

## Business Journal Column #5

### “How to Mentor? Learn to Teach!”

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The HR director grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me away from the crowded hallway.

“Look, I’m part of an informal mentoring program in our company, and my question is this: How do you mentor with patience and tact when someone makes a serious document error that could cost your company business?”

Her question is a real and practical one in this age of institutionalized mentoring and corporate coaching. And her question is relevant to “presentation skills,” for the ability to mentor and coach is essentially the ability to communicate persuasively, to listen creatively, guide, and teach.

In other words, mentoring and coaching are based on the classic Socratic Method—teaching through questions.

A good and wise mentor knows the highest value of mentoring comes from helping the “mentored” teach themselves. But most of us, when faced with an employee’s glaring, unnecessary error—one that should have been caught with careful review and should have been obvious to some one who really cared—resort to parental reactions of scolding, shaming, and belittling.

We send employees slumping back to their offices, mumbling to themselves, and vowing never to be put in that situation again...but at what price?

I began my response to the HR director’s question with a couple of questions of my own:

- Do you, in general, respect this employee? “Yes, in general, I do.”
- Do you feel, despite the glaring mistake, that this employee is capable of making a genuine commitment to excellence? “Yes, I believe so.”

With these answers to go on, I suggested we briefly role-play the scenario, with my playing the role of the errant employee. Her “coaching to success” dialogue included such unfortunate phrases as:

- “I cannot believe you didn’t see this!”
- “This is unforgivable. Why didn’t you take the time to do this right?”
- “Don’t you know this type of error will affect your credibility, our credibility?!”

Her final “motivating” charge was: “I don’t ever want to see this again...UNDERSTOOD??”

Well!

Yes, she used questions to move the “learning process” along, but they were questions that accused, intimidated, shamed, and belittled. Definitely not Socratic and definitely not mentor-like.

Then I suggested we reverse roles—I, the mentor and she, the employee.

My series of questions for the employee ran something like this:

- “I see something here on page 2 that contradicts an item on page one. Can you find it?” (Pause)
- “How do think this happened?” (Pause)
- “Why do you think this discrepancy would matter to our client?” (Pause)
- “Do you feel this work represents your best effort? (Pause)
- “What should we do about this?” (Pause)
- “What kind of commitment can I get from you—right now—about your future efforts? (Pause)
- “Can I count on that?” (Pause)

Of course, the vocal tone of these questions matters, too. With a neutral, yet forceful voice (what I call “forceful courtesy” or “courteous power”), this exchange probably would have resulted in the outcome the HR director wanted: embarrassment for doing sloppy work, a recommitment to detail and review, and an appreciation for the respectful demand of excellence.

This mentoring approach demands a number of refined communication skills: patience (it takes more time), the ability to tolerate silence (the pause is a powerful persuader), and a genuine respect for and belief in the ability of most people to teach themselves, if given the skills and opportunity to do so.

Mentoring and coaching teach not just “for the moment” but for a legacy, too. You can teach someone how to be strong and demand excellence without diminishing dignity—yours or theirs. This is a lesson that will be carried down the hallway, back into the cubicle, and even back into the home.

It’s called “Human Resources,” after all.

(A Tips Box)

Mentoring / Teaching Tips

- Attack the problem; respect the person
- Use questions to uncover, reveal, diagnose
- Listen a minimum of 50% of the time
- Say tough things in a neutral tone
- Eliminate accusatory gestures, e.g., stabbing the air with your pointed index finger
- Guide employees to solve their own problems

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