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## What Does It Mean to Be a Mentor for Young People?



### REAL PEOPLE

Many years ago, when I was an unfocused undergraduate, the world-famous philosopher, Cornel West, showed me what a mentor is supposed to do.

A friend of mine, who looked up to West, was about to drop out of the university due to family financial crisis. I went to West's office hours, wedging myself in without an appointment, and told him the story. I asked for his help keeping her in school. Sitting at a desk covered in message slips for speaking engagements, West became upset at the thought of her withdrawal. "She is just beginning to live the life of the mind," he told me. "I'll go to the president for the money if I have to."

He jumped up, and told me to follow him to financial aid. We walked there together, and West lobbied the director of the office for extra help.

West acted as an exemplary mentor. He saw trouble on the horizon for his student and acted immediately to keep her in school. In that moment, even though I did not really understand what a mentor was, I understood that West had both the power to help people and the will to drop everything to do it. Being around West was like being on the court with Michael Jordan after he took a shot—you want to practice enough to become as good.

### Mentoring: Then and Now

The noun and verb "mentor" date back to Homer's *Odyssey*. Mentoring in the *Odyssey* is born directly out of fatherlessness. Telemachus, the son and

heir of King Odysseus, has no father to guide him: Odysseus left long ago for the Trojan War, and every day he does not return sinks the kingdom of Ithaca further into chaos. Odysseus's friend and advisor, named Mentor, an older man, steps into this situation to help guide Telemachus.

This absence of a father is something we think of more in modern society than the traditional society of the *Odyssey*. But on each page of the *Iliad* there are men dying in combat and in other misfortunes as they battle over Troy. The *Iliad*'s "sequel," the *Odyssey*, gives us a small taste of the impact. Like many in his generation, Odysseus is absent from his household, where he is needed to prevent the breakdown of his kingdom and to train his son for adulthood and leadership.

Mentoring in the *Odyssey* is born in violence and chaos. The Trojan War, a pointless series of invasions, attacks, siege, and pillaging, has destroyed the social order in the Mediterranean world. In Odysseus's absence, his home is terrorized by "suitors," fellow warriors who seek Penelope's hand in marriage. The traditional social order to peaceful courting has been upended by the violence of war, and the men who look for Penelope are more like home invaders than friendly visitors.

Telemachus, still a young man, is thrust into a situation he cannot handle alone or without guidance. He lacks the experience with violence to kill the invaders himself, or to muster the men of his homeland against them. He has not been instructed in ruling by his father, so he simply wavers in his plans.



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

—What does a good mentor do?

Many young people have an idea about mentoring, but may not be able to put their finger on what it is. They may think a mentor will do things for them, or make decisions on their behalf, rather than help them clarify their options.

## What a Mentor Does

Mentor plays many roles in the *Odyssey*, both the human elder named Mentor, and the goddess Athena, who takes Mentor's form throughout the poem. These actions of Mentor inform what we today think of as mentoring.

## Mentors Speak Up for Their Mentees

When Telemachus seeks help in his mission to learn about his father, people scorn him. Mentor speaks up for Telemachus, helping him achieve his mission. There are times when mentees just need someone to speak up on their behalf, often to save them from their own mistakes.

## Mentors Challenge Their Mentees

When Telemachus needs guidance, Athena comes to him in the form of Mentor and tells him that, although sons are rarely as good as their fathers, Telemachus has the skills to begin his mission. Athena here seeks to challenge, not to soothe. While a human advisor might have reassured Telemachus, the divine Athena instead sets a high bar for him to aspire to. Mentoring young people is not just reassuring them, it is challenging them.

## Mentors (Sometimes) Offer Direct Help

In the *Odyssey*, Mentor does more than advise; he actively organizes events so that Telemachus is successful in his mission. Athena, in the form of Mentor, rounds up a crew for Telemachus, gathers supplies, and finds a ship. In the *Odyssey*, mentoring can be very hands-on and matter of fact. Just as in real life, mentors may need to step in with some direct assistance.

This should be help that empowers young people, and assists them in taking on the task in the future. Individuals and mentoring programs need to make sure that they are building the capacity of the young people they mentor, not fighting every battle on their behalf. It should go without saying that loaning money to a mentee is a bad idea, though I have helped out with purchases or given graduation gifts instead.

## Mentors Help Their Mentees Plan and to Implement the Plan

In the *Odyssey*, Mentor helps Telemachus get out of the house, and take steps to improve his and his family's situation. In modern terms, this may be getting someone off the couch, away from the videogames, out of the basement, and off to the world. Mentors often need to help mentees understand that they need a plan, and to help the mentee create his or her own plan.

### **Mentors Show That There Is a Plan**

Mentors can also help mentees see a larger plan in their own lives. The very presence of Mentor at the side of Telemachus is read as a sign that the gods are on the young man's side—an important factor in swaying public opinion to Telemachus' side. In Greek society, whom the gods favor or disfavor would be an important piece of information for a person to make decisions about whom to follow. In modern life, we do not look for similar signs of divine favor, but mentors can reinforce the sense in the mentee that there is a plan, that great things are bound to happen if the correct route is followed and the wrong routes avoided.

### **Mentors Connect to the Spiritual as well as Material World**

Working at a public institution funded by federal grants, I am always mindful that programming cannot be religious in content and that our participants have wide variation in spiritual practice, beliefs, and experience with religion. However, there is a religious/spiritual motivation to mentoring that goes beyond any social science outcomes. The beliefs that individuals can turn their lives around, that individuals who are lost can come back to the program, and that people can be redeemed, are all rooted in spiritual belief, though that can come from a wide variety of traditions.

This spiritual aspect of mentoring motivates people to have hope in situations that seem hopeless and to persevere in the face of the problems that seem insoluble. Over time, this hope is rewarding enough to keep mentors going in situations that, thought about in coldly rational terms, they would abandon. Without this sense of spiritual calling to mentoring, many participants would burn out or become discouraged.



### **REFLECTION**

— Who do you remember as an exemplary mentor? What did he or she do or say that made an impact?

### **Mentors Are Peacemakers and Mediators in the Lives of Young People**

At the end of the *Odyssey*, after a bloodletting in Odysseus's palace, it is time for those involved in this bloodbath to figure out the next steps. Again, it is Athena, in the form of Mentor, who steps forward to close the narrative: "Then Minerva assumed the form and voice of Mentor, and presently made a covenant of peace between the two contending parties." This role of elders in making peace and bringing pointless conflicts to an end is needed more than ever.



### **TIE TO LEADERSHIP**

In what ways do you see mentoring throughout your program or organization? While many programs and buildings can deliver excellent services to young people, they often fall short in creating a culture of mentoring or making sure that all needs in the organization are being met. With lower funding levels throughout K–12 school districts and social-service organizations, there is a greater risk of burning out the people who work with young people, ending with either high-turnover organizations, or those where people stay on even though they are performing at a less-effective level.

In organizations that embrace servant leadership, laid out in the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf (1973), the whole leadership structure is inverted. The front-line people serve the participants, the supervisors support the front-line workers, and those at the top support everyone. This explicitly involves mentoring at all levels of the organization, so that people are able to reach their full potential in the organization. This is, perhaps, an impossible goal to reach, but a method that should be kept in mind in any organization, building, or program that purports to mentor.

### **Resources**

Greenleaf, R. K. (1973). *The servant as leader* [rev.]. Cambridge, MA: Center for Applied Studies.

Homer (1990). *The Odyssey* [R. Fagles, trans.]. New York: Viking/Penguin.



# What Mentoring Can and Cannot Do



## REAL PEOPLE

### After the Meeting

We had just wrapped up the meeting. One of our smartest, but most troubled, students had just turned down a place in an Early College program. This program would provide up to 60 free college credits and free books. His mother, a recent immigrant, had been unclear about the value of the program, and for the young man the lure of football and life in a big high school weighed more heavily on the scale than the Early College opportunity.

The meeting left my staff drained. Two staff members attended, advocating with the Early College about the student's potential, then advocating enrollment to the student and his mother. At the end of the meeting, the student decided against the program, despite years of intensive mentoring by two full-time staff.

We stood in front of our building, just crushed. One of us began to cry, and we all knew that we had just watched a serious setback in the life of a young man. This kind of moment, familiar to people who run mentoring programs, is important, because it shows us the limits of what we can accomplish.

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When thinking about mentoring, sometimes I envision a young person's life in the balance on a scale, with the weight of hope on one side and the barriers on the other. I find myself putting out a finger to place on the side of hope, hoping that this small weight will tip the balance.

This helps me keep in mind that, at times, mentoring is enough to move a young person in a positive direction. But at other times, multiple factors—the weight of violence and the neighborhood environment, young people's own poor judgment, immaturity, and pure stubbornness—just push down too hard, leaving even multiple mentors feeling powerless and cast aside.

## The Discovery of Mentoring

Between the time *Odyssey* was written and the 1970s, mentoring has had a steady but unglamorous history. Used as a term for coaching or advising, the word “mentor” was used in the title of advice manuals and other books intended to give ambitious young men a leg up on their courtly and business careers. By the twentieth century, mentor was a synonym for coach, used in college football as an almost informal verb, as in “he mentored at Cornell.” From college coaching, the term made its way into the college classroom, as “mentor” became a synonym for a college professor in the latter half of the twentieth century.

As a high-profile concept, mentoring arrived in 1978 as part of the literature on business leadership. In the late 1970s, an age of economic slowdown and political “malaise” in America, mentoring seemed a way forward for both individuals and social institutions. The article that put the concept of mentoring on the map in business was Collins and Scott (1978), “Everyone who makes it has a mentor,” published in *Harvard Business Review*. This article, a collection of interviews with top business leaders, made the case that good mentoring was the key to reaching the very top of the corporate ladder.

The article, and the concept of corporate mentoring, was not uncontroversial. The publication of the article led to some backlash among other writers, particularly women, as the evidence base of the article—the experience of four elderly white males—was so narrow as to draw fire from those who pointed out that not all who got ahead had an official “mentor,” and that not everyone who had a mentor had risen to the same level as the four men profiled.

From business, the concept of mentoring and its critical importance made its way into education in the 1980s and 1990s, now applied to helping young people make it to college. Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer's 1995 book, *Beating the odds: How the poor get to college*, looked at the factors that bring low-income students to college and had findings similar to Collins

and Scott. After interviewing high-performing, low-income students who successfully make the jump to college, they found that a single individual could make a world of difference for a young person, making him or her believe in the dream of college and a better life. No one in their study “made it” without this type of mentoring intervention.



## REFLECTION

—Was there a mentor in your own life who was your “beating the odds” adult? What did this person do to offer the encouragement you needed at the time?

These arguments are powerful, and they connect to many people's personal experiences. Readers can remember figures in their lives who have believed in them and encouraged them to take on challenges that seemed daunting at the time. But this type of research is not conclusive. It measures successful people and then looks for what they have in common, without ever examining the experiences of the unsuccessful. This does not make this research wrong, but it should lead us to ask broader questions about mentoring.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, research and writing about young people in poverty pointed to mentoring as a key strategy to help young people. The books *Tough Change: Growing up on your own in America* (Lefkowitz, 1987) and *Growing up poor* (Williams & Kornblum, 1985) both pointed to adults, unrelated to the young people they mentored, as keys that allowed young people in poor neighborhoods to find opportunities. Unfortunately, in many cases these opportunities were reserved for top athletes in high schools, mentored by local boosters who hoped to aid their alma mater with a top recruit. Broader or more systematic attempts to reach young people did not exist in these neighborhoods, and little effort was made to aid those with academic potential.

The study of mentoring took a quantum leap in sophistication when Jean Rhodes's (2002) book, *Stand by me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth*, examined the research literature on mentoring that drew from a wider pool of subjects. Rather than looking at 4 or 20 subjects, this quantitative study examined more than 1,000 young people who had participated in Big Brothers/Big Sisters (a youth mentoring program which pairs up young people—“Littles”—with older adults—“Bigs”—for one-on-one activities over

## What Is Mentoring?

a period of years) in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the largest, best-run program of its type in the nation. The effect size of mentoring programs was smaller than might have been expected: approximately .05 (i.e., very small).

Rhodes (2002) does point to three positive mentoring outcomes: enhancing social skills and emotional well-being, improving cognitive skills through dialogue and listening, and serving as a role model and advocate. However, she presents the negative potential of mentoring as well. When adults are inconsistent in their mentoring efforts, the young people involved suffer harm, more than they would had they merely been left alone. The impact of early termination (fewer than six months) was seen in areas such as perception of competence, school attendance, pro-social behavior, and abstinence. The highest benefits of mentoring were seen in relationships that lasted more than a year.

Much of the benefit in mentoring came from setting up good matches. Rhodes developed a survey to measure how well a mentoring relationship was working, covering four major areas:

- Is the relationship helpful?
- Does it meet expectations?
- Does it evoke negative emotions?
- Does the protégé feel close to the mentor?

The absence of negative feeling, Rhodes noted, was a more important predictor of mentoring success than statements of happiness with the mentoring relationship.



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

— What do you expect out of the relationship as a mentee?

Sometimes young people have unrealistic ideas of a mentor's omnipotence. It can be productive to just talk about what a mentor does, and how it is different than a teacher, counselor, friend, or superhero.



## TIE TO LEADERSHIP

### How Researchers Understand Mentoring

David DuBois and colleagues completed a meta-analysis of programs for youth in 2002, finding 55 studies of mentoring to examine. A meta-analysis can tell you, based on a multitude of studies, whether a type of program has an impact on young people, and what the approximate size of that impact is. For youth mentoring programs, this program impact was small, but those programs that were based on research and evidence had a higher impact than those that did not. Programs in schools had less of an impact than those based in the workplace or the community. Matching the race, gender, or interests of mentors and mentees had no impact. Programs with a moderator to help facilitate programming and those that utilized mentors in helping professions (e.g., teaching) scored higher, as did programs with more intensity (more than two hours a week) and with longer duration (more than one year).

A follow-up study of one-on-one mentoring in 2008 found that academic, workplace, and youth mentoring all had positive impacts, and measured these at higher levels than the earlier study. Mentoring that includes academics was found to be most effective, workplace mentoring next, and generic youth mentoring third but still showing a positive impact (Eby, 2008).

The research on mentoring programs should raise some issues for even the most committed proponent of mentoring. Even the largest, best-run programs simply do not generate the kinds of results we would like to see. Programs do not manage to halt the slide, academic and personal, that afflicts most teenage participants. What programs can accomplish is often simply to change the slope of that decline, relative to what it would be in the absence of mentoring.

So what message does research have for mentors?

1. **Go forth and mentor . . .** Research shows us that consistent mentoring has a positive impact, even if that impact is not documented to be as great as we would hope it to be. In real life, we need to decide if mentoring is better than leaving young people entirely to their own devices. So if

mentoring is part of a solid program, with a long-term commitment to young people, research tells us to move forward and make the effort on their behalf.

2. . . . **But only if it is backed by commitment.** Poorly conceived, drive-by programs are proven by research to have a negligible or even negative outcome.
3. **Don't believe the hype.** Mentoring programs cannot positively change all youth outcomes by themselves. Schools need to perform better, health-care systems need to improve their interactions with young people, and mental-health services need to be more broadly available. All of this needs to happen for young people to flourish.
4. **Be encouraged.** Mentors do make a difference, albeit not as big a difference as one would hope, and sometimes just a difference in reducing the level of bad outcomes that young people experience in their teen years. Even when what young people are experiencing is quite bad, ask yourself if it would be better for them to go through the situation alone, or with at least one adult who cares about how the situation turns out?



## REFLECTION

- How do you know your program or a proposed program is effective?
- What key measures do you use now, or would you like to add?

## Resources

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