A Mentoring Relationship

Everyone who knows how to do something well, probably thinks he can mentor someone else successfully to teach them to do that thing as well. Not so. Mentors are neither tutors nor coaches. They don’t model how to do something, nor do they tell their protégés how to do something. It is not their role to give advice. The mentor/protégé relationship is unique. It is entered into with specific understandings that are agreed to beforehand. Here are some agreements and commitments that, if addressed correctly, start the mentor/protégé experience off to a good start:

Both agree….

- that the relationship will be confidential
- to recognize and respect each other’s experience, values, and priorities
- to be honest and open with each other
- to work together nonjudgmentally
- to have each other’s best interests at heart

The relationship should start with an all-important pre-mentoring discussion during which it will become apparent if the two are compatible. At times, incompatibility can surface after the mentorship begins. There are varied reasons that may contribute to this. One may be gender, as referred to in E. Groch’s doctorate on leadership. Jennifer Abrams, a consultant for VOICE, also cautions that gender may be an issue for certain people working together. Some men prefer to be mentored by men; some women prefer to work with other women. If the protégés know their preference at the onset, this should be made clear. Ms. Abrams also suggests checking for issues of power and resentment.
Once the mentorship starts, a foundation of support needs to be built so there can be sharing, exchange of ideas and perceptions, and risk-taking. The building of this foundation can be achieved in several ways.

- The first meeting should be informal and allow an exchange of information and rapport building.

- It is important for the mentor to find out what the protégé’s goals are and what the protégé wants to learn from the mentor. Abrams suggests the mentor ask, “What is the most meaningful use of our time together?”

- The mentor needs to verify how the protégé wants to achieve these goals via a preferred learning and communication style.

During mentorship, frequent check-ins are helpful to ensure the relationship is on track. Sometimes an irrational fear or sense of discomfort arises. In a trusting relationship, these would be addressed as soon as they are identified. A protégé may feel frustrated, disrespected, or highly emotional. When a mentor senses this, a question such as, “Is there something you would like to share with me?” invites the protégé to open up. However, it may not be the right time for the protégé to share. Patience is required.

Once goals and methods have been clarified and agreed to, the give and take of the mentoring begins. The mentor may ask for further clarification and then lead the protégé to think through several scenarios. Getting to where the protégé wants to go requires the mentor to ask thinking questions, perhaps starting with “What do you think may be holding you back?” to “How else might you envision getting there?” or “What do you think might happen if….?” At no time should the mentor say “This is how to do it,” or “This is what I do.” The majestic art of asking trumps telling every time. Lasting answers and solutions are best when they come from the protégé.

To be able to look back on a successful mentorship, start by entering it with an open, optimistic mindset, ready to establish rapport. Important to remember is that the protégé sets the agenda. The topics are all his or hers. The mentor offers support and assures the protégé that no subjects are “off the table.” The confidentiality between the mentor and protégé helps guarantee an
honest conversation between two mature adults working together professionally. If all goes well, both people are duly rewarded.

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Pdf Entry Information

Exhibitor Name:  Evie Groch
WEN:  8D48CB
Division:  FA - 361 - Essay
Class:  01 Persuasive Essay
Title:  A Mentoring Relationship
Description:  What a mentor is and isn't