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## The Making of a Mentor

When you think about the times you've been able to guide someone else's growth and development—whether it's through a relationship with your child or a younger colleague at work—you probably recall a great sense of satisfaction. Psychologist Erik Erikson says adults in middle adulthood are engaged in the “generativity versus stagnation” stage of psychosocial development. Generativity—leaving a lasting legacy for others who come after you—happens naturally if you're a parent and grandparent. But it also happens when you're contributing to benefit future generations in other ways.

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Erikson says the drive to contribute to another's positive development using the knowledge and wisdom you've accumulated over the years leads to successful completion of the generativity stage and the later “integrity” stage of life in later adulthood, when you look back and review your contributions. His research shows that those who don't reach out to others and give back risk feeling disconnected and may regret missed opportunities.

One way we can leave a lasting legacy is by mentoring others. Mentoring can occur in all types of environments—anytime and anywhere. Aside from the seminal task of parenting, workplace mentoring can help fulfill Erikson's generativity task during middle adulthood. Workplace mentoring programs may sustain and improve companies, in part, by powerful effects on both mentor and mentee. For those in retirement, post-career mentoring can lead you in new directions for a more satisfying next chapter.

### The Power of Workplace Mentoring

Companies are eager to transmit knowledge from experienced workers to new hires. By teaching young employees about the successes and failures that they have experienced, mentors play a vital role in the making of future leaders. Most C-suite executives—75 percent—say that mentoring helped to propel them to leadership positions.<sup>1</sup>

Mentoring has many other positive attributes that impact the bottom line. Studies show that mentoring programs help companies recruit quality candidates, increase employee engagement, and boost job retention. When an employee has a mentor, he or she is less likely to be looking at other job options.

Mentoring programs also help increase diversity. Research shows that when managers are paired with mentees of a different race or gender, getting to know the person helps break down stereotypes or bias; the mentor becomes a champion of the mentee through the new relationship.

Those are several good reasons that more than 70 percent of Fortune 500 companies have some variation of a mentoring program, and about 25 percent of small companies do, too.<sup>2</sup>

Experts say there's no one best mentoring program; the goals of the company, the culture, and even new technologies, all help shape different types of mentoring approaches.

### Essential Advice for Mentors

Top corporate mentoring programs don't get that way by accident; sponsoring companies evaluate their programs and listen to feedback. First Round, a venture capital firm that creates initial stage funding of tech companies, issued a call for mentees and mentors and received an overwhelming response from both.

The company structured its mentoring approach so that each mentor-mentee pair met every other week for one quarter. The mentees developed an agenda and shared it prior to their meetings, and First Round surveyed how mentees were applying their learning—all good workplace mentoring practices.

First Round then evaluated 100 matches to find what qualities make the most successful mentor-mentee matches and distilled the knowledge into a piece titled "We Studied 100 Mentor-Mentee Matches—Here's What Makes Mentorship Work." Here is what they found:

- **It's not just business.** Successful mentor-mentee pairs use their time together to form personal connections. Find out who each other is outside of work. Ask about favorite activities, hopes and dreams, and family. This forms the beginnings of real relationships.
- **Transparency and self-disclosure.** A seminal piece of advice for mentors is to be transparent. When you share a story about a time a project didn't work out the way you planned or something you regret and why, you're showing vulnerability. Your mentee is more likely to feel that he or she can bring a problem to you without fear of criticism.
- **The ability to listen.** Good mentors are also good listeners. Meet in a conference room or nearby coffee shop for more privacy. Mute your phone, and pay attention.

Think about the people in your orbit. To whom have you gone for advice? Most likely, it's the people who sat back and listened without judgment—who didn't jump in immediately with all the answers or counterpoints. A poetic essay by Brenda Ueland, "Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening," points out that simply being able to talk out a problem can help clarify what needs to happen next. Being heard is an important gift you can give your mentee.

### Benefits for Both of You

Mentoring not only aids the mentee's growth and development, it also provides important benefits for the mentor. If your mentee is younger and recently out of school, he or she may show you the latest technology or reveal new practices in your industry.

Mentoring also has the potential to develop leadership skills. A Sun Microsystems study of employee career progress found that those who mentored others were six times more likely to be promoted than employees who didn't mentor.<sup>3</sup>

Mentoring also has powerful psychological benefits, both in the workplace and otherwise. When mentoring, you're giving of yourself to others and the act has a boomerang effect. When you help guide someone's growth and development, you gain a sense of fulfillment, purpose, and achievement. Research shows that helping others can cause physiological changes in your brain related to feelings of happiness, followed by a sense of well-being, and may stimulate neurochemicals involved in experiencing a reward.

### **Beyond the Workplace**

If you're approaching retirement, have you thought about life after you're no longer in the 9-to-5 world? Experts say it's important to have a plan. Going from operating on all cylinders to a full stop can lead you to question your purpose. Retirement offers tremendous freedom to make a truly meaningful impact in the lives of others.

You don't need to be a professional expert to be a great mentor. You just need to be able to answer basic questions or know where to find the answers.

There are a multitude of different mentoring opportunities around each and every one of us. For example, if you relate to children well, you could be a welcome addition to a mentoring program helping at-risk youth. In fact, analyses of programs mentoring at-risk youth show that children who have a consistent relationship with a mentor are 52 percent less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37 percent less likely to skip a class.<sup>4</sup>

Another option, faith-based mentoring, is very common. Also known as *spiritual mentoring*, it is largely about modeling a mature life built on the values of your faith and being there for the mentee when questions arise.

Athletic coaches are in an advantageous position to become mentors. A few minutes during a water break or a quick walk-up to the athlete while heading to the locker room can bring about surprising results. Players become comfortable around coaches and learn to initiate such mentoring moments on their own.

The bottom line is, mentoring opportunities are everywhere. If you're knowledgeable about things like budgeting from paycheck to paycheck, obtaining employment or improving employment situations, improving your level of education, improving homemaking skills, or establishing a network of people who are reliable, you have plenty of valuable insight that you could pass on to another person through mentoring.

To quote the website of Trusted Mentor, a nonprofit organization in Indianapolis, Indiana, "Whether you are a business professional or formerly homeless, your knowledge and life experiences can help one of our mentees make the positive changes they desire for a more successful future."

If you want to help an individual who is seeking to be supported by a mentor, you can visit [mentoring.org](https://mentoring.org) and search the Mentoring Connector database for a variety of programs in your community and connect with them directly about becoming a mentor.

Mentoring can make a lasting difference in someone else's life. What do you want your legacy to be?

Mentoring may play a central role.

<sup>1</sup> George, Phil, "Your Next Must-Have Job Benefit: A Mentoring Program," *Recruiter*, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Mel, "Why Can't Companies Get Mentorship Programs Right?" *The Atlantic*, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Richards, Kelli, "The 4 Most Important Reasons You Need to Become a Mentor," *Inc.*, 2014

<sup>4</sup> "Mentoring impact," Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership, 2019

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