



Mentoring in the 21st Century

Issue V

by Paula Rutherford

This issue focuses on variables we can use to reflect on our mentoring efforts during the first semester and set goals for the upcoming semester. The color graphic which captures these key variables is available to duplicate at the end of this newsletter.

A Great Mentor Is...

Benevolent and Competent

Benevolence and competency are two variables that must be present in a trusting mentoring relationship. That is, if we want to develop and sustain a productive mentoring relationship it is essential that we demonstrate through our actions our interest in and commitment to the well-being and success of our protégées. It is, however, not enough for mentors to demonstrate such benevolence. Competency, or knowing what we are talking about and being able to make things happen, is another essential component in a trusting relationship. One without the other can lead to disastrous results. Well-developed listening and speaking skills accompanied by discretion help us know what to say when, and how to say what needs to be said.

An Advocate

Mentors can be advocates for their own protégées and for new teachers in general. David Sides, Lead Mentor at John Adams Elementary School in Alexandria City Public Schools in Virginia, advocated for new teachers by asking to have five minutes to focus on their needs in what he calls a Mentoring Moment at each faculty meeting. This ensures that the entire staff is consistently reminded of the need to be supportive of staff members new to the school. Protecting protégées from mismatched furniture, half class sets of texts, shared classrooms, multiple preparations, and, in general, from being the dumping ground of leftovers is an extremely important responsibility of mentors.

A Role Model

Accepting the responsibility of mentoring adds to our professional responsibilities in many ways. As mentors we are not simply tasked with assisting new teachers in their first years, we are also the face of the profession. This means that we have to model professionalism in every way...the way we dress, the way we speak, and the way we treat students, teaching colleagues, the administrative staff, support staff, and parents. When we accept a mentoring position we implicitly agree to support school and school district initiatives in ways that not only promote student learning but also help new teachers understand the rationale behind these initiatives and how the initiatives are interrelated. When we ourselves do not understand the rationale and purpose of the initiatives or when we have differences of opinions with colleagues, we must model professional approaches to learning more and/or resolving conflict so that we are seen by our protégées as members of a larger team and so that they have models for professional interactions.

A Systems Thinker

Expert teachers fully understand the social and organizational systems that are in place in their own classrooms; they know that those systems establish the conditions necessary for high performing learning communities to thrive. We not only understand those systems, we monitor and correct the systems when they are not functioning smoothly. Expert mentors must not only understand the systems necessary to lead in individual classrooms, we must also understand which systems are in operations in the department, the grade level, the school, and the district and how those systems work. This is even more important today than it has been in the past because almost all school districts now include in their teacher performance criteria statements that require collaboration with colleagues as well as support and contributions toward the accomplishment of school and district goals. Given that many teacher preparation programs do not include course work on collaboration or professional goal setting aligned with district mission statements, it falls on our shoulders to coach and guide new teachers around these issues. This is a significant change in some schools so mentors need to be ever vigilant in building their own understanding of school and district goals and in translating them for teachers new to the district. To accomplish this we need to frequently check the district website for updates on policy changes and use district documents to plan our data-driven discussions with new teachers.

A Student Learning Guru

A challenge for all educators is finding the balance between personal practical experience and reaching out to the research base on teaching and learning. As mentors we must not only know and be able to share strategies that work; we also need to be able to explain the reasons a given strategy is a good choice for a particular instructional situation. As expert teachers we have integrated the best of many approaches and initiatives into our practice and usually do not stop and think about the name of the strategy or the reasons we selected it. In order to be successful mentors we must do careful analyses of our own teaching decisions so that we can identify for our protégées the variables we consider when making instructional decisions. We can demonstrate our belief that “it hasn’t been taught if it hasn’t be caught.” by purposefully articulating how we use task analysis and formative assessment data to adjust our instructional decisions.

A Life-Long Learner

A natural pitfall of being seen as expert teachers is that newcomers may decide that we have all the answers. It is important to communicate that the more we know, the better we understand just how much we do not yet know. Parallel Planning by mentors and new teachers is an excellent way to support new teachers and to share our own thinking about planning instruction for diverse learners. In this mentoring format, each party is doing his/her own planning but sitting side by side, asking for and receiving suggestions from each other. The lessons being planned can be for completely different subjects or grade levels. We all have lots to learn from one another no matter what we are teaching.

Grounded

We remember well those situations when we were so uncomfortable with what we were being asked to do that all our attention and energy went toward our own survival and success. We did not yet have both feet on the ground. As we developed our content knowledge and built our instructional repertoires we became more grounded and were able to focus on and respond to the needs of the learners. The same developmental pattern unfolds as we learn to be great mentors. We have to learn more about how adults learn, how to approach adult learners who view the world through lens different from ours, and how to provide growth-producing feedback. Until we have developed our mentoring knowledge and built our mentoring repertoire, it is easy to lose sight of the purposes of the mentoring process. If we are not comfortable with ourselves personally and professionally, with our role in the school community, and with our skill sets as mentors, it is easy to be thrown “off our game” by the multiple responsibilities which make demands on our time and energy.

Capable of Bobbing and Weaving

Change happens! While school systems tend to move more slowly than other organizations, we are always

subject to new programs, new approaches, and new directions. Just when we think things are stabilized, financial or political variables lead to shifts in direction. New teachers struggle to seek balance between their professional and personal lives. Mentors can assist with this effort by minimizing our own reactions to new directions and looking for the ways to make the new approach contribute not only to student learning but to the professional growth of the new teachers. A great stress reducer for both protégées and mentors is to ask no matter what the change, “Given that . . . , how shall we move forward?” Energy spent on pity parties can be redirected to finding ways to deal with whatever change has come forth.

Resources to support mentor reflection and goal setting can be found in

The 21st Century Mentor’s Handbook on the following pages.

Page 284: Self-Assessment of Mentoring Knowledge and Skills

Page 286: Mentoring Professional Growth Plan

Page 287: 3-2-1 Reflection and Goal Setting

Pages 296-299: Induction/Mentoring Program Reflection and Evaluation

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