

VENTURING MAGAZINE

LeaderThoughts #10 by Michael Brown

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Mentoring

In LeaderThought #5, we spoke of the "Characteristics of Servant Leader". We have already touched on the concept of Vision & Mission that tied to the characteristics of Conceptualization and Persuasion. We dealt with Goal Setting that also ties to those characteristics. We looked at Change with ties to Foresight. And we looked at Communication which ties to both Listening and Empathy. Now we look at Mentoring, which is about having a Commitment to the growth of people.



In recent years, the idea of mentoring has become more popular and widespread. While it's more a personal development method than a leadership concept, it does have strong tie-ins with leadership, or as a way to develop and nurture new leaders. You many times hear people speak of their mentors, many organizations now make stronger use of mentoring. And it's being used and spoken of more within Scouting as well. Max De Pree and Walter Wright feel that the relationship between the servant leader and the follower is basically one of mentoring, and put heavy emphasis on this "relational leadership". (their works will be a topic of a future Thoughts)

So, what is it? As noted, it's a method of personal development in which a more experienced or knowledgeable person (the mentor) is paired with a less experienced/knowledgeable person (the apprentice, or nowadays the mentee). Note I said "more experienced". I didn't say expert. The mentor doesn't need to be an expert, but just more experienced, and be able to pass along their knowledge and experience. How the mentor is paired with the mentee can vary. Some groups seem to go with the idea of a mentor being selected for a mentee. Others go with the idea that the mentee should seek out their mentor. And in many cases, a mentee may have multiple mentors, as they seek out people with varying skills and area of expertise to help them in achieve their goals in life.

The relationship between the mentor and mentee is important. It is what separates mentoring with other methods of learning. This should not be a rigid student-teacher relationship, in which the mentor sets up formal sessions or the like. The relationship needs to be less formal. It could be conducted face to face (important at the beginning of the relationship), on-line, via phone, and the like. Ideally, the mentee should take a more lead role in terms of what they are looking for (their goals), with the mentor passing along their knowledge as the mentee seeks it out.

And that is an important part. Too often I hear of the relationship being more of the mentor just passively listening to the mentee, acting as more or less a sounding board for the mentee. If that is all they are, then what is the value in seeking out a particular mentor? If it all about speaking with someone, you could do that with your friends. The value from the mentor is MORE than that. It is what the mentee gets from the mentor: their experience and knowledge. It is getting back information, ideas, feedback, suggestions, advice. And sometimes the mentor needs to take a more active role. Ideally they should have an idea of what the mentee is looking for (their goals). And sometimes we need someone to push and prod us to action. The mistake I see too often made (with those who wish to be mentors or advisors), is thinking they are not allowed to take the initiative to move the mentee along.

The following example I think illustrates this. It's something that happened to a friend of mine with one of his mentors. He does bike races, and was working hard to qualify for one. This required that he place in qualifying races, but he hadn't been able to do so. If he didn't place in the next qualifier, he would be eliminated from competing. He spoke with his mentor about his frustrations about qualifying, hoping to get some suggestions or advice, which he got. As he was completing the qualifying race, he saw his mentor coming up from behind. He realized that if his mentor passed him, he'd be disqualified. This spurred him on harder, and he was able to finish the race and be qualified for the competition. But he was very upset with his mentor, as he knew how much he needed to complete that race. His mentor asked him: "Did you qualify". He had. Then he said: "You're welcome."

Hopefully, everyone got the point. My friend did. His mentor DID help him. By putting that pressure on him, it caused him to put more into completing that race, which he did. And this is something ANY good mentor (or advisor) must do at times. Take action to spur on those they mentor/advise to achieve the goals they set out to.

An important factor in the mentoring process is for organizations to cultivate a mentoring program or at least a "mentoring culture", in which mentoring is an important aspect of the organization, and to encourage people to seek out mentors and support of the mentoring of members. Some organizations do this in various ways. They may have a formal mentor program, where mentors are identified and recognized for their work. They may also realize the importance of mentoring members of the organization, and in looking out for people who have potential that can be mentored, such as those who may be future leaders within the organization.

Another aspect of mentor is something I call "group mentoring", for lack of a better term. It's something I see in other organizations, but which isn't really used well in the BSA. Most organizations have a well-defined process for new groups being formed (local chapters, if you will). With the BSA, once you have the minimum numbers required for a charter, you're chartered. With other organizations, the chartering process may take weeks or months as the group might need to meet requirements, or bring together the number of members needed. This is overseen by a sponsor, which is an experienced member of the organization. This process is done because it helps ensure that the group understands what that organization is all about, and is set out on the right path to be successful.

Once the group is chartered, many organizations then follow up with a further period of oversight that may last 6 months to a year. This may be done by the same sponsor, or by others who serve as mentors for the group, mainly to ensure that the group continues on the right path. This further period is done because many organizations have found that after expending so much time and energy to get chartered, that sometimes these groups can flounder and go under.

Further, if a group gets into problems, usually indicated by falling membership, they might be signed experienced members from the organization to work with them for a period of time to bring them back in line.

By and large, we don't do this in the BSA. While we have unit commissioners, these people are overseeing several units and often don't have the time and energy (or the experience) that is needed to do the job that is usually expected from the roles I outlined above, who are usually attending most meetings and events of these groups.



I have heard of some Councils who organize groups of experienced Venturers who can act as similar "group mentors" to help new Crews get off to a good start. It's unfortunately that no one has worked out a more formalized way of utilizing such a system, as I think it could benefit crews and the program.

As to resources. I have mentioned a few, such as the works of Walter Wright and the publications of the De Pree Leadership Center (to be more fully covered in a future Thoughts). I am disappointed that the Mentoring training developed for Venturing was never properly released. It was promised back in 2009. Maybe with the new Venturing elements coming out, we will have a proper mentoring program. There are several other works on mentoring, but I haven't been able to review them. The works by Lois Zachery look good, with guides for both mentors and mentees, as well as one on developing a mentoring culture. Several of the works I've covered in the past on experiential learning also cover the topic.

Here are some videos I have found on Venturing:

1. Colin Powell: Why Mentoring is Important - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suYhxYBHhKo>
2. Jack Canfield: Finding a Mentor - <http://www.youtube.com/embed/QEPtqx90grI>
3. CNN: Steve Harvey on education and mentoring - <http://www.youtube.com/embed/mX1NtAyDG7M>
4. Mentoring – Be a Mentor (humorous) - <http://www.youtube.com/embed/wZGxWC2qdSM>
5. The Value of Mentoring (humorous) - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Glg_HMRcXzI