The Importance of a Mentor

By Capt. Jean Tomte

Mentoring is a concept that goes back to the mid-18th Century. Being a mentor implies being a role model who enlightens someone’s path with advice and counseling coupled with practical lessons for one’s professional or academic path.

The word “mentor” comes from Mentor, friend of Ulysses who became the preceptor of Telema-chus, the son of Ulysses.

As Socrates the philosopher laid the ground for “maieutic” (the art of giving birth to spirits) while mentoring Plato, a mentor should reach that standard. Put another way, a mentor must exemplify excellence, expertise and nurture high self-esteem while equipping the mentee with tools needed for professional or academic growth.

A mentor is primarily an accompanist; who is a master in their field. They help the mentee gain experience without asking anything in return. They know the pitfalls the mentee is likely to face.

Confidence is also essential for the mentee. In this respect, the mentor should foster approaches that will make the mentee see him/herself as a valuable asset of an organization.

The Army also adopted the
mentor concept. The Army’s use of the term mentoring in Field Manual 6-22 (FM 22-100) refers to effective leadership. Teaching, counseling, coaching and caring for people are tools used by a mentor. In other words, they are important aspects of the Mentorship Program, but cannot account for mentoring in its full extent.

Given that most people misunderstand the word “mentor,” it is imperative to draw the attention of people on its misuse. People think that teaching someone a skill is mentorship, thereby referring to that person as a mentor.

In an Army Times interview, Gen. John Keane, former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, said “Quality of leadership—as reflected in the mentoring process—has fallen off. We’re just not taking the time that we need to spend with our youngsters and their personal growth and development. We need to do more of that.”

As a former operation officer, and now commander of a basic training unit—I face a sustainable development challenge while adapting to new processes and finding new ways for professional growth. At the heart of this quest for professional productivity is the future and success of the trainees considered as the next generation of our military.

Four Thirty Fourth Field Artillery Brigade leadership values hard work and discipline and demands trainees exemplify that despite the stressful environment and challenges they face. This creates a sense of pride and admiration for those fortunate to witness it.

My credo as a mentor would be: hang in there and do not let go! A military journey is often marked with lessons learned from one’s failures. My technical advice would be to learn all you can about your target and have a plan. You should also have an alternative strategy, as things do not always go according to plan.

Jim Flanagan, former captain in the U.S. Army, said that his experience with mentorship in the Army took place in Officer Professional Development. According to Flanagan, mentorship is more of a personal relationship. He said “As I got to know the various field grade officers, I honestly realized that I did not want to have my life turn out like theirs which is why I left the military. However, the only time I saw some emotional vulnerability from them was when they were stressed.”

“When I was a second lieutenant, my battalion commander [5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery] at the time Lt. Col. Kevin Ciocca in Rhine Ordnance Barracks Kaiserslautern, Germany, sat down with me at breakfast and just asked how I was doing. He talked about the ups and downs of a military career. I wish more leaders did that,” said Flanagan.

One does not need to look for the perfect mentor. What matters is finding the right person to help you fill in your gaps while moving where your strengths lie.

Why mentor?

Besides this altruistic aspect, your relationship is not of a deep connection, it is rather a rite of passage for them. After gaining a certain level of success and recognition, it is natural for most of them to want to help others. But not to anyone.

How to be worthy?

There are two essential attitudes. As a mentor, do your part of the job when the mentor gives you tasks to do. It can be impressive to interact with a mentor, especially considering that he or she is offering their resources and time. Do not think you are insignificant. An enlightened mentor knows the mentee will also teach important things and help them reflect on their own practices. Do not believe that a relationship with a mentor is a one-way relationship. It is a partnership with each person having values to share.

What motivates a mentor?

When witnessing the mentee’s growth, the mentor can decide when to withdraw or lend a hand. This dynamic walks the fine line between teaching and mentoring. In this perspective, mentorship is evolutionary whereas teaching is static in that specific skills must be sharpened regardless of the abilities of the trainee. The mentor and mentee rapport evolves as the mentee’s journey progresses.

Optimizing learning

Take notes during verbal exchanges. Every communication is precious and worth note taking, and you can’t expect to hold everything in your head. You will want to know certain things, and you will have to ask yourself this question: Do I have to search by myself, or can I ask my mentor? Your mentor will not answer everything, but you still must dare to ask for resources. You must seek it when you feel it is appropriate. If you do everything yourself, you may find answers to your questions, but your mentor will shed light on things you weren’t aware of due to lack of experience.

Lastly, a mentor is a support person. They have their own experience, and it’s not yours. So, do not expect that by applying each of their tips you will succeed. Your work must be done by you.

The Army should consider redefining the concept of mentor in order to avoid poor mentorship. There should be a fine line drawn between mentorship and leadership development. Being a leader does not imply mentoring subordinates. One way to avoid this confusion would be to reevaluate Field Manual 6-22 (FM 22-100) and redefine the word “mentor.” By doing so, subordinates and leaders as well as mentors and mentees will have a clear understanding and realistic expectations from one another.

The Officer Education System should be innovated to focus on facilitating leader development and clearly outlining key aspects of what mentorship is and how it must be done.

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