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ON BECOMING A MENTOR

John Bittleston

John.Bittleston@TerrificMentors.com

Business and Personal Mentor, Founder Mentor

Terrific Mentors Pte Ltd

To some extent almost everyone is a Mentor. Parents, Teachers, Priests, Employers, Politicians (even), in fact, anyone who has the opportunity to influence the thinking and behaviour of another is a Mentor. It is perfectly possible for a child to mentor an adult, for a labourer to mentor a scholar, for a beggar to mentor an archbishop. All the wise men and great prophets throughout history have been Mentors.

You can be a transient mentor to someone you don't even speak to, perhaps on a train or in an aircraft. Those who make sea voyages often find themselves mentoring fellow passengers who are mentally and morally 'lost at sea'. Experienced soldiers mentor young officers. The list is endless.

Partly this universal mentoring is because we are a society, even when we behave as though we are not, and partly it is because we mentor by example as much as by any other tool. That is why the relationship between Mentor and Mentee must always be sacred.

Some people will make better mentors than others. That does not mean that all mentors are alike - far from it. Since mentoring is such a universal activity it is vital that mentors differ not only in what they know but in how they deal with people. Interpersonal chemistry has never been easy to comprehend; likes sometime work well; opposites often attract and form terrific teams; we can only conclude that there is some love and some hate in all relationships.

There are seven attributes that a Mentor MUST have in order to be credible:

[1] Common sense. The definition "good sense and sound judgment in practical matters" is not particularly helpful since it begs the question of what is good sense and what is sound judgment.

Easier to describe the characteristics that identify people who have common sense; we know them when we see them. They consist of identifying the things that really matter, of being able to express them so that others can understand, of making suggestions as to how they may be advanced or resolved that are practical for the people who have to execute them.

Common sense is not a checklist of procedures. It cannot be measured numerically. It is not acquired by qualification although the discipline of academic achievement may support and enhance those who already possess it. A Mentor cannot function without common sense.

[2] Rough edges smoothed. We all carry rough edges to our personalities all our lives. For someone to be a credible Mentor he or she must have had the worst of their rough edges smoothed, enough so that they are not preoccupied with them and yet not so much that they have forgotten how life-directing and painful they are.

Asked on one occasion to describe how good a Mentor one of my Associates was, I replied: 'She has had enough of the rough edges knocked off to be able to stop forgiving and just get on with giving.' A compliment all mentors should deserve.

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The most successful Mentors have been tested very hard by life but never beyond what they could manage. As life is dynamic, this is a continuous process.

[3] Care. Nobody who contemplates becoming a Mentor would admit to not caring. And yet, there are so many different levels and ways of caring that just to claim to care is not enough.

People who work in hospices for the dying do a job that is as emotionally demanding as most. They are taught the disciplines of perpetual optimism and the ways to make the present all important to those for whom the future is short but certain. But go into the sluice room after a death and you will find a few damp tissues and some rather red eyes. The brevity of the relationship somehow often sharpens its intensity and the loss can be as hard as any we have to bear.

Time attended, thoroughness of the pain relief, even the number of smiles can all be counted. The true level of care is only known to two people, the carer and the cared for. A good Mentor will know how much he or she cares. Nobody else can monitor it accurately.

[4] Listening. Abysmally small amounts of what we are told even enter our brains. Good communication is at the heart of good mentoring and the most important part of it is listening. Listening is not a passive business of receiving data. It is a highly active operation of easing the truth to the surface and blowing away the cobwebs of confusion.

Watch archaeologists opening up a new site. They look and listen for a long time even before they touch. When they do begin to dig it is with great care and in such a way that every little clue is carefully exposed and lovingly preserved.

So it has to be with Mentees. A good Mentor will have questions, of course, but it is the response to the answers that will drive the conversation, not the prescribed list of questions. The purpose of mentoring is to get the Mentee to discover his own answers to his or her problems.

[5] Wisdom. Seldom acquired only through experience, wisdom is potentially present in everyone. We have all experienced the wise child whose wisdom comes from innocence and - sometimes devastating - honesty.

A small girl sitting for the first time at her parents' dinner table when guests were present was asked by her mother to say grace. "What shall I say?" enquired the child. "Just say what mummy says," replied her father. The child bowed her head and said "Oh God, whatever possessed me to ask all these people to dinner when we could have had a quiet evening on our own."

For all her sagacity, the girl didn't satisfy the full definition of wisdom as understanding what is true or right coupled with good judgment about action. We think people are wise when they express thoughts that we believe we have had but have never been able to articulate. Wisdom is therefore obvious; it is how we apply it that makes it useful. A Mentor must relate general wisdom to each specific case.

[6] Lucidity. Intelligibility in communicating is more than saying what needs to be said. It involves understanding what the listener is likely to understand. Cross-culturally, idiomatic language is as unhelpful as speaking in a totally foreign tongue. Good communicators judge the capacity of their listener to absorb thought and information and avoid making their meaning obscure by using ambiguous or unknown words.

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Misunderstanding - sometimes deliberate - in work and home relationships is the basis of many Mentees' problems. Misunderstandings with a Mentor and those trying to help them may be an avoiding tactic or an excuse for failing to help themselves.

[7] Creativity. Creativity is the ability to perceive relationships, not just between people but between situations. Usually this amounts to identifying a need and finding an available resource to satisfy it. Every problem has a solution; few have a perfect one. A good Mentor gets the Mentee to define the need and then helps them to identify the available resources to satisfy it.

Terrific Mentors help people in Business, Career and their Personal Lives

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