

What the Best Mentors Do

by Anthony K. Tjan

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Mentorship comes in many flavors. It doesn't always work unless leaders bear in mind a few common principles.

Over the past three years, as part of my forthcoming book, I've been researching how leaders can better judge and develop their talent in light of a changing, more purpose-driven, more tech-enabled work environment. Having interviewed close to 100 of the most admired leaders across business, culture, arts, and government, one important

characteristic stands out: They do everything they can to imprint their “goodness” onto others in ways that make others feel like fuller versions of themselves. Put another way, the best leaders practice a form of leadership that is less about creating followers and more about creating other leaders. How do they do that? I’ve noticed four things the best mentors do:

Put the relationship before the mentorship. All too often, mentorship can evolve into a “check the box” procedure instead of something authentic and relationship-based. For real mentorship to succeed, there needs to be a baseline chemistry between a mentor and a mentee. Studies show that even the best-designed mentoring programs are no substitute for a genuine, intercollegial relationship between mentor and mentee. One piece of research, conducted by Belle Rose Ragins, a mentoring expert and professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, demonstrated that unless mentees have a basic relationship with their mentors, there is no discernable difference between mentees and those *not* mentored. All this is to say that mentoring requires rapport. At best, it propels people to break from their formal roles and titles (boss versus employee) and find common ground as people.

Focus on character rather than competency. Too many mentors see mentoring as a training program focused around the acquisition of job skills. Obviously, one element of mentorship involves mastering the necessary competencies for a given position. But the best leaders go beyond competency, focusing on helping to shape other people’s character, values, self-awareness, empathy, and capacity for respect. They know in the long run that there is a hard truth about soft matters and that these values-based qualities matter a lot more than skill enhancement. There are many ways to mentor people around these values and to build greater self-awareness.

Shout loudly with your optimism, and keep quiet with your cynicism. Your mentee might come to you with some off-the-wall ideas or seemingly unrealistic ambitious. You might be tempted to help them think more realistically, but mentors need to be givers of energy, not takers of it. Consider why an idea might work, before you consider why it might not. The best method I know for thinking this way is the 24×3 rule for optimism. I've written about this approach and tried to practice it for years, but it's very difficult to master. Each time you hear a new idea, see if it is possible for you to spend 24 seconds, 24 minutes, or a day thinking about all the reasons that the idea is good before you criticize any aspect of it. It's been said that the world prefers conventional failure over unconventional success; good mentors should encourage exploration of the latter.

Be more loyal to your mentee than you are to your company. Of course, we all want to retain our best and brightest. We also want our people to be effective in our organizations. That said, the best mentors recognize that in its most noble and powerful form, leadership is a duty and service toward others, and that the best way to inspire commitment is to be fully and selflessly committed to the best interests of colleagues and employees. Don't seek only to uncover your mentees' strengths; look for their underlying passions, too. Help them find their calling. Most of us have experienced people, such as friends, religious leaders, and family members, who serve as our anchors and guides outside our workplaces. Why can't we bring this same high level of trust and support *inside* the workplace? In a lot of cases, we owe it to mentees to serve as something more than just career mentors.

The best mentors avoid overriding the dreams of their mentees. If an employee and a job aren't a good fit, or if an ambitious employee realistically has limited upward mobility in a company, a good mentor will help that employee move on. They might be better suited to another role within the organization, or even to a new path somewhere else.

At its highest level, mentorship is about being “good people” and having the right “good people” around us – individuals committed to helping others become fuller versions of who they are. Which is why the organizations and leaders I’ve come to admire most are the ones devoted to bringing others along.



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