



**Mentoring** is not a new phenomenon, but was practiced by the Greeks hundreds of years before B.C. Mentor in fact was a person's name in the works of the Greek philosopher Homer, who with the help of a Greek goddess "mentored" a king's son. Just what is a mentor and mentoring? An explanation that I like says that a mentor is an experienced and trusted advisor who helps others solve problems rather than give direction. Mentoring is the act of providing that

help. Mentoring, done right, can be a powerful Safety tool. Most of us have mentored and been mentored to some degree at points of our lives. When you were a youth, this person may have been a role model to you and heavily influenced what and who you are today. A mentor is not a teacher, although he may teach. He (please recognize that the he in this article includes the she as well) is much more than a teacher. Conversely, a teacher is not a mentor, although there are some who take on this role as well and have changed young lives for the better. Those few that do are always remembered by the students, as they influenced them to strive to their full potential.

Our son in his early teenage years was not doing well in school. It appeared that his head teacher didn't seem to care what they did and put in minimum effort to teach them even the basics. For example when it came to writing, the teacher didn't care where the students started a written letter, as long as it got done. As a result, our son, except for his signature, prints even to this day as writing doesn't flow if you start to write certain letters the wrong way. One of his friends from that class is unable to even read to this day. Still everyone in the class passed each year.

Come high school we took the big step to send him to a private school run by the Christian Brothers even though it was costly and we had to now drive him to the school. He dreaded the thought of having to go to this new school while his classmates and friends went to a public high school.

Even under the threat of running away he was convinced to very reluctantly go for that dreaded first day that he anticipated would be a "hell day" and the start of "let's have some fun bullying the new kid like they did us when we started high school." However, all the new students were, in his words, herded into the gym where all the school's students were waiting. There, to their great surprise they were welcomed as the future graduating "Class of 1988." Then with much ceremony they were knighted with a real sword touch on each shoulder while the students cheered and he became Sir Jason of the "Class of 88." A senior student stood beside him during this ceremony and was assigned to him. The senior's job was to be his mentor who he could go to with any problem. He came home with a huge smile on his face and I'm pleased to say that he graduated in the Class of 88 while not one of his former classmates completed high school. He, in turn, was a mentor for a new student in his senior year and the most valuable lessons he learned in those school years were not in the curriculum, but in the fellowship of helping his fellow man. Those lessons have stood him well over the years.

Many companies have come to realize that employees are much more than a number on a payroll list. In one large company, the Vice President of Safety himself welcomed the new employee and personally showed him around the company facility, introducing him to every employee they met while imparting on him the importance of Safety in that company. He was also told that if at any time he had a Safety concern that was not being addressed, he was to come and see that VP himself. Thus the VP had set himself up to be a mentor, at least where Safety was concerned. I have little doubt that that walk and one-on-one talk went a long way in improving Safety within that company and we'll never know how many accidents, if any, it prevented or even lives saved by that simple gesture. I would like to suggest that companies look at formalizing a mentor program with all new employees as a means to improving Safety within their organization. While the degree of formalizing would depend on the size of the company and the number of new employees they hire on a regular basis, at least consider taking the time to provide initial training that includes the way Safety things are done around here and who to approach if a question or concern arises. The sooner the new employee feels he is part of the team and is free to speak out, the Safer the organization is.

Choosing a successful mentor is not an easy task. The following are some of the requirements that person should possess.

#### **1. Should be a caring person**

I witnessed a sheet metal worker who was very much a loner, but a very skilled craftsman, become an excellent mentor. Sadly, we all thought that he lacked the social skills to impart that knowledge. When we had a surplus of bent metal from accidents filling the back of the hangar, the company hired a learner to assist our lone wolf sheet metal worker. At first, if the kid asked how to do something he was told that it was in the manual and to go and look it up like he had to do when he started. But something happened and in time we watched in astonishment as he began to go out of his way to show the learner how to do things. It was as if he became a "mother hen" to this young person who we had predicted, would quit in the first month. Our only fear was that he was going to create a "clone" of himself, which would limit the kid's chances of ever advancing.

#### **2. Must have specialized knowledge**

It's not enough for the person to be a nice guy. He must have the knowledge to assist the new person in his work.

#### **3. Must be willing to share information**

As simple as that sounds, there are some persons who can be reluctant to share information. Perhaps for fear the person will become better than them and take over their job. Am I training this person to do my job so the company can let me go and pay the trainee to do it for a lower pay? That may have been the sheet metal worker's fear at first, but he was the only one with the specialized knowledge that the company had.

#### **4. Must be willing to make the commitment**

Being a mentor is going to take a commitment to be there when required. It may cut into the person's time to do their regular work.

#### **5. Act as a model for the mentee**

There are few things worse than a mentor that says "never mind what I do, just do as I say." You may be able to get away with saying this a few times if you elaborate why you

require more experience in order to Safely carry out a certain task. Work hard to set the example that they can follow.

#### **6. May need the “patience of Job”**

For those who are not familiar with the saying, Job is a person in the bible who exhibited extreme patience when he suffered many tribulations.

What may have become simple for you with your experience may be difficult for some to learn how to do right every time. Ridiculing, yelling and calling of names does nothing to shorten the learning period, but can seriously harm the relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

#### **7. Must offer encouragement at every opportunity**

The correct amount of encouragement will go a long way toward the mentee working harder to carry out a task Safety and correctly.

#### **8. Provide advice where possible**

Try to avoid simply showing the person how to do something, but add the how and why and have him do the task while you advise. The showing him by doing it your self may be quicker, but is not the best way for him to learn.

#### **9. Realize that the role may take time**

Being a mentor can last you up to a lifetime, so don’t expect it to be only a week or so for orientation.

As Joe so aptly put it in this June 2019 editorial: *“You are opening the door of opportunity for the person and helping him through it.”*

Finally, sometimes there can be the question of compensation if the system is formalized in a large company. As an ex-trade school principal there were times when I thought that the worst thing we ever did to our students was to give the teachers a decent wage. All too many applicants for a teaching position were applying for the long holidays, bigger pay advance and NO more midnight shift instead of for the opportunity to impart knowledge into eager minds. You would learn not long after the probation period was up that they loved the job if it wasn’t for all the useless students they were stuck with.

The role of mentor is very rewarding with a high degree of satisfaction for a job well done. I would hope that could be reward enough as you give back to an industry that has brought you to where you are today.

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**Best of the season when it comes and I hope that you have a great 2020**

**Gordon**