mentees as being poorly prepared, overconfident, naive, or defensive. Rather, should new teachers exhibit such characteristics, good mentors simply view these traits as challenges to overcome in their efforts to deliver meaningful support.

How can we encourage mentor teachers to be more accepting of new teachers? A training program that engages prospective mentors in reflecting on the qualities of effective helpers is an excellent place to begin. Reading and discussing passages from the works of Rogers (1958) and Combs, Avila, and Purkey (1971), for example, can raise levels of consciousness about this important attribute. Equally important in the training protocol is helping prospective mentors understand the problems and concerns of beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984; Fuller & Bown, 1975) as well as stage and age theories of adult development (Loevinger, 1976; Sprinthall & Theis-Sprinthall, 1980). Training exercises that cause mentors to thoughtfully revisit their own first years of teaching in light of such research-based and theoretical perspectives can help engender a more accepting disposition toward beginning teachers regardless of their age or prior life experiences.

The good mentor is skilled at providing instructional support. Beginning teachers enter their careers with varying degrees of skill in instructional design and delivery. Good mentors are willing to coach beginning teachers to improve their performance wherever their skill level. Although this seems obvious, many mentor teachers stop short of providing quality instructional support. Among the factors contributing to this problem is a school culture that does not encourage teachers to observe one another in their classrooms. I often ask mentors-in-training whether they could imagine helping someone improve a tennis serve or golf swing without seeing the athlete play and with only the person's description of what he or she thought was wrong.

Lacking opportunities for shared experience, mentors often limit instructional support to workroom conversations. Although such dialogue can be helpful, discussions based on shared experience are more powerful. Such shared experiences can take different forms: mentors and mentees can engage in team teaching or team planning, mentees can observe mentors, mentors can observe mentees, or both can observe other teachers. Regardless of the nature of the experience, the purpose is to promote collegial dialogue focused on enhancing teacher performance and student learning.

What can we do to prepare mentors to provide instructional support? The quality of instructional support that mentor teachers offer is largely influenced by the degree of value an entry-year program places on such support. The mentor training program should equip mentors with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions prerequisite to effective coaching. Such training helps mentors value description over interpretation in the coaching process; develop multiple methods of classroom observation; employ research-based frameworks as the basis for reflection; and refine their conferencing and feedback skills. Finally, we need to give mentors

and mentees time and opportunity to participate in the preconferences, classroom observations, and postconferences that lead to quality clinical support.

The good mentor is effective in different interpersonal contexts. All beginning teachers are not created equal, nor are all mentor teachers. This simple fact, when overlooked or ignored by a mentor teacher, often leads to relationship difficulties and diminished support for the beginning teacher. Good mentor teachers recognize that each mentoring relationship occurs in a unique, interpersonal context. Beginning teachers can display widely different attitudes toward the help offered by a mentor. One year, a mentor may work with a beginning teacher hungry for advice and the next year be assigned a beginning teacher who reacts defensively to thoughtfully offered suggestions.

Just as good teachers adjust their teaching behaviors and communications to meet the needs of individual students, good mentors adjust their mentoring communications to meet the needs of individual mentees. To make such adjustments, good mentors must possess deep understanding of their own communication styles and a willingness to objectively observe the behavior of the mentee.

How can we help mentors acquire such self-knowledge and adopt a positive disposition toward adjusting their mentoring behaviors? Mentor training programs that engage mentors in completing and reflecting on self-inventories that provide insight into their leadership or supervisory styles are particularly helpful.

The Supervisory Beliefs Inventory (Glickman, 1985) offers an excellent vehicle for introducing mentors to the challenges of interpersonal communication. In similar fashion, *The Leadership Adaptability and Style Inventory* (Hersey & Blanchard, 1974) can provoke mentors to reflect on the appropriateness of their mentoring behavior given the maturity and commitment of their mentees. In my own mentor training, I follow discussions of such theoretical perspectives with the analysis of videotaped conversations between mentors and mentees from the *Mentoring the New Teacher* series (Rowley & Hart, 1993).

The good mentor is a model of a continuous learner. Beginning teachers rarely appreciate mentors who have *right* answers to every question and *best* solutions for every problem. Good mentor teachers are transparent about their own search for *better* answers and *more effective* solutions to their own problems. They model this commitment by their openness to learn from colleagues, including beginning teachers, and by their willingness to pursue professional growth through a variety of means. They lead and attend workshops. They teach and enroll in graduate classes. They develop and experiment with new practices. They write and read articles in professional journals. Most important, they share new knowledge and perplexing questions with their beginning teachers in a collegial manner.

How can we ensure that mentors continue their own professional growth and development? Quality entry-year programs establish clear criteria for mentor selection that include a commitment to initial and ongoing mentor training. In addition, program leaders work hard to give veteran mentors frequent opportunities to participate in high-quality professional-growth experiences that can enhance their work as a mentor teacher. Some programs, for example, reward mentors by giving them additional professional development days or extra support to attend professional conferences related to their work.

The good mentor communicates hope and optimism. In "Mentors: They Simply Believe," Lasley (1996) argues that the crucial characteristic of mentors is the ability to communicate their belief that a person is capable of transcending present challenges and of accomplishing great things in the future. For mentor teachers working in school-based programs, such a quality is no less important. Good mentor teachers capitalize on opportunities to affirm the human potential of their mentees. They do so in private conversations and in public settings. Good mentors share their own struggles and frustrations and how they overcame them. And always, they do so in a genuine and caring way that engenders trust.

What can we do to ensure that beginning teachers are supported by mentors capable of communicating hope and optimism? Quality programs take the necessary precautions to avoid using veteran teachers who have lost their positive outlook. If teachers and administrators value mentoring highly and take it seriously, mentoring will attract caring and committed teachers who recognize the complex and challenging nature of classroom teaching. It will attract teachers who demonstrate their hope and optimism for the future by their willingness to help a new teacher discover the same joys and satisfactions that they have found in their own career.

The Mentoring Leadership and Resource Network

The Mentoring Leadership and Resource Network is an ASCD network dedicated to supporting educators everywhere with best practices in mentoring and induction. For six years, the network has provided assistance and free advice to mentors and mentoring programs. In addition, the network sponsors a Spring Symposium each May and an annual meeting at the ASCD Annual Conference in March.

The Mentoring Leadership and Resource Network has five main purposes:

- To provide an organizational vehicle for a mentoring initiative;
- To increase the knowledge base and general awareness of best practices in mentoring and induction;
- To promote and provide effective training for new teacher mentors;
- To establish mentoring of new teachers as the norm in schools; and
- To establish, through mentoring, the norms of collegiality, collaboration, and continuous professional development in schools.

For more information, visit the mentoring Web site (<http://www.mentors.net/>).

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