

*Leadership*

## **Mentoring can provide you with a terrific advantage**

*By Rick Maier*

One of the primary reasons some people earn more responsibility and enjoy more success than their peers is that they have great mentors – inspiring coaches, advisors and role models in their lives.

Let me share some examples of mentors or coaches who have had a big impact on me.

### Parents

My foremost mentors were my mother and father. In addition to successfully raising three boys, they built a prosperous retail business by working long hours and maintaining high standards, long before the phrases “entrepreneurial” and “total quality management” became popular. (Corporate recruiters often seek out people whose parents owned their own business because such households can foster a strong work ethic.)

My parents also taught me about leadership transition – following years of nurturing three children, they encouraged us to be independent as young adults - just as a business leader treats veterans quite differently than new employees.

My father died when I was in my twenties, and it made me realize how much I took his support for granted - the way he was always there, but didn't interfere. I had no idea how much I had always tried to please him until he was gone.

### The Jock Accountant

Another great influence in my life came years later when I worked for a former college football player. He was unlike any accountant I had ever met. He was organized and good with numbers – just like you'd expect from a financial guy. But he found humor in every situation, and no one could forget meeting him.

Up until this ex-jock, my idea of an extroverted accountant was one who stares down at *your* shoes instead of his own when he talks to you. He was quite a departure from the “beancounter” image - both in appearance and in the way he positively impacted so many people.

He taught me that accounting was only a process and that what people really wanted was information for decisions, not a bunch of techno-babble. And the better you understood your subject, the simpler you presented it in terms your audience could relate to and enjoy.

### Special leaders at work

We count on parents and friends who mentor or coach us, even after we're all grown up, and no matter how "big" we get in business. I imagine even Jack Welch seeks the approval of someone. We need people to look up to, hold us accountable, and care enough to give us honest feedback.

Intelligence, connections and good fortune help, but a great coach can guide us through the maze of tough decisions and judgement calls.

If you've ever had a great mentor, you know what I mean. If you haven't, well, you need to seek one out by identifying successful leaders with whom you have frequent contact, and studying their style – not *what* they do but *how* they do it.

The key is to borrow different characteristics from several of the successful people you meet. Even the greatest leaders have flaws, so pick and choose the best traits, and blend them in with your own personality to create a unique style. You're not trying to change your personality to copy someone else's, you're searching for a style that works for you.

### Attributes

What are the attributes of a great mentor? Think back to what you fondly remember about that special person who has had a powerful influence on you.

My favorite business mentors are those who:

- push you to your limits, but are fair and upbeat
- encourage you to grow and experiment, but are there if you stray too far
- teach you skills and give you ideas, but expect you to do things for yourself
- listen well, and act with an understated confidence and a great sense of humor

We put a great coach up on a "pedestal" and try hard to please them. We learn through their example and adopt many of their principles and values. We feel empowered and impassioned, and look forward to the time we spend together.

How are your mentoring skills?

Do you work for the kind of leader who makes you want to succeed? Do you inspire your people?

The world is full of smart managers and experienced bosses, but there is a critical shortage of the kind of leaders you would call mentor or coach.

Don't forget to let the mentors in your life know how much you appreciate them, and return the kindness by being there for someone yourself.