Mentors and Protégés: Simple Rules for Success

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Mentoring is a partnering relationship where a senior, more experienced officer provides guidance and advice to a junior officer in order to foster professional growth in the subordinate. Speaking from personal experience, mentoring has been and remains the single most important factor in my development and growth as an officer and a leader. The following are some "kernels of wisdom" for the mentoring relationship that I have discovered during my nearly quarter century of experience as both mentor and protégé. I have distilled this experience into two sets of 10 common sense, yet remarkably often overlooked rules—one set each for the mentor and the protégé respectively.

Ten Simple Rules for Mentors

When initiating any discussion on mentoring, a natural question to ask is where to begin? Do you start with the mentor or the one being mentored (protégé)? While the contributions of both participants are important, mentoring successes or failures most often depend upon the skills of the mentor. If the mentor is not prepared to do his or her job, then the entire mentoring process may be ineffective and, consequently, discourage the protégé from any future mentoring opportunities. It is hoped that by considering these 10 simple rules, mentors, present and future, will be better prepared to assume this very important role.

Mentor Rule #1
It's Not About You!

Being chosen to be someone's mentor is a powerful, potentially intoxicating experience. Not surprising, it is easy to let it go to your head. However, if you simply engage in mentoring to satisfy your own ego, you will ultimately fail. At best, your protégé will recognize that you are just doing this for yourself and not for him or her. At worst, you will model a self-centered behavior that your protégé may emulate and then perpetuate when he or she becomes a mentor. While mentoring does offer benefits to the mentor, such as self-validation and establishing a legacy, the primary focus of mentoring is on the individual being mentored, the protégé. Since not all attempts at a mentoring relationship will be successful and not all of your advice will necessarily be followed, you should be humble while mentoring and check your ego at the door. It is also essential that you do not use the mentoring relationship as a vehicle to exploit the protégé for your own personal gain. For example, avoid giving "busy work" that you do not want to do to a protégé under the guise of it "being good for him or her". Chances are your protégé will see right through this veiled attempt at exploitation and understandably grow to resent it.

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MENTOR RULE #2

Always Maintain Confidences

Trust is critical in a healthy mentoring relationship. Hence, matters discussed between a mentor and a protégé must remain confidential (as long as the issue does not involve violations of Army regulations or the Uniform Code of Military Justice). It is in this "safe" environment that a protégé can openly share mistakes or any lack of self-confidence. It also allows the junior mentoring partner to take risks without fearing negative consequences. Given that, the mentor should not share the protégé's mistakes and setbacks with others. Of course, maintaining confidences goes both ways. This trusting environment allows the senior mentoring partner to share lessons learned from personal mistakes and failures without the fear of these "blunders" becoming common knowledge. Always remember, trust takes a long time to become fully established, yet it can be destroyed in a matter of moments.

MENTOR RULE #3

Set and Enforce Boundaries

This rule deals with avoiding one of the darker aspects of a mentoring partnership—the development of an inappropriate relationship. Throughout the course of mentoring a junior officer, it is easy to develop a liking or affinity for your mentoring partner. But, it is imperative that the mentor keep the relationship professional. As a mentor, you must always insist on maintaining military courtesy with no exceptions. As a personal example, I called my mentor of more than 20 years, "Sir" until the day he retired as a colonel. If you are a supervisor to your protégé, you must never let your role as a mentor compromise your duties and responsibilities as a rater. You must avoid letting any hint of cronyism or favoritism to creep into your decision making. Of course, a romantic relationship with your protégé is strictly forbidden and will probably adversely affect both of your careers. A final note: you should never allow your mentoring relationship to circumvent the chain of command.

MENTOR RULE #4

Know Your Limitations

Once you have gained the trust and confidence of your protégé, you may find yourself asked for guidance in areas about which you know very little, or, perhaps, nothing at all. That is why it is so important that you acknowledge any such limitations when providing advice. There may be the temptation to provide guidance, any guidance, just so that you don't lose face. Admitting a lack of knowledge on a subject may seem like a weakness and threaten to undermine your standing with the protégé. But, in actuality, acknowledging your own lack of expertise or experience will further strengthen your mentoring relationship. Those being mentored do not expect their mentors to know everything, but, rather to share their experiences and point them in the right direction. So, if you are asked to provide advice on a subject about which your knowledge is limited, you should guide the protégé in the proper direction and, if possible, to the best person who can give them the necessary guidance.

MENTOR RULE #5

Keep Your Promises

Mentoring takes time, your most valuable resource. Before entering into a mentoring partnership, it is crucial that you determine whether or not you can make the time to dedicate to such an endeavor (I strongly believe that if you truly think that mentoring is important, you will make the time for it!). If you cannot dedicate the time, then I suggest that you do not even attempt it. Once you have decided to commit to a mentoring relationship, you must follow through with your promises. For example, if you agree to weekly meetings with your protégé, you must keep these appointments. If you promise to review a junior officer's OER Support Form, then do it and provide your feedback in a timely manner. A pattern of broken appointments and unfilled promises will send a clear message to your mentoring partner that you are not really devoted to his or her development. So, do what you say you are going to do, when you say you are going to do it.

MENTOR RULE #6

Listen and Ask Questions

A common misconception about mentoring is that the protégé simply brings problems to the mentor and the mentor tells the protégé what to do. Although this may be tempting for both mentoring partners, it should be done sparingly. First, do not assume that you automatically know what your mentoring partner needs from you. You need to truly listen to the questions that the protégé is asking. Practice effective listening to be sure you are giving the actual help or advice that is required. Interestingly enough, a highly effective way to impart wisdom is by asking questions that lead the protégé to discover the right answer for him or herself. I know firsthand that this can be very frustrating to the protégé who usually simply wants a quick answer. However, in the long run, it teaches the one being mentored how to think through problems and independently develop sound solutions.

MENTOR RULE #7

Reach Out to Junior Officers

It is essential that, as a senior officer and potential mentor, one must remain approachable. In the Army, rank can be very intimidating. Remember how you were intimidated by senior officers when you first joined the Army. Given that fact, we as senior leaders need to break the ice. A practice that I learned from another of my mentors is to initiate conversations with junior officers whom I do not know. I introduce myself and ask where they are from and try to learn a little about them. This simple gesture pays big dividends in the long run. It greatly increases the probability that these officers will seek me out for guidance in the future.

MENTOR RULE #8

Don't Sugarcoat Feedback

Honest feedback is very important in an effective mentoring partnership. However, there may be a temptation to soften constructive feedback so as not to offend the protégé or ruin the mentoring relationship. Typically, when handled correctly, such corrective feedback is usually some of the most important mentoring that you can give a young officer. Now, I am not condoning, degrading, or belittling the individual. Negative feedback needs to be specific, given judiciously and unemotionally. Of course, it helps if such feedback is "sandwiched" between positive comments. As with all counseling, it should be done immediately and in private to have the greatest impact. The feedback should also provide recommendations on how to address shortcomings or areas that need improvement. It is important to always separate the individual from the undesirable behavior. Finally, once the matter is discussed, it should not be brought up again unless the behavior or mistake is repeated.

MENTOR RULE #9

Be Yourself

Since mentoring is a relationship between two unique individuals, there is no single guaranteed recipe for mentoring. The relationship will naturally reflect the distinct personalities of the pair of individuals involved. So, it is important that, as a mentor, you are authentic. Your deeds should match your words or "your walk should match your talk." If you are an introvert by nature, trying to come across as an extrovert will seem phony. One thing that may help you in developing your own style is to do some self-reflection. This can help you identify the key elements of your leadership style and how you can use these traits to become a more effective mentor. The good thing about mentoring is the more that you do it, the better you will become. So take pride in being a mentor and do it your own way, with both passion and conviction.

MENTOR RULE #10

Commit to Continuous Learning

Whatever your military specialty, you should be dedicated to maintaining your technical competency and staying abreast of advancements in your field. This is also true for the leadership and mentoring skills required to be an effective officer. A way to do this is to set aside some quiet time for reading professional journals, those relating to your military specialty and those related to officership. While you are probably aware of professional references for your technical discipline, you may not be aware of journals for leader development. Army journals that may be of help are *Military Review*, published by the US Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, KS, and *Parameters*, from the US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, PA. Both institutions support websites from where their articles may be downloaded:

Military Review – http://usacac.leavenworth.army.mil/CAC/milreview/index.asp

Parameters – http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/

This publication, the *AMEDD Journal*, is another venue for staying current in developments with the Army Medical Department. Finally, if you are serious about growing as a mentor, you should avidly read all that you can on the subject of mentoring. For a list of suggested reading material, I have included a bibliography of books and articles (page 28) that I have found helpful in my personal growth as a mentor.

SUMMARY

The key points of the above rules include remembering that mentoring is about the protégé, not the mentor. Confidences must always be maintained to ensure trust. The mentor needs to set and enforce boundaries in the relationship to ensure professionalism. A mentor must know his or her limitations when giving guidance or advice. Promises made by the mentor need to be kept if the relationship is to last. During the mentoring, the senior officer must use effective listening and should refrain from simply telling the protégé what to do in order to develop problem-solving skills in the protégé. Potential mentors must be approachable if junior officers are to feel comfortable in seeking them out as mentors. Feedback needs to be specific and, when necessary, include constructive criticism. Mentors must understand themselves and develop a mentoring style that is authentic and consistent with who they really are. Finally, mentors need to dedicate themselves to continuous learning, technically, tactically, and as mentors.

It is my sincere hope that, by considering these key points, mentors will be better prepared to focus on the individualized needs of their respective protégés, the real goal of any successful mentoring relationship.

TEN SIMPLE RULES FOR PROTÉGÉS

While the skills of the mentor are critical to mentoring, the protégé also shares responsibility for ensuring that the relationship is successful. Unfortunately, some new protégés may not be aware of their responsibilities as a mentoring partner. Hence, the following 10 rules for protégés are presented to help them realize the greatest benefit from their mentoring relationships.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #1

Cherish your Mentor's Time

It is important that as a protégé you truly value your mentor's time. Your mentor is setting aside time exclusively for your development and growth. Consequently, you owe it to your mentoring partner to always be on time and fully prepared for meetings with him or her. If he or she assigns you "homework" to do, such as reading assignments, then you must be sure to complete your tasks before they are due. To not do so may be viewed by your mentor as a cavalier attitude and will likely hurt the relationship. Your mentor may reasonably conclude that, if you do not take your professional development seriously, why should he or she?

PROTÉGÉ RULE #2

Always Maintain Confidences

One of the cornerstones of a successful mentoring relationship is trust. It is within a safe relationship that the protégé is able to freely ask questions, express concerns, and take risks without the fear of negative consequences. One of the most effective ways for mentors to impart wisdom is by sharing personal challenges and setbacks and what lessons the mentor has learned from them. Since it is unlikely that anyone would want their mistakes widely advertised to others, the same is probably true for those who mentor. Therefore, when your mentor tells you things in confidence, you must honor that special trust and not share the information outside of the mentoring relationship. Simply put, genuine trust only develops over time and can be destroyed in an instant. Consequently, it is imperative that you always maintain confidences.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #3
Learn from Your Mistakes

Good mentors do not expect perfection in those they mentor and fully expect their protégés to make mistakes. Interestingly enough, it is usually from our mistakes and failures that we learn our greatest lessons. So, be willing to take risks and try new things; it is essential for your growth as an officer and a leader. Also, accept that you will, from time to time, make mistakes. If and when you do fall short, reflect upon those setbacks and glean whatever lesson that lies at the heart of your failure. Now, while a mentor should be tolerant of mistakes, an effective mentor will not tolerate a protégé repeating the same mistake. Such behavior does not show personal growth and maturity. Be sure to learn from your mistakes and not repeat them.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #4
Be Receptive to Feedback

One of the most effective tools in successful mentoring is the use of feedback. Often feedback is positive and encouraging. It can be just what a protégé needs during trying or difficult times. But, sometimes the feedback is more critical. The key to being a good protégé is to accept the bad with the good. If you expect your mentor to only shower you with praise, you will be missing the full breath and depth of mentoring. So, keep your ego in check and listen objectively to any constructive feedback from your mentor. While it might not seem so at the time, such wisdom and insight can often be some of the most important mentoring that you will receive.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #5
Keep Your Promises

Mentoring requires your most valuable resource, namely your time. Before entering into a mentoring partnership, be sure that you can dedicate time to such an endeavor. If you cannot set aside the time, then I suggest that you do not enter into a mentoring partnership. That being said, if you do commit to a mentoring relationship, you must follow through with your promises. For example, if you agree to weekly meetings with your mentor, you must keep these appointments. If you promise to provide your OER Support Form to your mentor, then do it promptly. Broken appointments and unfilled promises will clearly demonstrate that you are not serious about being mentored. To avoid this common pitfall, keep your promises to your mentor. By doing this, you will also be keeping an important promise to yourself, namely to make the most of being mentored.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #6

Genuinely Consider Advice Given

One of the most valuable benefits of mentoring is the opportunity to freely ask for advice. Guidance can range from the technical aspects of getting the job done, to suggestions about choosing an assignment, or whether or not to continue pursuing a military career. As a courtesy to your mentor, you should thoughtfully consider any advice that is given. Now, this does not mean that you simply do whatever the mentor suggests. Rather, it is best to listen to the suggestions given and then carefully decide whether or not to follow the advice. A self-confident mentor does not expect the protégé to follow every bit of advice. However, if you are constantly seeking advice from your mentor, but never follow his or her guidance, then chances are that your mentor will stop giving you any advice. (This happened to me with one junior officer I was mentoring. This recurring behavior ultimately ended the mentoring relationship.) So, genuinely consider any guidance that is given and, if you choose not to follow it, explain to your mentor why you elected not to follow the advice. This kind of open dialogue will help to ensure that your mentor does not feel that he or she is wasting his or her time.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #7

Clarify Your Expectations

Since the focus of the mentoring is on the needs of the protégé, it is important that you clarify your expectations to your mentor. For example, if you are only looking for someone to be a role model or a sounding board, you should make that clear. If you are looking for a more in-depth relationship, you should also spell this out. What you require from the mentoring relationship will determine the degree of your mentor's involvement. Therefore, open and honest communication is critical to ensure that your actual needs are being met. Clarifying your expectations will make it easier for you to gauge your progress and determine whether or not your mentoring goals are being fulfilled.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #8

Respect the Chain of Command

It is important to remember that mentoring is not a way to bypass or interfere with the chain of command. For example, you should never use your mentor to "go over your boss's head" in order to reverse a decision with which you disagree. Also, refrain from asking your mentor to intervene in matters between you and your rater. Now, that is not to say that you cannot ask your mentor for advice on how to talk with your rater or resolve any disagreements. However, your mentor should not be inserting him or herself between you and your rater. Any such interference would be highly inappropriate. So, always remember to respect your chain of command and do not use your mentoring relationship as a short cut around it.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #9

Bring More Than Just Your Problems

Over the years, I have had protégés come to me with problems and they wanted me to simply tell them what to do (Much to their chagrin, rarely did I just give them the answer!). Since the ultimate goal of mentoring is the development of a self-reliant officer that can independently make timely and effective decisions, it is important for protégés to develop their own skills in problem-solving. To help achieve this goal, it is desirable that, along with the given problem that needs solving, you come armed with potential solutions. While this may seem like more work for you and your proposed courses of action may ultimately prove to be inappropriate, this sort of exercise will help you in the long run by improving your ability to solve your own problems.

PROTÉGÉ RULE #10

Commit to Continuous Learning

Whatever your military specialty, you should be dedicated to maintaining your technical competency and staying abreast of advancements in your field. This is also true for the leadership and mentoring skills required to be an effective officer. A way to do this is to set aside some quiet time for reading professional journals, those relating to your military specialty and those related to officership. While you are probably aware of professional references for your technical discipline, you may not be aware of journals for leader development. Army journals that may be of help are *Military Review*, published by the US Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, KS, and *Parameters*, from the US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, PA. Both institutions support websites from where their articles may be downloaded:

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SUMMARY

The key points of the protégé's rules include remembering that the protégé must cherish the mentor's time and make the most of it. Mutual trust is dependent upon maintaining confidences. A protégé must learn from his or her mistakes if he or she is to grow as an Army leader. Being receptive to feedback, both positive and negative, is essential to maximize the mentoring experience. Promises made by the protégé must be kept if the relationship is to last. While not all advice must be followed, the protégé should genuinely consider the guidance that is received and, if the advice is rejected, explain to the mentor why it was not followed. Clarifying expectations will ensure that the type of help wanted is provided and that the mentoring goals are achieved. Protégés must never use their mentors to bypass the chain of command or ask the mentor to intervene in issues between the protégé and his or her rating chain. When bringing problems to their mentors, protégés should also have possible solutions in mind to foster the development of their own problem-solving skills. Finally, those being mentored must dedicate themselves to continuous learning, technically, tactically, and as protégés.

I offer these key points in the hope that they will assist junior officers to better prepare for their roles as successful mentoring partners in order to reap all of the lasting rewards of being mentored.