

Mentors: Making a Difference for Tomorrow's Leaders

Mentoring relationships benefit both mentor and protégé, allowing those who have grown through mentoring to pass along the gift in developing new leaders

By **Gene Spencer** and **Cynthia Golden**

At some point in our lives, most of us have encountered a person whose influence has had a profound, positive effect on us. As a child, we might have had an older person help us on the road to becoming an adult by looking out for us, showing special concern, sharing advice, and providing guidance. As a student, we might have had a professor whose example and encouragement gave us the motivation to explore new territories, to succeed in our scholarship, and to take on new intellectual challenges.

Similarly, in our professional lives, many of us can point to a few inspiring individuals who have made such a difference. Someone special might have taken a unique interest in us, provided counsel, suggested direction, and helped us advance our careers. Their guidance may have started a chain of events that cannot be fully appreciated until much later.

As IT professionals, most of us place a high priority on professional development throughout our careers. The conferences and institutes we attend, our sharing of best practices, and our networking with each other are activities toward which we gravitate. They help us broaden our skills and develop as leaders. They are valuable, indispensable parts of our career development and personal growth.

In addition to these activities, a strong mentor relationship can be one of the



most important forms of professional support and development that a younger person in our field might receive. The attention, affirmation, advice, coaching, and opportunities that can come from a mentor are priceless, if you are lucky enough to have such a relationship.

When we think of the classic mentor, we think of that wise and trusted counselor who provides a protégé with practical advice and encouragement to take on new challenges, and who regularly shares his or her wisdom and experiences.¹ However, a relationship with a mentor or mentors can take on many different forms. It can develop around a particular issue or problem, such as an

IT manager learning the ropes of personnel management from a particularly interested or helpful human resources specialist. A mentoring relationship can develop among a cohort of peers, who provide support, encouragement, and resources for each other long after their workshop, course, or seminar has ended. Such a relationship can develop between a seasoned professional and someone new to the job or industry, and grow throughout an individual's entire career. Most often, these relationships evolve over time and change in nature and complexity. Ultimately, they result in benefits to the mentor as well as to the protégé.

The most effective mentor relationships develop one at a time between people who see something valuable in each other. It is difficult to force them to happen in a formal or prescribed way. However, as IT professionals in higher education, we can work to heighten the awareness of the topic of professional mentors, both within the community of people who might be looking for a mentor and among those of us who have something to offer others.

The Mentor Experience: Three Stories

Perhaps the best way for us to bring more attention to this idea is to provide personal testimony to the value of mentors. For this article, we invited three individuals who have recently taken new leadership positions in higher education to tell their stories about the experiences they have had with mentors during their careers. We believed that all three were likely to have had a mentor or mentors and that each of them was also likely to be serving in a mentoring role.

Susan Metros has been working as the deputy CIO, executive director for e-learning, and professor of design technology at Ohio State University for about one year. Carrie Regenstein has served as an associate CIO/associate director for the Division of Information Technology (DoIT) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison since the summer of 2001. David Dodd was recently appointed the vice chancellor for information technology and CIO at the University of South Carolina Spartanburg. Their stories provide us with interesting insights into the nature of mentor relationships, and we are grateful that they were willing to share them with us for the purposes of this article.

Susan

Susan Metros has had two significant periods in her life where a classic mentor has played a critical role in her growth and development. While in college, Susan studied graphic design under a particularly demanding professor at Michigan State University. While her relationship with this professor was often difficult (“No matter how hard I toiled,

how innovative my solutions, it was never good enough”), she came to understand that this important individual was teaching her far more than the average professor. Under his tutelage, she learned that “it was the journey that was important, not the destination.” Her experience points out that a mentor relationship can sometimes feel adversarial, as your mentor pushes you to be more than you thought you could be.

Today, Susan’s mentor is her current CIO at Ohio State. Susan believes that Ilee Rhimes hired her with the expectation that her next career move likely would be to a CIO position, and that idea has shaped their relationship. In all their professional interactions, Susan finds herself in a position to observe someone she respects highly, while having many opportunities to discuss the nuances of the situations at hand, to ask for feedback and direction, and to learn the importance of building a hard-working and loyal executive team.

Susan described each of her mentor relationships as invaluable because “they have taught me to examine and explore issues from a variety of viewpoints and provided me with insight into a pretty closed society.” While Susan believes that she does not currently serve as a mentor to anyone, other than the students she comes in contact with in her faculty role, we wonder who might be looking to Susan as a person from whom they could learn a great deal.

Carrie

Carrie Regenstein reflected that “there were one or two key moments in my career where the advice and guidance of a mentor were critical.” In her comments, she also articulated an interesting array of mentor relationships that deserves reflection. First, she described some of the more conventional views of mentoring (“Although common practice suggests that a mentor should be two levels up, I believe that a direct supervisor can sometimes serve as a mentor”), and she talked about a long-term mentor relationship with her current CIO, Annie Stunden, whom she says she met “by chance at a conference.” Said Annie, “I know that I’ve served as

a mentor to Carrie. She has served as a mentor to me, too. I agree that mentoring comes from a lot of sources. It’s the people whom you trust: above, below, and around you. They are a deliberate source of wisdom.”

Carrie went on to describe a number of her other mentor relationships that one might not think of in the general rubric of “mentoring.” She considers herself fortunate to have friends and colleagues upon whom she can call at career decision points. “I once called Jacqueline Brown (University of Washington) when I had a path to choose. With no prior information or warning, she gave me informed, thoughtful, personal advice that made all the difference in my career.”

Carrie also talked about how much she appreciates Carole Barone, Vice President of EDUCAUSE, “who was always very gracious with her perspectives; all I’ve had to do is ask.” She described another powerful type of relationship that she has been able to develop with colleagues “who might be behind you in your career.” She commented that they “can help you grow and learn in ways that make you more effective... and more satisfied.” These might be thought of as “peerful relationships” (a term she attributes to Annie Stunden), or they might be considered “mutual mentors,” where each partner serves as a mentor to the other at the appropriate moments.

When asked whether others considered her to be their mentor, Carrie listed some individuals she met in the EDUCAUSE Management Institute (where she has served as a member of the faculty) with whom she had developed such relationships. She also described how others who once reported to her continue to regularly seek her advice, which keeps their associations alive and vibrant.

David

David Dodd’s powerful story starts with a revelation: “I have not previously had the benefit of a mentor in my career, though I have benefited from wonderful personal and professional relationships that have positively influenced my career and professional develop-

ment.” He described a phenomenon many of us have experienced, which involves keenly observing some colleagues who provide us with examples of “what *not* to do.” While not mentors in the positive sense, these people unwittingly contribute to our success by taking a path that does not lead to their own success. Like David, we can all be grateful for the clarity that allows us to recognize these examples and helps us know that there must be a better way. As David indicated, “Rather than simply surviving those experiences, I have internalized them and profited from them immensely.”

Today, David looks to his current chancellor, John Stockwell, as his mentor. “He is an exemplary leader with vision, dedication, insight, optimism, and humility.... He is very supportive of his staff, and his counsel and advice mean a great deal to me.” The benefits of this new mentor relationship are obvious to David, and this motivates him to look for ways to give back to others. “I also make every attempt to mentor individuals in my own organization. I believe it is the most important thing I can do professionally.”

David mentions an additional reward he receives from his contributions as a mentor. “To help someone develop [the skills] to think systematically and strategically is the best way to improve your own organization and to help others grow professionally.” While we haven’t mentioned it specifically, we believe that most mentors would describe similar results; the benefits of a mentor relationship flow in both directions.

Personal Reflection

Collectively, Susan, Carrie, and David offered a compelling set of suggestions to help us reflect on our relationships with mentors (past, present, and future) and with those who might be looking to us as a mentor as well:

- Don’t think in terms of a single mentor for your entire career; think of different people serving in that role in different ways at different times.
- Ask trusted colleagues to share the different types of mentor relationships they have had throughout their

careers. What can you learn from their stories?

- Don’t shy away from people who really challenge you; they might be the catalyst that propels you forward in ways you could not have imagined.
- Think about those who might have pushed you earlier in your career. What lessons did you learn from those mentors that might not have been obvious at the time?
- Look in unusual places for your mentor, and be open to the possibility that the “right person” might appear at a time that you would least expect. Your mentor might be a current colleague or someone to whom you report, or someone from an entirely different field or profession.
- Find someone with whom you can be comfortable and with whom you enjoy spending time because the relationship is as much a personal relationship as it is professional.
- Finally, remember that a mentor often benefits as much from the relationship as does a protégé. The questions asked often challenge a mentor’s thinking in interesting ways.

David offered an important closing thought: “One of the most important pieces of advice I would give someone about choosing a mentor is to select that individual very, very carefully. No one is perfect, and all of us have differing strengths and weaknesses. Choosing the wrong person as a mentor can prove far worse than having no mentor.”

We agree with David. Consider, for example, whether your potential mentor can help you grow in the directions you have chosen for your career or if that person has a very different background and career interests. Does the relationship seem almost antagonistic rather than challenging and vital? These are hazards we would all do well to avoid. We also want to add, however, that there probably isn’t one perfect mentor out there for each of us. You should not put off considering a mentor for fear that you might choose the wrong person. If the relationship doesn’t meet your needs, you can move on to work with another person who might be a better fit.

We hope that this article will give you a reason to think about the role of mentoring in your own professional life. Consider some person in higher education or information technology whom you believe to be a leader in the profession. How did he or she make the right choices that led to such success, while avoiding the pitfalls and obstacles that seemed to block others from attaining a high level of achievement? Who do you think were the most influential people who helped this person along the way? Do you have a mentor who is helping you along your path?

Looking Ahead

At the same time, you might want to think about those who might be looking to you as a mentor or a guide who can help them along in their careers. Is there a person in your organization or institution who could benefit from your experience and guidance? How can you take an active role in coaching that special individual? If you choose to take on such a role, you stand to benefit from the satisfaction that comes from reinvesting in the profession and passing along some of the gifts you have received in your career.

When discussing her professional mentors, television news anchor Diane Sawyer once noted, “Every one of my mentors has made me more confident by treating me as if I could grow. I think that’s a gift to give someone at any age.”² The next generation of leaders in our profession will be better because of your gift. *e*

Endnotes

1. C. Golden, “The Wise and Trusted Counselor,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, March/April 2002, p. 56.
2. M. R. Cuomo, ed., *The Person Who Changed My Life: Seventy-five Prominent Americans Recount Their Mentors* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, June 1999).

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