

The Mentoring Family Tree

How intergenerational concepts can inform and improve our mentoring relationships

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Mentor: “An experienced and trusted adviser or guide; a teacher, a tutor.”
—*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*

Chances are at some point in your life you’ve been involved in a mentoring relationship, either as a mentor or as a mentee. Asking advice, giving advice, and teaching someone new skills are all hallmarks of mentoring relationships that we engage in daily—either consciously or subconsciously, formally or informally. There are a variety of ways, models, or concepts to use to think about these relationships: teacher: student, employer: employee, master: apprentice, team leader: team member. While these models all strive to define mentoring relationships, we think the best model for discussing the value and complexity of mentoring relationships is a family tree.

When the word “mentor” is used, it often connotes a “mentor with a capital M”—that is, a formal, structured relationship. This is certainly a common mechanism for mentorship. Mentoring, however, comes in all shapes and sizes—or from all branches of the family tree, if you will. Within a family tree there may be formal and informal mentoring relationships or peer mentoring relationships. From what is learned in those relationships, advice and guidance are passed on to the next generation. The receiving generation builds on that knowledge and continues to pass it on, creating a series of grandmentees and great-grandmentees.

The advice and guidance we pass down is like that old family recipe passed from generation to generation. You know the one, written in your great-grandma’s handwriting on a faded sheet of paper covered in flour. The recipe with writing in the margins; some notes in faded ink, others freshly written as each person adds more advice or tweaks the recipe to make it better. And because of that individualization, the notes on your copy might differ from those on your great-aunt’s, your mother’s or your brother’s.

Everyone who uses it takes that time-tested recipe and tweaks it to reflect attitudes, individual tastes, and styles.

We may not often think of mentoring in this context—but maybe we should. Mentoring is not always simply passing down what you have to say or what you’ve learned. Nor is it always a clear top-down concept. Mentoring is intergenerational. It is fluid. It is influenced by many factors. The advice of mentors, we think, is meant to be like that family recipe: passed down, molded over time, personalized, and shared across generations in every direction.

Whether you think about mentoring in a formal or informal context, you may find it helps to think about the intergenerational concepts that can inform and improve our mentoring relationships.

We’ve identified six mentoring concepts.

Looking at those concepts through the context of a family tree, we hope, will get that conversation started.

Building a Mentoring “Family”

Why do you want a mentor? Why do you want to be a mentor? What characteristics are you are looking for in a mentor? What do you want to get out of the relationship? What do you have to offer to a mentee? The first step in building a mentoring family starts when you identify what you want to get from a mentoring relationship or what you want to bring to a mentoring relationship.

In looking for a mentor, perhaps the best question you can ask yourself is: Who do I want to be when I grow up? Your search for a mentor will revolve around finding someone who has the same values and goals, the same approach to professionalism. That person doesn’t necessarily need to be someone in your profession; a mentor can be anyone

who possesses characteristics that can help you develop and grow. While a mentor in your profession can help you in a number of specific ways—networking, learning about professional culture, etc.—mentors from outside of your profession can also be helpful. As Owen Sutkowski notes in “Kitchen Cabinet of Mentors,” a friend outside the profession who has seen you grow professionally and who you trust to give you honest feedback and advice can be an invaluable mentor because he or she will have an unbiased view and a different perspective on your work.

When working with a mentee, ask yourself: What can I offer this person? What do I bring to the table? The development of this relationship is a bit more difficult to define because it isn’t like you, as the mentor, are necessarily (figuratively) jumping up and down and saying, “Pick me, pick me . . . I’ll be a great mentor!” We have found that becoming a mentor usually happens in one of three ways.

The first way that many mentoring relationships develop is through formal mentoring programs like the one offered through AALL, Mentor Match (community.aallnet.org/mentoring/aboutmentormatch). These types of programs are most similar to the “pick me, pick me” scenario. Here you’ve identified qualities or skills that you think would be helpful to a mentee and what you would bring to the mentoring relationship. You’re volunteering your time, knowledge, skills, and expertise to someone through a more formal and structured relationship. There’s a commitment on your part. You’re consciously making an effort to introduce this person to the profession through networking, suggestions, and advice.

The second way that mentoring relationships often develop is organically: you meet someone and find that your personalities mesh and you have common interests; you connect. You begin emailing, talking regularly on the phone, sharing what you’ve learned over the course of your career, becoming a sounding board, or offering advice when asked. Another way to think of this is mentoring through friendship.



The third way that people typically become a mentor is a variation of organic mentoring—becoming a mentor through a family tree. As you connect with people and develop mentoring relationships, a “family tree” begins to develop: you as a mentor on some levels become the “parent,” your mentee becomes the “child,” and those individuals who your mentee mentors become your “grandchildren.” And the family tree analogy doesn’t end there, as mentoring relationships are often not linear. In many cases you may be mentoring or being mentored by more than one person, growing branches on your tree. Those branches may be the result of a conscious decision on your part to “add new family members” through work in a formal mentoring program, or they may be there as a result of relationships developing organically.

Think about where you are in your career. At different points in your professional life, you’ll be either in a parenting role or in a child’s role. As a new librarian, the mentoring you look for and receive is very different than when you are mid-career or late in your career. And it isn’t just your length of time in the profession that helps define mentoring. It’s also career milestones that are relevant or impact what role you play, what you need, and what you can offer. In academia, for example, pre-tenure needs are different than post-tenure needs; assistant to associate to professor-level advice and other factors are relevant in building family relationships. Moving from one job or one type of law librarianship to another also presents areas where mentoring relationships can come into play.

Generations

Once you establish mentoring relationships and begin to grow your family tree, think about how you interact with members of the family. What advice have you received from your mentor? Has it been helpful? Have you adapted it, or “leafed” it out and passed it on to a mentee? What did you do or can you do to help your mentee become a mentor? One of the more important aspects of mentoring that we frequently forget is sharing: how relationships grow and develop; how quickly, almost seamlessly, we transition from mentee to mentor; and how we frequently and simultaneously occupy both roles.

Most people working with graduate or law students think about mentoring these young professionals in various ways. Often, however, we fail to help them develop and foster mentoring skills. We fail to give them the skills and tools they need to become mentors.

Not too long ago, a graduate assistant was complaining to his supervisor about a fellow graduate assistant. The complaint was valid and deserved to be addressed. Rather than stepping in to address the issue, the supervisor advised the student to talk to his coworker himself. He replied, “I don’t really care that much. I am almost gone.” This was a perfect opportunity for the supervisor to mentor his student, showing that the discussion with his colleague was not about him but rather about him helping his colleague grow as a professional—hence, making the student a mentor, as well.

Informal vs. Formal

When trying to decide which type of mentoring you want to provide (or receive), you may wish to take a moment to consider the value of formal relationships versus informal relationships. They both have great value despite providing different outcomes.

As mentioned earlier, there are formal mentoring opportunities available like AALL’s Mentor Match; perhaps your institution also offers a formal mentoring program where newer employees are matched with older employees, someone to contact with questions about the job or the institution. These structures often create artificiality in the relationship but, conversely, also offer discrete parameters for the relationship. These interactions can also be valuable for those who are unsure where to start when seeking a mentor or considering offering mentoring guidance. Additionally, many programs of this nature provide guidance on ways to interact to get the mentoring ball rolling: topics to discuss, activities to engage in, regular meeting times, etc.

There are also informal mentoring opportunities, one of which is networking. You connect with someone at a conference, institutional event, or through writing, and a relationship develops. You may not say “I’ll be your mentor,” or ask, “Will you be my mentor?” but your interactions essentially become those of a mentoring relationship.

Additionally, many informal relationships are driven by a combination of circumstance and need. You may develop an informal relationship simply by working side-by-side with a senior colleague on a new project. Maybe you’re teamed with someone who has a unique skill set that is demonstrated and shared with you throughout work on a joint project. Perhaps you’ve unconsciously developed a peer-to-peer mentoring relationship. Michelle Hook Dewey, one of this article’s co-authors, provides an example of this: when she was in library

school, a classmate kept referring to Dewey as her mentor. Dewey was confused because they were peers, but then she realized that she was always talking things out and offering guidance, so she was, in fact, a peer mentor—a role largely made possible by the effective mentoring that Dewey received from Candle Wester, another co-author of this article.

Informal relationships can also guide us in many ways. They can provide models that we hope to emulate in our careers or our day-to-day actions. These casual mentoring moments can also help us see the role that we all have to offer, even if we are not interested in giving or receiving formal mentorship. While there is usually no specific mentoring discussion in these circumstances, the party or parties walk away having learned from one another.

There are other forms of informal mentoring that you likely participate in that you may not even be aware of. Think of the posts you read on Law-Lib, for example. Some of the suggestions or information posted impacts you—how you think about an issue, how you approach a problem, how you develop as a professional. Think of your professional reading, as well—those articles also serve to mentor you about different aspects of the profession; help you learn from shared experiences; and develop a deeper understanding of the nuances of law librarianship. There are also a number of excellent blogs focusing on business, law librarianship, the law, and a variety of other interests that intersect with what we do on a daily basis and provide helpful information, serving as informal mentoring.

Reverse Mentoring

Changes in the profession, longer working lives, and technological growth are just three areas where reverse mentoring can be important. But what is reverse mentoring? In a nutshell, think of it as learning from someone new to the profession, or being open and appreciating what a newbie has to offer. The obvious “learning” may be in technological areas, but there are a number of more subtle areas where reverse mentoring can benefit both the mentor and the mentee.

Interacting and developing a positive relationship across generational and professional lines benefits both parties. Aspects of social interaction, implementing what was learned in classes, and even a fresh approach or viewpoint are all ways that reverse mentoring can play out. The younger mentor can gain confidence in his or her abilities: they may think, here is someone

listening to what I have to say, valuing my knowledge, and giving me the opportunity to share what I've learned and become an equal partner in this relationship. The older mentee gains knowledge from a different perspective. Frequently, the longer you stay in a profession and/or job, the more likely you are to become static or stale. It's too easy to do things the same way and more difficult to think outside the box because, on some level, you become entrenched in a way of thinking, an organizational culture, an unconsciously narrow approach to doing things. A younger mentor can provide a fresh perspective, a new knowledge base, and a way of getting outside of the box and shaking up the organizational culture.

The most important aspect of mentoring is mutual respect. In some ways, it's perhaps more important in reverse mentoring. For the older mentee, it's being open to change and realizing that you still have something to learn, as well as respecting and accepting what the mentor has to offer. Even though this person is new to the profession, he or she can still teach you something. For the younger mentor, it's about being aware that a certain level of respect comes into play. Being a professional is important, and understanding how you approach the relationship is key. Yes, you have something to offer, to teach, ways to mentor a colleague who has been in the profession longer than you, but being cognizant of how you approach your mentoring role is also important.

Balance

The No. 1 reason people cite when we ask why they do not engage in more mentoring is *time* and balancing it with all of one's other professional responsibilities. Mentoring relationships can be time consuming, and individuals are often resistant to enter in to formal mentorships because of this commitment. Even mentees can sometimes worry about time, often self-censoring out of fear that they are taking too much of their mentor's time.

Additionally, when you are in a mentoring relationship, it can add a new dynamic to your professional life. Hence, balance, in mentoring relationships as in all other aspects of our professional careers, is extraordinarily important. Because successful mentoring relationships are frequently rooted in

compatibility, shared interests, and, on some level, "liking" someone, balancing the relationship can be a challenge.

As we ebb and flow between being a mentor and being a mentee, we can find balance in our relationships through reciprocal mentoring. As noted above, a newer member of the profession can reverse mentor a seasoned colleague on how to use the latest screen-capturing software while the more experienced colleague passes along institutional knowledge on how to prepare one's promotion and tenure dossier, for example. It is this kind of give and take that helps make the individuals whole and professionally balanced.

Make sure you have ways to incorporate both roles into your life. It is important to have mentors who can bring fresh guidance to your work and develop your mentoring skills. It is equally important to make sure you find ways to share the great guidance you receive.

Methods + Approaches

There are a variety of approaches to mentoring. In an informal environment, we may be mentors simply by being ourselves. Our colleagues may look to us as examples of professionalism, patience, dedication, etc. In a formal relationship, the method might still be an informal approach, such as, "I am an open door, so stop in when you need help." Others may formalize the contact with regular meetings or discussion points. There is no right or wrong way to mentor; however, there are two guiding principles that work together to create a best practice.

The first is to make sure that all parties agree and are comfortable with the approach and expectations. Discuss at the outset, and revisit when necessary, what each party is looking to gain from the relationship. You may also want to set up boundaries with your mentor or mentee. For example, you may only want to communicate via your work email address and phone, or you may be open to accepting a LinkedIn request but not a friend request on Facebook. You want to be accessible and flexible, but you also want to respect comfort levels.

The second principle encourages mentors to take an approach of providing guidance, not directives. As Steven Spielberg once said, "The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not

creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves." Think back to the family recipe once again. You want to be there to explain it, discuss why it is important to pre-heat the oven, etc. At the same time, a good mentor must not take it personally when the mentee ups the salt for their own version.

Try framing advice in the context of a decision-making rubric. For example, if a colleague asks, "Should I apply for this job?" help him or her weigh the pros and cons. Explain what the different choices will offer and not offer. It may also help to encourage mentees to talk to someone who might give differing advice or guidance. This helps ensure that the advice is not telling a mentee what to do, but rather allowing the mentee to make the best choice for himself or herself.

Finally, think of mentoring like dating—sometimes it just doesn't work out. To that end, remember not to stay in a bad relationship. Put yourself out there and try different avenues, both formal and informal, but if you are not benefitting or it is not reciprocating, don't be afraid to walk away. ■



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