

The Mentoring Dance

Mentoring, to me, is a bit like dancing. Like two people stepping out onto the dance floor for the first time, mentoring can feel a little awkward at the beginning of the relationship. Both the mentor and the mentee must take time to get to know each other and be explicit about their goals for, and expectations of, the relationship.

To dance well, one person must lead and the other must follow. Those new to dancing often find that both themselves and their partners are trying to lead - and therefore stepping on **each other's toes** - or no one is leading, resulting in confusion about the direction and steps to take next.

I was reminded of the mentoring “dance” while recently working with a group of senior managers. They began to discuss how several people were looking for mentors. These were people who were previously told they were high-potential, meaning they were seen as individuals with the ability to take on greater responsibility or move into bigger jobs in the future.

Mentoring was not the issue I was brought in to work with them on, so I simply listened in on what they had to say.

Some companies have a formal process for identifying and training mentors. The company may also take on the role of matching mentors and mentees. In other organizations, the process is much more spontaneous.

In the case of the latter, the scenario might be that I approach a person within my organization - who I believe is very knowledgeable about a subject I want to learn more about - and inquire about potentially mentoring me.

In his article, “[How to Nurture a Successful Mentor and Protégé Relationship](#)” (Government Executive, May 15, 2017), Ian McAllister, Amazon’s Director of Alexa International, claims there are seven characteristics of a successful mentoring relationship:

1. Mutually understood goals
2. Mentee-driven
3. Bandwidth-appropriate
4. A focus on approaches, not tactics
5. A focus on listening
6. Transparency

7. Dissolved appropriately

While I agree with McAllister on the first attribute, I think of the second characteristic as more of a shared function, even if the mentee is most likely to initiate more often. Bandwidth refers to the mentor not becoming overloaded, and I, too, think that is an important component.

I also think that a focus on approaches, not tactics, makes sense as mentoring is different than coaching, which focuses more on asking leading questions to help someone arrive at an answer or solution. A mentor relationship is more about telling and sharing their experiences. The mentor can and should be willing to share tactics they have used in specific situations. If the conversation evolves from there to how the mentee might handle a similar situation, I could then envision **the mentor asking some “how-to” questions.**

Like McAllister, I think transparency is crucial, and mentor relationships should only last as long as necessary to achieve the stated objectives, whether that be a brief time or an extended period. I have seen situations where the mentor and mentee have outgrown the relationship but neither feels comfortable officially ending it.

I am a fan of mentoring within organizations. I have seen them over-engineered, particularly **on the “matching” component.** Matching can work, but the most impactful relationships come about from two people bonding naturally based on some chemistry between them.

That doesn’t mean everything happens organically. The best dancers I have observed have an established understanding of their individual roles and the roles of their partners. The same applies for mentoring. For a mentoring relationship to be effective, the *What, Where, When* and *How* of the relationship needs to first be clearly discussed. The two parties need to talk about goals, roles, norms and capability. This clarity will result in shared expectations and reduced ambiguity.

Mentors and mentees need to revisit their routine, so to speak, periodically - perhaps quarterly - to review and discuss how they are working together. Like improvising on the dance floor, an impromptu mentoring relationship can certainly work. But a relationship in **which you are also discussing what’s working and what can be improved will ensure the** mentor and mentee are in step, in sync and moving gracefully towards an objective.

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