



Will You Be My Mentor?

Mentor (noun): someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person

You've arrived. Your hard work, determination and grit have paid off. Talent and some good luck have been important too. Your learning and experience is making your work a bit easier - you know what to do, and importantly what not to do. Others seek your advice and input. And now this. Someone has asked you to be their mentor. This request isn't for a single piece of advice, or a coffee chat. They want a new relationship with you.

Serving another as a mentor is a privilege, and we want to do a good job. This note offers some practices from professional coaching to support more satisfying and productive mentoring relationships. Coaching and mentoring are distinct practices of differing motivations and outcomes. Specifically, mentors possess valuable and specific knowledge and experience they're willing to share or "pay forward." Coaches, on the other hand, design conversations that can generate the future a coachee wants.

The focus here will be on advanced listening skills and creating promises with requests.

Reflect on times you've sought out mentors. Who were they? What were conversations like? What worked for you (what didn't)? Maybe you still have a mentor, or you're mentoring now. What makes those relationships successful?

Successful mentoring relationships involve clear understandings and expectations. What is it the mentee wants? What are their conditions of satisfaction? Which of these conditions are the mentor willing to commit to? Does this understanding constitute a clear and complete promise? We will offer a reflection on successful promises nearby.

Whether the mentoring relationship will be “one-time,” “let’s see how it goes,” or ongoing, a clear shared understanding is important. The mentor may begin with questions such as: “What is it you want from me?” “In the end, what will make this a successful relationship for you?”

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” Simone Weil

We’ve come to know through experience that to help others we need to listen well. That is easier said than done. We tend to listen to respond (often before we really understand the other person). We want to jump in prematurely – with answers and solutions. This is especially so for those in leadership or advice-giving positions — after all, we have the experience to share.

Active listening is one tactic that’s often suggested. We’re reminded to maintain good eye contact, mirror body language, nod and engage verbally (using such phrases as “hmmm,” “go on,” “and what else?”). The idea is to leave space for the other person to fully express their thoughts.

I claim that “whole-hearted listening” is active – and more. It’s mindful: maintaining complete presence and connection with the other person. It’s caring and curious. The focus is on the complete person — their moods and emotions, facial expressions and physical presence, and manner of speaking (the linguistic distinctions introduced below). The invitation is to listen to everything, holistically, above listening just for what’s being said (just words).

This is a shift. We’re taught to listen for information (the who, what, why, how, etc.) with the purpose of judging, analyzing and acting. But, the invitation here is to absorb this kind of information nonjudgmentally and without too much thinking. By “letting go” a bit, we may “hear” with our heart and our “gut,” and trust our instincts. Their words become secondary to what’s underneath the surface.

“If words come out of the heart, they will enter the heart, but if they come from the tongue, they will not pass beyond the ears.” Sufi saying

People engage in many kinds of conversations, and it’s a good idea to be aware of what kind of conversation we’re in. Things get complicated when our expectations don’t match the other person’s. Let’s say someone wants to talk about their day, their experiences, conversations, or dilemmas. If their partner wants to jump in to solve a problem, offer advice, or (argh!) tell them what to do, there is a mismatch. She wants to be listened to (“just listen to me”), and I’m trying to solve something (“I can help fix it”).

Listening for what kind of conversation we're in comes from whole-hearted listening. The mentor can lead by exploring two questions: "What's on your mind today?" and "What would make this conversation a success?" Does the mentee just need to vent, or work out their thoughts aloud (a conversation to be listened to)? Do they need to brain-storm (a conversation about possibilities)? Perhaps, the mentee needs to evaluate something and make decisions about it (a conversation for assessment). With an open mind, we practice being in the same conversation as the person we're with.

When what we say (our action) isn't getting the results we want, we need to take a fresh look at what we're saying and how we're saying it. A mentor is in a great position to observe the mentee's actions-results experience and reflect on their language with care. Moreover, with practice, a mentor may also assess whether the mentee's mood and presence supports what they're saying. Two distinctions are helpful here. The first is the difference between matters of fact and judgements. The second is how we create a new future by asking for help and making promises.

Our assessments paint the background for what we see as possibilities, and define the range of our future actions.

When we look at the world we see what is (matters of fact) and we make judgements about it. For example, we observe the weather, and make an assertion: "it's 35-degrees and rainy." An assertion is factual. We might then judge or assess the day as being "dreary" or "bad." Others may assess the weather differently. Our assessments set the tone for our actions. We may be resigned to staying indoors and foregoing an activity we planned on. Or, we can accept the weather as a matter of fact and consider fresh possibilities – we can wear a raincoat and hat and go on our planned walk anyway, or stay in and catch up on reading.

Our assessments paint the background for what we see as possibilities, and define the range of our future actions. Negative assessments greatly limit our future possibilities. We observe this in others and ourselves: "I'm not good enough." "I can't do it." "I can't ask for what I want." These assessments hold us back.

A skilled coach or mentor can help another person see their assessments more clearly. First, by looking at them for what they are: judgements and opinions. Second, by reconsidering those assessments that are not supportive of the future the mentee wants. And third, helping them learn to accept what cannot be changed (even if they don't like it). From acceptance, we open ourselves to new possibilities, and approach the world with fresh energy and ambition.

Promises create a new future between people, and the journey begins with a request.

"Will you be my mentor?" is a request. But, it may be an incomplete request because the hearer may not know precisely what's being asked. They might not know what a mentor actually does. The listener may not respond, or be confused. In this case, the speaker of the request may feel

rejected or ignored. When a listener says “yes” to an incomplete promise, there is a possibility of misunderstanding, or failing to meet expectations.

A complete request contains several elements: committed speaker and listener, desired action and conditions of satisfaction, and timeframe.

- A committed speaker (the requestor) is sincere, knows what they want, and they’re ready to do their share of the work. They approach the listener at a place and time they can be heard.
- A committed listener is willing to listen to the complete request with an open mind. The listener is free to accept the request, decline, negotiate or defer answering.
- The desired action and conditions of satisfaction need to be as complete and clear as possible, including timeframe. So, together, they (speaker and listener) can make ongoing grounded assessments about the relationship, and know whether the promise is on-track.

A clear promise is created when the listener accepts the request. A request may be simple and brief; think of ordering a cup of coffee. Other requests may be more complex and include formal contract negotiations.

In this context, promises are important linguistic tools. Sometimes; however, we can’t keep promises as intended. We may need to renegotiate the promise. If we break a promise, we may seek ways to repair any damage we’ve caused.

The mentoring relationship may be well served with an understanding based on a complete promise. The mentor may lead a conversation with the mentee about their request – helping them ensure it’s complete. This promise-making conversation in and of itself should be valuable to the mentee.

“Nobody can give you wiser advice than yourself.” Marcus Tullius Cicero

Is there anything worse than unsolicited advice? Think back to a time you were sharing a story or a problem with someone. Suddenly they’re telling you what to do. Giving unsolicited – or the wrong – advice is especially tempting in a mentoring relationship. After all, giving advice is the whole point, isn’t it? Think about the best advice you’ve received (and the worst). Often, the “answer” was available to you already; the skilled mentor merely helped reveal it.

If not advice, then what? Better listening, and question asking. One suggestion is to be patient and resolved to uncover the real challenge. Addressing the wrong issue, or a minor issue isn’t productive. When we’re seeking advice, we often mask our underlying concerns out of embarrassment or a lack of trust. So, when we’re the mentor, listening with caring curiosity will support the mentee discover and reveal what’s most important. Questions such as: “Why is that important to you?” “Why now?” help uncover primary issues. “What else?” This may reveal other lines of inquiry.

Of course, receiving advice is what the mentee wants – they need your help. Answers and actionable advice is one of their conditions of satisfactions. The invitation here is to help guide them to the core issues and the “right questions.”

“Practice (as a noun) can be anything you practice on a regular basis as an integral part of your life—not in order to gain something else, but for its own sake.”

George Leonard in Mastery

Any conversations or relationship can fall into a rut. So, it’s a great practice to check-in whether they’re on track. Is today’s conversation, or our relationship, serving your (the mentee’s) needs? What conditions of satisfaction are still unmet? Are we keeping our promises? Do we need to adjust, or renegotiate our promise / agreement?

A successful mentoring relationship can be rewarding for mentor and mentee alike. The conversational behaviors discussed here support a mentor wanting to be of greater service. And, by modeling these behaviors, the mentor can also impart useful communication skills. The invitation here is to practice, and seek incremental progress.

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