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MENTORING VOLUNTEERS FOR RETENTION & DEVELOPMENT

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THE MYTHOLOGY OF MENTORING

Homer's Mentos: The Original Mentor

The cultural history of mentoring begins with the role of Mentos in Homer's *Odyssey* and extends in our time to Steven Spielberg's mysterious Obi-Wan Kenobi in the modern classic, *Star Wars*.

Unlike the story of Obi-Wan, which continues over a number of films, the material on Mentos takes up but a small, though highly significant, part of the *Odyssey*. It makes sense then, given our time limits today, that we look briefly to Mentos as the original model from whose own name the term "mentor" derives.

When Odysseus, King of Ithaca, left his island to fight in the Trojan War he placed his son Telemachus in the care of an old friend named Mentos (Mentor). Mentor was to act as a surrogate father—that is, to advise, counsel, teach, motivate, inspire, guide, and protect his young charge (Carruthers, 1993).

In *Travels with Odysseus: Uncommon Wisdom from Homer's Odyssey*, Michael J. Golderberg (2005, p.68) describes a mentor as "a wisdom teacher"—a person who may provide another with "authoritative guidance about the road ahead."

But was that really true of Mentos?

Evidently not.

A reading of the text itself reveals that due to Mentor's inattentiveness things rapidly went from bad to worse for young Telemachus and his mother, Penelope. Mentor, we may surmise, was too involved in his own affairs to be of much assistance to either of them.

Although the point is commonly overlooked or even misrepresented (Roberts, 1999), it is only when the goddess Athena appears in the guise of Mentor that any real mentoring takes place.

What is it about Athena that makes this meaningful?

Athena and the True Spirit of Mentoring

To begin with, Athena is a goddess of war as well as wisdom. This might seem strange since war is so often unwisely undertaken. In Athena's case, however, the pairing of wisdom and war makes sense. Her forté is defensive, protective warfare. Thus she is almost always depicted with both helmet and shield, articles of protection. In fact, her most common persona is Pallas Athene (Helmeted Athena).

Nonetheless the helmet is tilted back and its visor is open, giving her a clear field of view so that nothing escapes her notice. At the same time, of course, Athena is never without her single-pointed spear—suggesting that she possesses the capacity to thrust right to the heart of any situation.

Despite all that, there is nothing at all ostentatious about her self-presentation. She always appears modestly dressed, fully covered in a long gown and grounded in flat, practical sandals which are not ornate in any way.

Acting as Mentos, she imparts wisdom to Telemachus by means of which he is able to protect

and defend himself from his enemies—and from his own immaturity.

Although she is a powerful goddess Athena chooses to be intimate with Telemachus, rather than remote from him. She comes to his palace and engages in conversation with him, drinking his wine and eating the food he provides. This is the setting in which she encourages him to rise to his duty and undertake a journey in search of his father.

Telemachus cannot leave on that journey until he has sorted out those who wish him harm at home. He is naturally afraid of confronting them. Athena, however, tells him that he is his father's son. As such, he possesses the same exceptional qualities of courage and intelligence that make Odysseus the man he is.

Acting on this encouragement, he rises to his own nature and sets sail on a quest that transforms his life.

THE METHODOLOGY OF MENTORING

Mentoring and the Practice of Virtue Ethics

As Solomon (2003, p. 57) points out, "Virtue ethics has a long pedigree, going back to Plato and Aristotle, Confucius in China, and many other cultures as well." Two time-tested traditional virtues are most important in mentoring (and indeed in life): *sincerity* and *charity*.

Sincerity

Partridge (1958) suggests that the etymology of "sincere" reveals the image of an imperfect statue, the cracks of which have not been "waxed over" in order to conceal its true condition—an image similar to the concept of "unvarnished truth." A similar understanding of "sincere" obtains in Chinese, as well, where perfect sincerity is represented by a sequence of the characters for "open," "heart," "see," and "sincerity," [*k'ai hsin chien ch'eng*; 開心見誠] (Matthews, 1948, p. 481) and where the word for "concealment" also means "injury" in such a way that to hide is to harm (Cleary, 1986, p. 144).

In mentoring then, as in the rest of life, one who hides himself from another injures the relationship between them.

The open-hearted-seeing sincerity which reveals the true person in full relatedness can be thought of in two ways. It can mean the sincerity of one who has opened his heart to another's view, despite his own imperfections.

It can also refer to the kind of vision available to one who sees with an open heart.

When both meanings come together, we have a mentor who is able to see and to be seen without any artifice, prejudice, or obstruction.

Charity

Derived from the Latin word *caritas*, the meaning of charity is love. The root *care* is easily recognizable in English as the kind of love that involves care and concern for another.

The Chinese have a similar sense of this kind of love. They call it *jen* (仁), meaning human heartedness, or deep compassionate concern.

It is both interesting and highly significant that 仁 consists of a variation of *ren* (人), the graph for an upright human being, paired with *er* (二), the number two.

Jen thus represents the very foundation of human society: two persons standing in caring relation to one another.

It is a fine image of what true mentoring is about.

Mentoring As Influence Communication

Nothing is more important to effective mentoring than influence communication. Properly understood, influence communication is altogether magical.

As *social psychokinesis*, it can create action at a distance and make multiple things happen in a single instant.

It can cause people and situations to grow, develop, generate, and regenerate on their own.

In fact, its powers are so great that its only restrictions are the limits of human nature itself.

While virtually all human communication is influence communication of one kind or another—we all speak, sing, hum, write, and gesture to people in order to affect them in some way—the influence communication which concerns an effective mentor most is that which stimulates and guides developmental change.

Principles of Influence Communication

Here are some basic principles of influence communication which are particularly germane to mentoring.

Know before whom you stand

התא ימין פל עד — “*Dah lifnai mi atta omed.*” These words, “Know before whom you stand,” written during the Talmudic period by Rabbi Eleazer ben Hyrkanos (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 28b), have been emblazoned on the ark above the Torah scrolls in synagogues around the world for well over a thousand years.

The text originally referred to the respectful attitude one must have in relation to God during the dialog of prayer—maintaining a critical awareness of the difference between human nature and the deep mystery of divinity.

Jewish philosophers over time have also recognized its importance in our relations with people, as well. In that context, it is a call to be both respectful and understanding of the individuality—and the mystery—of others.

Never assume—always inquire

One of the greatest mistakes a mentor can make is to act on unconfirmed assumptions about a protégé. Effective mentors always remember that they stand before another human being who is as complex, complicated, and in some ways inscrutable as they are.

“*What do you mean by that?*” It is vital to ask protégés what they mean by what they say, how they understand what is said to them, why they approached a particular task the way they did, and

how they intend to undertake each new assignment (when it is given to them).

Make Meaningful Eye Contact

We all know from personal experience something that social psychologists proved long ago through academic research: “Without eye contact, people do not feel that they are fully in communication” (Argyle and Dean, 1965, p. 289). Research also reinforces the common sense understanding that how we look at people has a lot to do with how they respond to us (Shimojo, 2003). Interested, active eye contact engenders trust and confidence, while refusal to connect eye-to-eye with others produces feelings of suspicion and social discomfort. Looking at and seeing others also helps in gauging their reactions to us.

Good, comfortable, socially appropriate eye contact is indispensable both as a means of reassuring protégés in general and for clearly communicating important information which one wants to be received seriously.

Use volunteers’ names often

Everyone likes to be recognized by name. We have distinctive physiological responses when our names are called, including a marked increase in the neural activity of specific areas of the brain (Kampe, 2003). Protégés really do “light up” when addressed by name.

Use smooth conjunctions

Effective mentors try not to butt up against the word “but.” No one likes to hear, “That’s a good idea *but* we’ll table it for now.” It is somehow easier to accept, “That’s a good idea *and* we’ll table it for now.”

It is also best to avoid “iffing” about. “If” leaves open the possibility of *not*. Note the difference between “*If* we do it this way, it *will* work better” and “*When* we do it this way, it *works* better.”

The second statement is significantly more positive—and directive. It contains no implication of any result other than success.

(Note also the use of “we” instead of “you.” Because it is more cooperative than prescriptive, it tends to lessen the perceived distance between the mentor and protégé.)

Be alert to protégés’ feelings

Affect (emotion, feeling) is an integral part of every human interaction. Effective mentors are sensitive to the feelings generated through their words, actions, and decisions.

They always take their protégés’ feelings into consideration—without being controlled by them.

MENTORING FOR RETENTION

The effort and expenditure involved in replacing lost volunteers can be quite substantial. When volunteers leave, they can leave holes behind them. Work falls into these holes and does not get done—unless it is taken on by others who already have their own work to do. The holes must be filled either by new volunteers or by operational restructuring. Either solution is costly in terms of lost productivity and the time and expense of new training.

Therefore, whenever volunteers are important to an organization, mentoring them for retention becomes a critical goal. In order for that goal to be realized, the mentoring relationship must become meaningful and rewarding for both mentor and protégé alike.

Why Volunteers Leave

Somewhat surprisingly, however, an important study by the UPS Foundation (1998) reported that more volunteers withdraw their services due to dissatisfaction than as a result of changes in their lives outside the organization for which they volunteered.

In fact, two-fifths of volunteers surveyed were found to have left at one time or another simply out of frustration or disappointment at such things as poor use of their time, failure to recognize and employ their talents, and role ambiguity (absence of clear communications as to what was expected of them).

Four Simple Rules for Retention

There are four simple things mentors can do to keep volunteer protégés actively involved over time. All are fundamental to a mutually rewarding mentor-protégé relationship.

Recognize, recognize, recognize!

Recognition is one of the chief means of enriching a volunteer's experience—and thus his or her desire to remain with an organization (Grossman and Furano, 2002).

Personal recognition from a mentor is of prime importance to any protégé and can take many forms, including a private comment, a thank-you note, or the mention of good work in the presence of other staff and volunteers.

Recognition events, where years-of-service pins, certificates, awards, commendations, gifts and other tangible proofs of appreciation are presented, are very important.

Equally important, but generally overlooked, is the exceptional reward factor of public recognition. Hager and Brudney (2004) found that fully two thirds of organizations studied failed to offer any public recognition to volunteers—yet who among us would not like be included in a television or newspaper story about the work we do?

SDSU Alumni Association mentors can forward volunteers names and contributions to *360* and can ask the association's or the university's public relations personnel for help in letting the community at large know what their protégés have accomplished.

Be rewarding to be with

In many ways the mentor is the real reward. We are all interesting in different ways. Effective mentors let their interesting sides show. They share stories and experiences with their protégés. They set aside time to socialize and have fun with them.

Be available

Mentors must always understand that their personal time and attention as mentors are valuable and desirable—*because their protégés value and desire them*. If a mentor is unable for any reason to grasp that, then he or she ought not to attempt mentoring.

Introduce them around

Presumably, mentors are mentors because they are successful—and successful people know and associate with other successful people. Mentors who share their organizational, business, and community contacts with their protégés are much more likely to retain them over time.

MENTORING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Developmental mentoring is a highly profitable investment in the future leadership of an organization. This is perhaps especially true in situations where volunteers play key roles—and where one of the main benefits of volunteering is the opportunity to learn new things and exercise new responsibilities.

There are several factors a mentor can emphasize to ensure that development succeeds. They include:

Ensure a Developmental Culture

Protégés may be expected to thrive best in settings where a genuinely developmental orientation is the norm. There are several ways mentors can show that development is a priority.

Most important is to provide sufficient resources and encourage their use. The mentor can have a library dedicated to the subject and available to all staff and volunteers. If this is not possible, a book list can be provided and prominently displayed. The mentor should refer to these resources from time to time and ask what protégés and others have learned from them.

In addition to seminars, colloquia, presentations and other educational events, informal salon-style tea-party discussion groups demonstrate that development is both highly valued and expected—and fun.

Another way to highlight the developmental ethic is to encourage protégés to act as recruiters and trainers for other volunteers whenever possible.

Focus on Solutions

To get the most out of mentoring, protégés need to learn to focus on solutions not problems. After all, it is better to focus on the quick discovery of solutions than to get stuck working on problems. Emphasizing problems easily leads to blaming, factions—and more problems.

Effective mentors will not waste time asking protégés “What’s wrong with where you are” but will pose this question instead: “Where do you want to be and what will get you there?”

Be More Dialogical Than Didactic

In the mentoring milieu, dialogical interaction is often far more effective in creating change and learning than didactic instruction.

The dialogical approach (first modeled by Socrates) engages the protégé in critical analysis and self-reflection as part of solution discovery. What is learned in this way is a matter of one’s own effort. That makes it more meaningful in many ways—and more likely to be applied generally—than information handed down from someone else.

An effective mentor is not purely Socratic, however. He or she answers appropriate questions

as well as asks them, yet nonetheless does so in a manner that engages the protégé's solution-focused imagination.

Employ Positive Feedback

Positive feedback is part of the solution-focused approach. It keeps protégés on track with what is working, provides assurance that they are valued, and promotes a sense of self-confidence. Mistakes must of course be acknowledged, corrected, and learned from, but focusing on them is detrimental to protégé development.

Teach From Past Mistakes

Teaching protégés how to learn from mistakes should involve the mentor's own history in that regard. Some of the best knowledge mentors can offer is knowledge of what to avoid. By sharing their past failures and mistakes, they provide invaluable vicarious experience.

Provide Navigational Expertise

Every organization has a culture with a combination of formal and informal rules of operation. Mentors usually have enough time and experience in the organization to understand how to navigate along both lines.

This is some of the most valuable tutelage any protégé can receive. No mentor should neglect it. Moreover protégés should be urged to apply their newly acquired skills as soon and as broadly as possible in order to learn from experience. When mistakes are made, the mentor should help to smooth the way—and make sure lessons are learned.

Delegate Responsibility

Human beings learn best through experience. It is therefore the mentor's role to provide learning opportunities for protégés by delegating responsibility to them. Get them involved in planning and fulfilling various projects, taking over routine tasks, and directing others as needed.

Show them how to get work done through the work of others—with the *practical magic of social psychokinesis*.

Mentor the Whole Person

Mentoring is a true meeting of persons in which not only skills and information but also significant human values are shared and acquired.

As with Athena/Mentes and Telemachus, when a mentor undertakes to guide a protégé he or she takes an important part of that person's future, and in many ways something of his life, into her hands for a significant period of time.

Whatever wisdom the mentor imparts in terms of organizational and interpersonal skills will naturally carry over into the protégé's family and other social activities. This is simply an inherent social psychological characteristic of the relationship and cannot be avoided.

The sincere and charitable mentor acknowledges this and acts to cultivate and promote the protégé's fullest human potential as much as her organizational success. It is this responsibility which takes mentoring beyond the scope of coaching and training.

Practice Self-development

Ongoing self-cultivation is one of the hallmarks of effective mentors. The more they grow, the more they have to offer. Moreover, mentors who continually work to understand and better themselves soon discover how much they have in common with others.

Naturally enough, such self-knowledge positively informs the way they relate with protégés.

Get Your Own Mentor

There are mentors who mentor mentors.

Not only are they of great help in many ways, but having your own formal or informal mentor is an excellent way to role-model the value of mentoring itself.

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MENTORING QUOTES

"Mentoring is all about people—it's about caring, relationships and sensitivity. As it becomes increasingly in vogue it's becoming too formulated—too concerned with performance metrics, critical success factors, investment and spending. It'll be a disaster."

Rene Carayol
Business Leader & Speaker/Author
Former Managing Director IPC Electric

"The capacity to shape a vision of that which can be achieved, and to share it with others so that it becomes their own, is one of the most important elements of leadership."

David Pennington, Vice Chancellor
University of Melbourne 1988-1995

"If you put fences around people, you get sheep."

William McKnight
Former 3M CEO

"Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us to do the best we can."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Tell them what you want them to do, but don't tell them how to do it. You will be amazed at their ingenuity."

George S. Patton
General, United States Army

J. Kingston Cowart, M.S.

Curriculum Vita



PRIVATE PRACTICE

J. Kingston Cowart, M.S. has been a specialist in the practice of influence communication in San Diego, California for over 37 years. He works with people who want to make important changes in their lives quickly. He also creates organizational change through solution-focused management training & consulting; and delivers presentations that stimulate real change in managers, employees, and organizations.

UNIVERSITY TEACHING

J. Kingston Cowart founded the San Diego State University Self-Hypnosis Program, teaching self-hypnosis for academic improvement and personal development to some 5000 students over 28 semesters (1971-1985). A nationally noted course, the program received favorable notice in *Psychology Today* and stimulated interest in other universities as far away as Belgium and Brazil. During its thirteen-year existence, the program was the only university offering of its kind in the world.

Mr. Cowart developed many innovative and highly effective techniques in educational hypnosis. As a consequence he created and taught a program for the SDSU school of education on Hypnosis and Self-Hypnosis in Educational Processes. Originally intended as a single semester offering for teachers and graduate students, the course was continued for two and a half years. A frequent guest lecturer, he has also taught additional courses on hypnosis at SDSU from time to time for both graduate and undergraduate credit in sociology, education, athletics, and criminal justice. He has taught police psychology at Southwestern College; the tactics of interpersonal relations in hot calls for the San Diego County Sheriff's Department; and lectured on both altered states of consciousness and consciousness and self-change for California State University - San Marcos extended studies.

SEMINARS AND PROFESSIONAL CONSULTING

J. Kingston Cowart is an engaging and informative presenter for seminars, lectures, and keynote addresses on influence communication, the philosophy and metaphysics of change, organizational change, and related topics.

He offers personnel training in such areas as self-hypnosis, motivation, stress management, salesmanship, executive development, and health & wellness—as well as Solution-Focused Management Consulting—for corporations, private companies, public institutions, and other organizations.

A graduate of the *Law Enforcement Hypnosis Institute* in Los Angeles, Mr. Cowart pioneered the use of hypnosis in criminal investigation for San Diego County in 1974 and served for several years as forensic hypnosis consultant to the San Diego Sheriff's Department.

A SPIRITUAL APPROACH

Having completed a two-year interfaith seminary program through St. John's University (Springfield, LA), J. Kingston Cowart was ordained as an interfaith minister of the Congregational Church of Practical Theology on July 15, 2003. His private practice and other professional activities are thus part of an ongoing ministry of support for others on their own paths to self-change. It is therefore part of the mission of the Center for Self-Change to help promote an understanding of those essential psychological and spiritual truths which can be of use to members of all faiths (as well as to persons whose beliefs and values are entirely secular).

J. Kingston Cowart's own background is well suited to that mission. In addition to separate bachelor of arts degrees in sociology and psychology and a master of science degree in counseling, he has also completed over 90 undergraduate and graduate units in the fields of philosophy and religion. These include courses related to the equivalent of a third bachelor's degree in religious studies and the Master of Arts in philosophy and psychology of religion. His major interests have been in world religions, East Asian traditions, metaphysics, and philosophy of spirit.

He has studied the Teaching of Philosophy and Religion with Huston Smith, Ph.D., author of *The World's Religions* and subject of "The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith," PBS 1996; Philosophy of Religion and Psychology of Religion with Maurice Friedman, Ph.D., moderator of the famous 1957 dialogue between Carl Rogers and Martin Buber, and Buber's authorized biographer; and Ways of Transformation and Philosophy of Spirit with Allan W. Anderson, Ph.D., a major interlocutor of J. Krishnamurti, author of *A Wholly Different Way of Being: Krishnamurti in Dialogue with Professor Allan W. Anderson* and an exceptional professor of religious studies whose unparalleled series of special topics classes Mr. Cowart attended for 26 years. During the course of these studies, he also became acquainted with Joseph Campbell, M.A., author of *The Masks of God* and subject of "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth," PBS 1988, for whose academic, professional, and personal advice he remains most grateful.

These influences have led J. Kingston Cowart to an approach toward self-change which emphasizes the essentially spiritual nature of the human condition. He agrees with Carl Jung's position that psychology must be spiritually informed if it is to be of

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any real use at all. He further believes that what may generally be called Spirit is the source of self in each of us— and is thus the true agent of self-change (whether acknowledged or not).

Mr. Cowart does not require nor even expect that his clients accept these views. They simply represent the perspective from which he envisions reality and the basis on which he works to help others achieve the changes they desire.

Read the full curriculum vita, including academic degrees, organizations, and offices, online at www.self-change.com.