

What's Next After You Say Hello: First Steps in Mentoring

A co-mentoring relationship with mutuality and clear goals benefits both those involved

By **William F. Hogue** and **Ernest M. Pringle**

In most cultures wisdom, knowledge, and experience are prized assets. Those who possess them are held in high regard and are expected to share them with the next generation. So it is in the world of information technology. Veteran IT professionals are often charged with identifying and developing future IT leaders, while future leaders often seek current leaders to whom they can turn for support and guidance. Such is the story of a new mentoring relationship between Ernest Pringle and Bill Hogue.

Pringle was born in South Carolina at about the same time that Hogue dropped out of college in New York City, at the height of the Vietnam War protests. Some 35 years later, Pringle is Associate Director of Student Development and University Housing for Information Technology and Vice President of the Black Faculty and Staff Association at the University of South Carolina (USC). Hogue serves as Vice President for Information Technology and CIO for USC. The two began to get to know one another about four years ago through casual conversations at meetings and receptions. Their relationship grew more substantive as they began to focus on the issue of minority underrepresentation in the IT profession. Last summer, Pringle decided that the time had come to seek a formal mentoring relationship.

How to Get Started: Will You Be My Mentor?

From Pringle's perspective, initiating a mentoring relationship evoked the kind of nervousness and anxiety typi-



cally associated with a courtship ritual. What if Hogue didn't share Pringle's optimism about such a relationship? Would he have the time to be a mentor? Did he think Pringle was worthy of his time and effort? If he said no, would they be able to continue the professional relationship they already had? Pringle found that he was grappling with many of the same questions he had asked himself before proposing to his wife!

Pringle also worried about how Hogue would perceive the request. Although not currently the case, Pringle could one day be in Hogue's chain of command, and Pringle did not want him to think he was being used as a vehicle for Pringle to move up in the organization. On the other hand, Pringle did not want their relationship to preclude him from future consideration for positions that might be a good fit in Hogue's organization.

Despite his concerns and anxiety, Pringle did ask, and Hogue agreed to meet regularly with Pringle and serve as his mentor. As Pringle's anxiety abated, however, Hogue's spiked. Though his career had included other mentoring relationships, none had been formalized to this extent. Hogue wondered whether he had the right stuff to meet Pringle's expectations. CIOs encounter opportunities every day to feel unwise, unknowledgeable, or inexperienced about something; was Pringle giving him too much credit? And what about this business of regularly scheduled meetings that Pringle had proposed? Who would lead and who would follow in this dance? What would the two do to ensure their time together was productive?

As Hogue pondered these questions, he realized that he had an aversion to the word "mentee," at least in part simply because it sounds so odd to the ear. Hogue considered and rejected a number of alternatives, such as "protégé" and "apprentice." The term Hogue settled on, "co-mentor," made him feel self-conscious the first few times he used it, but it captured the flavor of what he hoped for in his relationship with Pringle. He envisioned a relationship that in many ways would mimic that of two authors—one senior, one junior—collaborating on a piece of writing. Pringle and Hogue would "co-author" their relationship together.

Defining the Relationship: Balancing Risks and Benefits

The relationship the two men had decided to embark on presented a number of risks and rewards that needed to be considered. As with any partnership, professional or otherwise, Pringle felt that balancing the relationship's positive and negative aspects would be critical to its success. Were Hogue's experiences relevant to a frontline IT professional in today's technology arena? Hogue had served in IT support roles in the past, but his current position took him away from supporting end users. Now, his primary customers were university executives, deans,

board members, and even state legislators. Pringle wanted to make sure he was not wasting either his own time or Hogue's.

Pringle also knew Hogue could serve as a strong door-opener for Pringle's career, a fact that carried a major risk within what otherwise could be a benefit of their relationship. With his contacts and credibility, Hogue's professional reference could mean the difference between career opportunity and opportunity lost. Pringle did not want Hogue to feel merely like another entry on his list of references or think that Pringle was simply using him to advance his career.

Hogue, meanwhile, was struggling with his own concerns. He wanted to be able to speak freely with Pringle, to give him the benefit of the full story, but without boring him with 20-year-old IT war stories or gassy and self-indulgent pontifications about the state of the world. Hogue knew that Pringle—not part of his reporting chain—could provide relatively unfiltered and unbiased feedback about what was really going on in the IT world around campus. Could Hogue handle frank feedback in the spirit in which it was offered? And, how could Hogue guard Pringle from being used as a pipeline for feeding information (or disinformation) to "the boss"?

Hogue ultimately reconciled these issues by remembering that the relationship was primarily about Pringle. As senior partner in the relationship, it was Hogue's simple responsibility to take all reasonable steps to help Pringle flourish.

Guiding Principles: What They Have Found Useful

As the relationship developed, Pringle and Hogue discussed these and other topics freely and explored the reasoning behind the benefits each sought to gain. They read what others had to say about mentoring, and Pringle developed a set of open-ended questions about mentoring. Together, they interviewed three senior administrators at USC: Shirley Mills, director, state government and community relations; Jane Jameson, vice presi-

dent of human resources; and Andrew Sorensen, president of the university. Pringle and Hogue asked these respondents to reflect on their own experiences—good and bad—as either mentors or co-mentors.

Over a period of several months, with help from all these sources, Pringle and Hogue developed a set of guiding principles they are using to help shape their relationship and that may provide a useful framework for others who are just getting started with mentoring. They know they still have a lot to learn about what will work best in their relationship, so they prefer to think of these guiding principles as a work in progress.

Strive for Mutual Benefits

The relationship should be defined from the beginning as mutually beneficial. If represented in graphical form, the mentor and the co-mentor would be two circles of roughly equal size, with double-headed arrows between the circles representing the mutual flow of communication and benefit. Each participant has committed to the relationship by choice. Each should openly share his or her goals for the relationship and work collaboratively to help achieve them.

Agree on Confidentiality

Maintaining an environment of confidentiality is one of the critical components in building trust between the mentor and co-mentor. There might be times when the mentor needs to share confidential or closely held information so the co-mentor can understand the sometimes Byzantine logic behind plans and decisions—logic that is heavily flavored by the daily university stew of resource constraints, politics, relationships, institutional priorities, and technological possibilities. The same is true of the co-mentor; at times, the co-mentor may need to share information that simply can't be passed along to anyone else. Without a mutually understood ability to speak freely as the situation warrants, the relationship is unlikely to reach its full potential.

Commit to Honesty

Honesty is also an essential component in building a trusted mentor/co-mentor relationship. The participants should be willing to candidly share what they expect to gain from the relationship and their vision for getting there. They should be prepared to offer frank feedback as appropriate, even if the feedback is critical. In his interview, for example, Sorensen described how angered he was at an early point in his career when he judged that his mentor was needlessly critical of his research. Reflecting back, Sorensen now believes that the criticism was completely justified, serving as exactly the spur he needed to sharpen the focus of his future research.

Listen and Learn

Mutual benefit and honesty can only be achieved when both members feel their viewpoints are being heard and respected. Mentors and co-mentors will do well to listen carefully. Mentors, especially, need to remember that the relationship is not primarily about them. Co-mentors should not be intimidated or made to feel their views are not valuable.

Pringle knew that Hogue was a good listener and could provide valuable feedback. He also knew that Hogue had already experienced many of the career hurdles he currently faced. The challenge was learning from Hogue's experiences while not simply becoming a clone. Pringle wanted to be free to experience situations and make intelligent, informed decisions on his own, armed with the advice provided by his mentor.

Pringle saw the relationship as an invaluable opportunity to learn from a proven industry leader, someone who had been successful at a storied institution like MIT and was now the top IT administrator at USC. While race, cultural background, gender, age, and other characteristics may influence mentoring relationships, such differences present opportunities for mutual learning. Hogue is missing a chance to learn something if he isn't open to the perspectives of a black professional a generation younger, and Pringle is

missing a similar opportunity if he is not open to the perspectives of a white professional from the previous generation.

Build a Working Partnership

Consider structuring a working partnership that includes project consultation or active collaborations rooted in the common ground of your shared professional goals. These collaborations can lead to discoveries about each participant's preferred working style, daily obligations, and professional aspirations. An example of one such project would be Hogue's and Pringle's co-authoring this article.

Lead by Example

Sorensen credits his mother with saying, "What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say." Mentor and co-mentor alike may do well to remember this epigram. Actions create the most lasting impression.

Be Flexible

A series of unstructured, late-night bull sessions about life is unlikely to yield lasting benefit, but not all mentoring relationships need a carefully mapped structure to succeed. It may be useful for a mentoring relationship to have defined goals, but the process may be as important—or more so—than the goals. The relationship's organization can range from structured to flexible, formal to casual, announced to unannounced. The administrators interviewed said that the majority of the mentoring relationships they've had have been relatively unstructured and are often unacknowledged by either party. Jameson warned that an overly structured mentoring arrangement "leaves no room for the relationship to develop naturally." Regardless of its organization, a mentoring arrangement must meet the needs and fit the personalities of its participants.

What's Next?

Now that Hogue and Pringle have developed a framework for building their relationship, what happens next? One of their interview respondents,

Shirley Mills, reported that a key lesson she learned from all of her mentors is the importance of sustaining relationships through good times and bad. She noted that one never knows when a current relationship—no matter how strained or distant at a given moment—may become critical. Therefore, Pringle and Hogue will commit the energy necessary to sustain a dynamic relationship and not let it drift. That means careful monitoring with adjustments as needed to keep it from becoming stale or routine.

Additionally, given what they know about each other, Pringle and Hogue believe that their relationship will grow strongest and most naturally if it is rooted in their work. They expect to identify specific opportunities for joint planning, research, or projects needed by the university but that also have potential benefit to the relationship. They may even share reading materials to facilitate discussions about pressing IT issues. And they are mindful that, for some periods of their relationship, no plan at all may serve as the best plan.

Will there be some end point when each is satisfied that the goals for the relationship have been accomplished or are no longer worth pursuing? There is no way for Pringle and Hogue to know that at this time. They do know that even unhappy endings have the potential to impart valuable lessons, and they're willing to take that risk. As for happy endings, one can argue that once the co-mentor is ready to become a mentor to future leaders himself, that is the time to recognize the success of the relationship, even as they look forward to continuing to collaborate. For today, however, Pringle and Hogue will focus on a framework for beginnings and let the endings take care of themselves. *e*

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