

MENTORING: TWO VOICES

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Mentoring is an increasingly important activity in our culture. It is, perhaps, simply a new name we have given to a centuries-old practice: two people enter into a learning relationship. This monograph discusses mentoring from two very different points of view—one poetical, one pragmatic. Together, this duet gives us a complete song describing in many aspects the sometimes mysterious, but almost always productive, relationship between mentor and mentoree.

Fittingly, Max De Pree and Walter Wright have been both mentor and mentoree. Max has been mentor to Walter, and both have been mentored by, and mentors to, other people. I commend their thoughts on mentoring to you as informed, wise, and practicable all at once.

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MENTORING

ONE OF SOCIETY'S SIGNIFICANT NEEDS IS THE CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT and maturation of its leaders. Based on many years of mentoring and being mentored, I believe this give-and-take relationship is the most effective way to guide people with leadership gifts toward their potential. Mentor was the trusted friend whom Odysseus left in charge of Ithaca as he departed for the Trojan War. Disguised as Mentor, the goddess Athena helps Telemachus, Odysseus' son, search for his father. Through the centuries, the word has come to mean trusted advisor and counselor, and the mentoring relationship today seems to

me to have become a primary way to grow and develop as a leader.

A wonderful variety of people are candidates for mentoring. There are people dealing with the unexpected demands of promotion and people who decide to shift from the for-profit world to the non-profit world. There are young people—teachers, pastors, or managers—early in their careers and people finishing up one career and exploring another. There are folks surprised by failure. There are people in academia, especially, who move from a specialized discipline to administrative or leadership responsibilities. There are volunteers searching for new meaning in life. Mentoring can succeed at various stages in life.

The needs of both mentors and mentorees are challenging. My purpose in writing these thoughts and ideas and experiences is to encourage legions more of seasoned leaders to lend their wisdom to this calling. For those approaching retirement, mentoring is a life-giving way of being called to retirement, rather than defaulting to retirement. For those still engaged in the daunting job of active leadership, mentoring is a way to bring all the advantages of contemplation and unbiased perspective to an active life.

Mentoring takes place in many settings and at many levels. This essay seeks to shed a little light on the process of mentoring leaders in established organizations. I would like to increase the value of my experiences in mentoring by drawing some guidelines, some rules, and some practices from them that I hope you will find helpful and encouraging as you ponder the role of mentor or mentoree. It's part of my goal to be concise. First, we're all busy. I won't burden you with a lot of words. More important, mentoring cannot be reduced to a formula. All we can do is build a framework on which we can hang our experiences, gifts, and art in such a way that another person can interact with it, make sense of it, take ownership of it, and work at

reaching new levels of humanity and leadership on their own. At its heart, mentoring might be described as witnessing.

MENTORING IS ABOVE ALL A WORK OF LOVE, WHICH AT ITS BEST IS A two-way exchange. Though both parties walk away with priceless insights, both people come to each other intent on giving rather than taking. The immediate goal of mentoring is reaching toward potential. It thrives in community and prospers with risk—for nothing worthwhile arrives without risk. It thrives on the vulnerability of both mentor and mentoree. It focuses on the whys and wherefores in our work and our lives, not on the what and the how. Mentoring is about conjugating the verb “to be,” not the verb “to have,” to paraphrase the pianist Franz Liszt, himself a famous mentor. Mentoring is not a private management seminar. Its ultimate goal is to make mentors out of mentorees.

Mentoring is a holistic approach to becoming a better servant—to one’s calling, to one’s society, to one’s followers. It has to do with family and career. Its roots lie in ethical behavior and virtuous beliefs. Mentors and mentorees work hard at establishing and nurturing relationships. They respect the value of effective communication.

At its best, mentoring is a covenantal approach to life and leadership. I once heard a wonderful description of the work of a mentor: A bird doesn’t sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.

OVER A LONG WORKING LIFE, I HAD MANY TEACHERS TO WHOM I AM indebted. Carl Frost, David Hubbard, and Peter Drucker are the three chief mentors in my life. Carl Frost was a professor at Michigan State University and consultant to Herman Miller, Inc. for more than 45 years. During much of that time, he was also my mentor. His field was

Industrial Psychology, and he was one of the earliest and foremost proponents of participative management.

David Hubbard was for 30 years the President of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. I served as a member of Fuller Board of Trustees for most of David's tenure. One of his great contributions to my life and to the life of my family was to help me learn how to integrate work into faith.

Peter Drucker was for many years consultant to the management team at Herman Miller. During that time we became friends, and he became my mentor. Each of these three teachers strongly emphasized in words and actions the critical matter of learning how to establish and nurture good relationships as one of the primary skills of an effective leader. Their mentoring—I would almost rather say their ministering—in my life has been absolutely crucial to my development as a leader and the to quality of my family's life.

Beginning in the early 1980s, I myself became a mentor. Like many important parts of life, my mentoring became central without my realizing it.

Over the years around twenty people have been gracious enough to ask me to meet with them about mentoring. I'm not exactly sure how all the relationships started, but I can tell you that at this stage in my life I'm sure glad they did start. I have been involved with folks from non-profits—most often in education and government—and from for-profits, including people from manufacturing, investment banking, and publishing. With only one exception, my mentoring relationships have all been long-term working relationships. Most of these people have gone on to become mentors to others. As you may imagine, I have learned a good deal from these friends—for my mentorees have all become my friends—and our experiences together.

Mentoring relationships can begin in a variety of ways. Getting to

know each other is, of course, a given. In my experience, a mentoring relationship does not begin from scratch. It blooms after the flower has been cultivated for a while. You suddenly find yourself discussing with someone you have known the possibility that your meetings might become more intentional, more directed. Usually the mentoree suggests formalizing some arrangement, or at least begins to ask for more time together. Occasionally a mentoring relationship starts without any discussion at all. Sometimes it is at the suggestion of a mutual friend that “you ought to consider talking with so-and-so about that.” But there always comes a time when both people feel that a talk about mutual commitments is a good idea. Sometimes it is practical to approach someone and ask her or him to be your mentor, but to make mentoring work between strangers is quite demanding.

Mentoring is about life-long learning. The kind of world most of us live in makes life-long learning a natural requirement, regardless of our discipline or profession or occupation. It’s not only a requirement, it’s fun. Curiosity isn’t limited to mentorees, you know. Expansion of the mind changes attitudes, makes possible new horizons, surprises us concerning our own potential, and often helps us gain essential skill in finding and developing relationships. This last result of learning is crucial because so few of us work independently, and poor relationships can seriously diminish personal and professional competence in a leader’s life.

Many of us struggle with life-long learning. We have access to more information than we can possibly use. We struggle to translate information into knowledge, and we seek to explain to ourselves how to transform knowledge into wisdom. This progression becomes another emphasis for a mentor, a field of exploration best approached with questions and not with answers. One of the best ways of giving guidance in the self-development of mentorees has to be the especially

apposite question, the arresting query. It is the Socratic approach.

A AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE MENTOR'S RESPONSIBILITY IS TO BE diligent in guiding discussion away from "What shall I do?" and toward "Who do I intend to be?" What we do in life will always be a consequence of who we are. The mentor and the mentoree have joined together in a process of becoming.

Mentors guide personal development by formulating questions that trigger responsive thought, that bring the light of experience to the discussion and that encourage breadth rather than narrow focus. Mentors have the opportunity to move the interaction beyond job or career into family matters, other areas of service, areas of study not connected to career. We all ought to know something special—about the arts, about theology or philosophy, about other cultures. One very specific reason to broaden the horizons of our discussions is to remove the fear I have found in many leaders of the creative process and creative people. For organizations that depend on creating change through innovation, such fear is a serious threat. As mentor and mentoree move more deeply and intimately into a relationship of real trust and confidence, our personal "uniquenesses" lead to an expansion of the ground we cover and a comfort with exploring new and unfamiliar territory.

It seems to me that these thoughts about mentoring lead us naturally to think about the personal chemistry needed to make mentoring enticing and productive. My experience tells me that we need a good deal of common ground on which to build a mentoring relationship: shared philosophy, familiar experience, an easiness with each other's language. We need confidence and respect in common. The mentor should believe in the potential and commitment of the mentoree. We should be in the process for the long haul.

Our working modus begins with candor. We understand clearly that

mutual trust and confidentiality are the order of the day. The process must be objective and disciplined; pandering and flattery must be absent. We must agree to hold each other accountable.

Are there ground rules we might consider? Here are a few. You will surely discover more.

For instance, we should be prepared to live with a certain level of ambiguity, even mystery. Leadership in some ways is like being a parent of a seventeen-year-old. You don't have to know everything. We don't need to share everything for us to help each other. Much about human potential remains a mystery. As mentors, we don't need grades or progress reports to be effective. Our mentorees are already mature, effective adults who have accepted responsibility for their own development.

Don't expect miracles. Mentoring is not problem solving; it is growing together. Be a bit laid back. Don't expect concrete changes from visit to visit. Remember, mentorees also hold down jobs and may already have a boss or a board with high expectations.

Another good rule of thumb is that to be a good mentor we need more than desire and theory. The mentor's side of the bargain is to be competent and a good communicator. Competence comes from experience. (Don't go to sea with a captain who has never left port.) Competence is never unlimited: don't try to give help in areas of your incompetence. (It's tempting sometimes to think that one's position as mentor conveys omniscience!) Every mentoree deserves a mentor's best shot, part of which surely includes good communication, by which I mean the ability to listen and a knack for telling stories from experience.

Be prepared to surrender some privacy. You will, on occasion, receive a phone call during dinner. You should trust your mentoree to

decide when a subject can't wait until business hours. If she calls after dinner, be prepared to go to work. It must be important.

Finally, what about compensation? As I said earlier, I think of mentoring as a work of love. Taking money for it seems to me to be a contradiction. Consulting requires compensation, for the intended results of consulting are so very different from those of mentoring. There may be situations that would lead you to make a different judgment. I only suggest you consider carefully the effects of linking compensation and mentoring.

LET ME SHARE SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE ACTUAL PRACTICE OF mentoring. Here are some of the nuts and bolts of making this process work.

It's important to know each other face to face. You can accomplish a good deal on the phone or through email, but a working intimacy with each other is essential. When you are apart, both people need to visualize the other person's geography and circumstances.

Cover the basics early. Who travels? Who initiates contact? My answer is the mentoree. Who sets the agenda? The mentoree. The mentor is obligated to keep good notes so that she can be properly prepared for future discussions. Mentoring, after all, is not an off-the-cuff proposition. How shall we express the goals for this relationship? I suggest you freely discuss them together; the terms of your mutual agreement should be agreed upon together.

The process of mentoring may be enjoyable, but good mentoring is not easy work for either person. While mentors should not ordinarily follow up or seek out performance measurement, it is certainly reasonable to expect real perseverance on the part of the mentoree. Person growth is a serious business. It requires determination, grit, and heart.

While a mentor does not usually follow up on suggestions or per-

formance, some exceptions need mentioning. A certain discipline is in order. Repeated discussions of the same problem are not constructive. Laying blame elsewhere as an excuse needs to be avoided. Getting together without an agenda can be a pleasant social experience, but it is not mentoring. It's important to have both kinds of time together, but don't confuse them. When sessions are face to face, it's helpful to share a meal and have snacks and drinks available. Eating together is an important part of mentoring transactions.

Sometimes we need to work around detours. Family matters—rightly so—can interrupt. A job offer to your mentoree may seem like a distraction at first. Organizational politics intrude, or a subordinate of your mentoree seriously disappoints. A critical performance review by a board of directors can become a setback. It's important to see these events as perfectly normal parts of a mentoring relationship. Work with them as opportunities to learn and develop; don't overreact to them as emergencies.

Occasionally a mentoree simply moves on. There is no disagreement or conflict; your mentoree simply stops calling. This, too, is OK. Mentorees have a right to move on. In some cases, they no longer need your help. Some retire. Sometimes their resolve weakens. Some become mentors—which we always hope for—and their attention shifts. Whatever the case, your own experience and energy and time are now available to someone else.

Of course, sometimes mentors fail. As we get older, it's more and more difficult to be perfect, don't you think? Sometimes mentoring relationships fail because one person becomes too passive, and a challenge is ignored rather than exploited. Sometimes disagreements crop up that indicate the two of us ought to try other paths of growth. As we work together, sometimes we discover that we disagree as to goals or philosophy or potential. Or we find that our chemistry

together isn't what we thought it might become, and we agree to part. These kinds of failures are not the end of life, they are part of life. Mentoring, like so many worthwhile things, is risky. We should realize the risk every time we begin a mentoring relationship and discover how necessary risk and failure are to learning.

Try to remember mentoring is a process of becoming, not an unimpeded march to perfection. The odds of success increase tremendously when we understand that mutual discovery, not exclusive answers, leads to potential. The best mentors spark the discovery.

SEVERAL OF THE PERSONS WHO CALL ME MENTOR HAVE DECIDED TO

S work together to further the practice of mentoring. At one of their sessions in June of 2002, they set aside a part of their meeting to thank me for my own efforts at helping them discover the best about themselves. In many ways, it was an embarrassing morning as one after another spoke in wonderful ways about our times together. Each of them brought me a unique gift that symbolized for them the very special relationship that mentoring can become. One person gave me a carabiner—a piece of mountain climbing equipment used to connect people by rope. This particular carabiner had been up Mount Everest over 18,000 feet and back down. The gift and accompanying words—like the other gifts and words that day—made my eyes water. It reminded me of the power and love and growth that spring from simple human connections.

Max De Pree

MENTORING

A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH FOR MENTOREES AND A CHALLENGE FOR MENTORS

Mentoring begins with the realization that you deeply desire to learn and grow.

Getting started....

1 IDENTIFY AREAS OPEN TO GROWTH.

This is where it begins. Are you open to growth, to learning, to change? A mentoring relationship assumes a shared journey during which two people agree to keep learning and growing. Where are your rough edges? Where are your flat sides? What gaps need to be filled in? What new areas need exploration?

2 IDENTIFY SOMEONE FROM WHOM YOU CAN LEARN.

Mentors are all around us. A person does not have to be perfect – few people are, but he or she should be strong in the area in which you want to grow. Your mentor does not need to be older, nor does he or she need to be seasoned in all areas of life. Often, someone younger has knowledge of a subject like technology where you are lacking. Do you respect the person and the strength that person brings to you?

3 ASK FOR ONE MEETING (LUNCH?); INTERVIEW YOUR PROSPECTIVE MENTOR AND LISTEN TO HIS OR HER THOUGHTS ON YOUR SUBJECT.

You don't have to announce your interest in a mentoring relationship at the beginning. It might be asking too much of an untested relationship. Ask for a conversation with a prospective mentor about a particular topic. Ask for only one meeting. Suggest that you would like to “pick their brains” and gain insights from your prospect's experience. If you can, eat a meal together for this first meeting and pay

attention to the social side of the time together.

4 USE THE FIRST MEETING TO TEST FOR A NATURAL AND COMFORTABLE RELATIONSHIP.

Mentoring is all about a relationship. A continuing relationship depends on both you and your mentor finding the time enjoyable and instructive. Do you share interests? Purposes? Are your values compatible? Recognizing the value of different perspectives, do you simply enjoy having lunch with this person? Do you respect this person? Do you feel respected and encouraged? Could this become a relationship that you could nurture and maintain?

5 ASK FOR A SECOND MEETING OR PROPOSE A SHORT-TERM, PERIODIC RELATIONSHIP.

If you both find the first meeting comfortable and interesting, ask for a second. Schedule just one meeting at a time until the mutual comfort level is strong enough to warrant a commitment to periodic get-togethers. Agree on when, where, and how often you can ask for such meetings.

6 TAKE RESPONSIBILITY TO ARRANGE THE NEXT MEETING(S).

Make the next meeting convenient for the mentor, and don't expect the mentor to take the initiative. You have more to gain than your mentor. Your mentor may take the lead later in the relationship, but at the early stages you must provide the momentum, direction and follow through.

7 TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE AGENDA.

Come to the meetings with an agenda of things you would like to talk about. Do not assume that your mentor will bring one, even though

he or she might. Accept responsibility for using your time together well.

8 COME TO THE MEETING WITH QUESTIONS.

Your agenda should be heavily weighted with questions designed to draw wisdom from your mentor. In addition to questions specific to the subject of shared interest, it can be valuable and instructive to ask mentors what they have learned lately or what they are reading. Come more as a listener than a talker.

9 INVITE YOUR MENTOR TO ASK QUESTIONS THAT DRAW YOU OUT.

From the beginning, invite your mentor to ask you questions. Give your permission to discuss anything and everything about you and what you believe. Give permission even to probe behind your words to a truth you might be avoiding or unaware of. Make yourself vulnerable to learning and growth. The questions your mentor asks may be more valuable than answers or advice.

10 LISTEN, ASSESS, ACT, AND GIVE FEEDBACK.

Listen more than talk. Assess and evaluate what you hear. Sort out the wisdom from biases or blind spots, while watching out for your own biases and blind spots. Act on the wisdom. Mentors will not stay long with people who fail to act on what they learn. Talk without action is a waste of time. Act and report at the next meeting about what you learned, what you tried, what worked and what did not, and be prepared with questions to explore the matter more fully.

11 ASK FOR ANOTHER MEETING.

Don't forget that the momentum for your relationship is up to you. Ask for, schedule, and follow through with the next meeting. The

mentoring relationship will continue only so long as you continue to initiate and learn from your conversations. The burden to remember what has been discussed also falls primarily on you, not the mentor.

12 IT IS NOT IMPORTANT TO CALL YOUR CONVERSATIONS A “MENTORING RELATIONSHIP.”

This learning relationship between two people may well become a formal mentoring partnership—intentional, exclusive, intensive, voluntary. But such acknowledgement is not important and may, in fact put too much weight, too many expectations on the relationship in the early stages. It is much more important that two people find their time together a fruitful investing in, and learning from, one another. Along the way—or even in hindsight—you might begin to call it a mentoring relationship. The label will be appropriate when your relationship is strong enough not to need a label at all.

Mentoring leads you to see the potential in other people and to open yourself to helping them see that potential. Taking the next step...

13 IDENTIFY SOMEONE WITH POTENTIAL WHOSE VALUES YOU RESPECT.

Once you have a true mentor, look around for people with potential whom you can encourage. Look for someone you respect, whose values you can affirm, someone who you believe has the desire to grow.

14 FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO AFFIRM LAVISHLY THIS PERSON'S CONTRIBUTION.

Look for chances to approach and affirm this person and his or her work. Be lavish in honest affirmation. Do not offer to be a mentor unless you are asked, perhaps even if you are asked. Affirm lavishly and wait to see if anything develops.

15 FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO ENCOURAGE PERSONALLY.

Look for the chance to encourage the other person by sharing of yourself, your resources, your connections and relationships. Be a person whose very presence is encouraging and empowering. Again, do not offer to become a mentor or even to help unless you are asked. Be open to possibilities. If the other person wants to take things further, be available.

16 LISTEN TO WORDS, EMOTIONS AND BODY LANGUAGE.

In the mentoring relationship, listen. Listen to the words spoken, but listen even more carefully to the words not spoken. Listen to the emotions, the feelings, the joy, the hurt, the anger, the love being communicated. Try to hear what's going on in the other person's heart as well as head. You have the privilege of hearing things that the other person may not even know he or she is saying.

17 ASK QUESTIONS RATHER THAN GIVE ADVICE.

Think questions, questions, and more questions. When people ask for advice, resist the advice that leaps into your mind. Form a question instead that draws wisdom and learning from the other person. Try to help the other person to see another view of reality through the questions you ask rather than through lessons you expound upon. The quality of the relationship will be found in the questions you ask.

18 CONSIDER WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM THAT PERSON.

All true relationships are mutual. It takes two persons to sustain a relationship. A mentoring relationship is no different. Both people must see their time together as a learning, growing experience. What can you learn by sharing the learning and growth of the other person?

What can you learn from the reality in which the person lives and works?

19 IDENTIFY AREAS OPEN TO GROWTH.

This brings us back to the beginning. Are you still open to growth, to learning, to change? A mentoring relationship assumes a shared journey involving two people who know they must keep learning and growing. Where are your rough edges these days? Where are your flat sides? What gaps do you want to fill in at this stage of your journey through the reality you find yourself in? What can you begin to explore as you continue to discover the world around you?

20 IDENTIFY SOMEONE WHOM YOU CAN LEARN FROM.

Whom are you learning from? Who are your mentors now? Who believes you have potential? Whom do you respect? Whose conversation and questions will enrich your life?

Walter C. Wright, Jr.

MAX DE PREE

Max De Pree, chairman emeritus of Herman Miller, Inc, has provided leadership and wisdom for many years in both the corporate and the non-profit worlds. He was named by *Fortune* magazine to its National Business Hall of Fame, and received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Business Enterprise Trust. He is the author of four best-selling books, *Leadership is an Art*, *Leadership Jazz*, *Leading without Power* and *Called to Serve*. His monograph *Does Leadership have a Future?* is available through the De Pree Leadership Center.

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DE PREE LEADERSHIP CENTER

The De Pree Leadership Center was established as a resource for men and women with responsibilities for leadership. The Center seeks to promote relational leadership that nurtures effective organizations into relational communities in order to encourage positive workplace environments where people belong, contribute, and grow.

The Center develops written materials, retreats, workshops, seminars, consultation, and training through relationships with a network of partners. For additional information, contact:

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