



Article from

The Stepping Stone

November 2016

Issue 64

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The Three Surprising Ways Becoming a Mentor Helps Your Own Career

By Darcy Eikenberg

If you want to grow your leadership skills, someone will likely give you this piece of career advice: “You need a mentor.”

Sure, mentors are great. Their support, counsel and example can be a foundation for how we change and learn. But that advice is only half-right. Because while **having** a mentor is great, **being** a mentor is an even more important step toward building the leadership credibility and career you want. Here’s why.

MENTORING CREATES CONNECTION

When asked about the most important factor in buying a house, people often say, “location, location, location.” Well, the three most important things in career success today are connection, connection, connection.

No, this doesn’t mean the number of people who we’re connected to on LinkedIn, or who are following us on Twitter or Instagram. You may be connected to them, but how much are you really connecting?

Clicking isn’t connecting. Connection is a sense of deeper understanding and empathy about someone else’s experience and background. Connecting is the sense others have that you really see them and know them.

Connection is the currency of today’s success, and not in a slimy, “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” way. In an age where trust is harder and harder to come by, the people who we’re really connected to stand out as ones we trust. Those are the ones we recommend, promote and hire, too. When you become a mentor, you deepen your ability to create connection.

MENTORING HELPS YOU PRACTICE

THE ART OF LISTENING

One young professional debating becoming a mentor said to me, “What if I don’t have anything of value to say?” But that’s

looking at mentoring backward, because a good mentor listens more than she talks. A good mentor becomes the literal sounding board for the other person’s ideas or concerns. She shuts up and lets the other person have the floor. She doesn’t have to prove that she’s the smartest person in the room.

As a mentor, you can use your mentoring relationship to practice the art of listening. Exercise your focus muscles on what’s really being said, in addition to the ideas that are staying unsaid. Plus, mentors get to practice one of the most powerful leadership tools—silence. It’s not your job to fill the space in between sentences. It’s not your job to have all the answers.

It’s your job to listen, really hear and care. Being a mentor gives you the rare, safe chance to practice these valuable skills that will benefit you in your leadership journey (and maybe at home, too).

MENTORING REMINDS YOU OF YOUR VALUE

One of my mentors, Marshall Goldsmith, leads an exercise in rooms of hundreds where he asks that you write down one problem or issue you’re struggling with. Then he has you randomly find a partner across the room, and in a tightly timed process, share your problem and hear what your partner has to offer you.

I’ve participated and led this exercise many times. And the element that always fascinates me is that no matter who you randomly partner up with in the room, that person will always have a good idea for you to consider.

It doesn’t matter if you’re in the same industry, at the same peer level, or even in the same company. Human beings are naturally creative, and when we focus on the other person, we can typically figure out ways to be of help.

It’s the same when you are a mentor. No matter what problem the other person brings up, you have something to offer them. You have value. Encouragement has value. Asking more questions to help clarify the problem has value. Providing a safe place for someone to talk and feel they’re being heard has value.

Look around you right now. Who might benefit from having you as a mentor? What formal and informal programs can you get involved with in your company, community or profession? If you’re ready to build your leadership skills, don’t be shy. Raise your hand, because not only can you support someone else, but you’ll grow your own career, too. ■



Darcy Eikenberg, PCC, is an executive coach and speaker on leadership and career success. She’s the author of *Bring Your Superpowers to Work*, and regularly shares free tools at RedCapeRevolution.com. Reach her at Darcy@RedCapeRevolution.com.