

Mentoring Fully Trained 'Apprentices'

By Rick Boxx

Many vocational trades, including plumbers, carpenters, electricians and other skilled crafts, over the years have utilized apprentice programs to train the next generation of workers entering their particular vocation. The novice worker comes alongside a veteran in the profession, learning what to do and how it should be done, both through observation and hands-on practice.

In the business and professional world, a similar strategy is often implemented, although the term "apprentice" is rarely used. Instead, this approach for training sometimes takes shape in the form of a mentorship or internship.

Mentoring might take a variety of forms, and may be carried out as part of a formalized program that is part of each person's job description, or a more informal, relationally oriented process. Either way, a more seasoned executive or staff member serving as a mentor can be of great benefit in helping a newer employee become established with the company.

The question sometimes arises, "What is our goal in mentoring?" It is valid to ask this. In fact, it is an important consideration if the activity of mentoring is to have the desired outcome. The purpose might not only be to prepare and equip the individuals for specific roles or responsibilities, but also to help them in understanding and embracing the company culture and values. In the corporate world, multi-generational family businesses are rare, especially beyond the second generation, and one reason is the failure to pass along values and practices that made a company successful at its start.

People being mentored also can observe company veterans, seeing how they handle certain situations, particularly under stress. As a wise person once said, some things are more easily caught than taught. Finding a good, consistent role model to mentor can go a long way in developing a good employee.

Whenever possible, allowing a new or prospective employee the opportunity to shadow an experienced worker can be an effective way to train and equip your next round of leaders. Without these opportunities, many young people will make costly mistakes and have greater likelihood of failure.

In this mentoring/apprenticeship process, one important consideration must remain foremost: The person serving as mentor must be someone worthy to teach and model. It is said, "Practice makes perfect," but that is untrue if you practice

imperfectly. A mentor that does substandard work, or exhibits unacceptable values or ethics, cannot train newer staff people how to perform at a higher, more desirable level.

As Jesus said in Luke 6:40, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher." In leading His own followers, Jesus demonstrated that people cannot teach - or mentor - above the standard by which they themselves are working and living. Or as Proverbs 27:17 states, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man (or woman) sharpens another."

For this reason, in training someone new in your profession, be intentional about assigning him or her to shadow one of your best people, someone in your organization that is highly valued. Hopefully, the newer person eventually will end up being like the mentor - another top contributor to your company.

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CBMC INTERNATIONAL: Jim Firnstahl, President
2850 N. Swan Road, Suite 160 ▪ Tucson, Arizona 85712 ▪ U.S.A.
TEL.: 520-334-1114 ▪ E-MAIL: mmanna@cbmcint.org

Web site: www.cbmcint.org Please direct any requests or change of address to:
jmarple@cbmcint.org

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever served as an apprentice or held an internship in any profession? If so, what was that experience like for you?
2. When you hear the words "mentor" or "mentoring," what thoughts come to your mind?
3. How can you best determine whether someone - even yourself - is qualified and suited for mentoring another individual? What criteria would you establish for such a person?
4. Jesus stated, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher." Assuming that is true, what examples have you observed that would confirm this?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Philippians 4:8-9; 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Peter 5:5-6; 1 John 3:2