

TITLE: *What are the keys to a successful mentoring relationship?*

AUTHOR (S): *Balachowski, M.*

ORGANIZATION: *Everett Community College*

## **Abstract**

Everett Community College is home to a campus-wide mentoring initiative, and our college has developed opportunities for students, faculty, staff and administrators to participate in. However, as with many organizations, both academic and business, we continue to wonder what makes a successful mentoring relationship. In each area there are pairings of mentor and protégé that are extremely successful and productive, and pairings that simply do not work. In this paper I will review the work of Byington and others to determine commonalities in the components of a successful pairing. What can we learn from the work of Teresa Byington, (Area Extension Specialist, Early Care and Education at the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension), who has identified four keys to successful mentoring relationships? In addition, I will interview multiple individual pairs of EvCC administrators and staff or faculty to determine how they built their mentoring relationship, how they continue to thrive, and the results of the mentoring after one year; I will discuss mentoring with our student program as well. I will also investigate our group mentoring program, in which a single faculty member mentors new faculty during their first quarter of employment. Finally, I will interview individuals who were part of an unsuccessful pairing, trying to determine which if any of the identified key components were missing. I hope to be able to develop a model for Everett's mentoring program that will help our mentors and protégés thrive.

## **Developing a Culture of Mentoring**

Much has been written about the keys to a successful mentoring relationship. Articles in business and academic journals alike tout the benefits of creating a mentoring culture, and identify the qualities that mentors and protégés alike must possess in order for a mentoring relationship to thrive. A fulfilling mentor relationship will enhance not only the potential for personal and professional growth, for the protégé as well as the mentor, but will also benefit the organization that the partners are a part of. This in turn may lead to a greater understanding of the organization as well as sharpened workplace skills, increased job confidence and performance, thus creating a more vibrant and successful workplace. In other words, a thriving mentor relationship is a win-win-win for mentor, protégé and organization. While a great deal of research comes from the corporate world, when we apply the rubrics that are suggested in business journals, do they accurately represent the needs of mentor pairs in an academic setting?

Finding the right mentor or protégé at any level can be a challenge. Many organizations have formal mentoring programs and work to develop models that will provide both training and matching services. In some of these organizations the service is provided as a way to onboard new employees, helping them acculturate to the norms of a new position and company. In this role a mentor may assist the protégé to grow into their company role and responsibilities. In other organizations it is an opportunity to help employees develop specific career skills, experiences or networks that he/she may lack. Other organizations have less formal mentoring programs; this may be described as something more like a buddy system. In this case the organization may not even be aware that this informal mentoring is happening! Employees may

look to colleagues who they view as having been successful in their roles or who display good listening skills and are perceived as being empathic with excellent communication skills. In both the formal and informal mentoring, this mentor has experience in the organization and may be a supervisor whose direct reports express great job satisfaction. However, this mentoring relationship is not evaluative. Organizations, whether business or academic, are looking for employees who are adroit at dealing with the challenges of their work, and who persist through the demands of their job. Lois Zachary, a well-known authority and prolific author of mentoring articles and texts and part of the Center for Mentoring Excellence, reminds us that “Organizations that find meaningful ways for their employees to connect are more likely to realize greater productivity, enhanced career growth and overall improvement in employee performance” (Zachary, n.d.).

### **What are the Qualities of a Good Mentor?**

Teresa Byington, Area Extension Specialist, Early Care and Education at the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, suggests the following keys to successful mentoring relationships: “creating a relationship of trust, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, establishing short- and long-term goals, using open and supportive communication, and collaboratively solving problems” (Byington, 2010). Susan Healthfield, a Human Resources Expert, lists 15 characteristics of a good mentor. In addition to those listed by Byington, Healthfield lists characteristics such as honesty and integrity, emotional intelligence, someone who is already knowledgeable with the organization’s culture and who is able to communicate those norms, and is able to work with a population of employees different from him or herself (a skill known as cultural competency) (Healthfield, 2016). The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) lists ten tips for a successful mentor pairing. A quick search of the Harvard Business Review website has an extensive list of articles on mentoring such as “Getting the Mentoring Equation Right,” “Demystifying Mentoring,” and “HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Want.” Reviewing these and multiple articles from both corporate and academic journals, we begin to see patterns and overlaps emerge with each additional set of recommendations. In addition to the communication and support skills necessary, honesty, creativity, consistency and active participation are at the top of many lists. A profile of a good mentor begins to appear as a person who is positive, available, who has excellent listening skills, who provides positive feedback while recognizing opportunities for improvement, providing constructive criticism, and who will be dedicated to the success of the protégé in whatever way that person seeks to improve.

### **Staff Mentoring at Everett Community College**

What does a good mentor look like at Everett Community College? Our College supports multiple mentoring programs, including staff, faculty, group and student programs. Each year for nearly a decade graduates of the EvCC Leadership Academy, a year-long professional development program for staff at all levels of the College with a team project as part of the required outcomes, have been offered the opportunity to be involved in a campus mentoring program. Graduates are interviewed by Human Resource staff to learn more about goals and what they might want in a mentor. EvCC realizes that good mentoring partnerships provide support to future leaders in many ways and can enhance the career success for both people involved (Balachowski, 2015). Mentors typically come from upper administration, and include Vice Presidents, Deans and Directors.

From an anonymous survey sent to the most recent class of mentors and protégés who were just completing a year-long mentoring relationship as of June 2016, it is possible to build our own list of the most important characteristics of a good mentor. This list again overlaps with many of the skills already mentioned from other sources. At the top of the list, mentioned by nearly everyone who responded to the survey, was good listening skills. Additionally, respondents mentioned candor, humility, honesty and integrity, knowledge of the institution, the ability to see things from multiple perspectives, a sense of humor, cultural competency, and a willingness to share. In this last category, respondents mentioned that good mentors commit to sharing their time, sharing their personal work and life experiences, insights, and their network of colleagues who may provide opportunities for their protégés. In other words, good mentors show a willingness to share themselves in many ways.

A trait that was not mentioned in any previous research but is seen as critical to successful relationships at EvCC is a reflective nature. As part of our mentor training for all levels of mentoring, reflection is emphasized as a critical tool. Mindful attention to the needs of the protégé is important when building a trusting relationship. The reflective or contemplative writing can be described “as a practice that emphasizes process rather than outcome” (Barbezat and Bush, 2014). It is an opportunity for each of the partners in any mentoring relationship to look back *and* look forward to roles and responsibilities, provides topics for future meetings, and will deepen the discussions, providing multiple opportunities for exploring future goals and behaviors. The key to a successful reflective practice, however, is honesty. “Be honest with yourself about both your success and failures” (Kobiakla, 2016). With that approach, mentor pairs can delve deeper into discussions about goals and objectives, and any unexpected situations that might occur. It also opens the door to empowering protégés to take risks that they might have previously been uncomfortable with. It also opens the door to empowering protégés to take risks that they might have previously been uncomfortable with.

### **Group Mentoring at Everett Community College**

One-on-one mentoring, especially if done well, is time consuming and can bring on mentor fatigue (T. Evans, personal communication June 14, 2016). At Everett Community College, a small group of people are regularly tapped to mentor new or mid-career employees. We typically refer to this group as “the usual suspects.” They are the successful, responsible and happy employees who believe that they are responsible for reciprocating the good fortune and learning experiences they have had from past mentoring relationships in their career. One such group consists of three long-term faculty who are assigned five to seven new adjunct faculty each quarter. This mentoring is part of our Associate Faculty Academy, currently supported by a Title III grant (Strengthening Institutions). In this Academy, associate faculty who are in their first quarter of employment at EvCC are enrolled in this hybrid Academy and are assigned one of the three faculty mentors. This facilitated group mentoring has provided many opportunities for rich conversations because of the diversity in each group of new faculty. There is often a mix of professional/technical faculty with engineering, English or other academic faculty. The faculty mentor shares her own experiences from successful classroom teaching, and provides a safe and confidential environment for the new faculty to express their concerns about their new role. This style of mentoring helps to facilitate a culture of safety and security. The mentees make use of their assigned mentors during the course of their first quarter (and often beyond) for advice on all

aspects of their teaching experience, from the most basic questions about printing and classroom keys, to broader issues around classroom management and student evaluations. One of the mentors, Andrea Wells-Edwards, noted that in the Spring 2016 quarter, “I was able to work with a brand new teacher who was extremely excited about her introduction to the profession. It was a treat to be able to encourage her and witness this newfound excitement (A. Wells-Edwards, personal communication June 14, 2016).

### **Mentoring New Faculty**

Everett Community College’s Strategic Plan states that

We infuse innovative learning and state-of-the art pedagogy—such as an emphasis on critical thinking and collaborative learning—into all course offerings. Our infrastructure supports innovative instruction, prepares students for technologies of the future, and links education and training to high demand career paths” (Everett Community College Strategic Plan, 2012).

New faculty must be prepared to meet the demands of teaching in an institution where this is a priority. Everett Community College supports new tenure-track and full-time temporary faculty in a year-long mentoring program called *The New Faculty Teaching Academy*. The rationale for the Academy, developed by the author, includes statements about the importance of mentoring. “Mentoring relationships offer an opportunity for reciprocal growth and learning” (Balachowski, 2011). These faculty may have no teaching experience; they arrive as content experts in an institution with teaching as its primary mission. This program provides on-going support for new faculty through their first year and beyond, providing opportunities to introduce, practice and assess new pedagogies in their classes. In a time of reduced budgets, EvCC’s administration continues to support the on-boarding and mentoring of large groups of faculty (25 new faculty in the 2015-16 academic year).

In the past, faculty were often left to their own devices. As a new teacher I stumbled through my first few years without ever developing a clear vision of what it means to be a good teacher or learning new tools to better support student engagement and learning. Some teachers find their own informal mentors after struggling to find their place in the department or college.

Carl Jung tells us that the archetype...represents “knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition.” The figure (mentor) appears in a situation where “insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning, etc. are needed but cannot be mustered on one’s own” (Daloz, 2012, pp 17-18)).

This would suggest that a strong formal mentoring program supporting first-year teachers, no matter what their discipline, would benefit not just the faculty member but the department and institution by providing that advice and understanding. The *Academy* is designed to provide opportunities for reflection, and activities in monthly group meetings allow faculty the time, place and safety to have transformative conversations with other new colleagues about risks, failures, self-determination, and the future of our profession.

In an end-of-the-*Academy* reflection, one of the “graduating” faculty wrote that she now knows she is “headed in the right direction” with her teaching practices. She also knows that the cohort model of the Academy supports peer-mentoring, and that the Academy mentor (the author) will always be there for her (D. Casson, personal communication, June 7, 2016). Another graduate

described the mentoring experience as “support, confidence building, and it’s all about my journey” (B. Stam, June 13, 2016). Maryellen Weimer reminds us that, “Good teaching is not a mystery; it isn’t a gift. It’s comprised of acquirable skills—meaning you can learn what the skills are and work to develop them” (Weimer, 2012). Many faculty will agree that teaching is not a mystery, but this confidence comes only after years of experimentation and experience and possibly failure with different skills. The Academy is the place for new faculty to experience that experimentation and failure, being guided by their mentor and making course corrections and improvements along the way each quarter. Faculty also learn how to engage with students, and develop a repertoire of formative assessments, which in turn help to improve their student evaluations.

What are the qualities that the mentors in these two programs, Group Mentoring and *The New Faculty Academy*, bring to the table? Our mentors have discovered that in many cases they serve as coaches; this is especially true when working with professional/technical faculty, who identify themselves by their trade such as Master Welder or Precision Machinist rather than their role as an educator. Best practices in mentoring suggest that mentors also be open to new experiences. We can learn much from our prof/tech faculty colleagues and their perspectives on teaching. In addition to this, the mentors list good communication skills, a knowledge of current trends in pedagogy and adult learning, a familiarity with the College’s mission and culture, the ability to deliver feedback in a positive, productive way, and an acknowledgement that there are still lots of things to learn. In all cases, the mentors want new teachers to be successful, just as they have been successful in the classroom and as campus leaders. Helping to initiate new ideas and classroom activities in a risk-free environment and helping new teachers cope with the demands of a new career and culture are the hallmarks of these mentoring programs.

### **Student Mentoring Program**

Everett Community College is an open-access institution. Students of all ages and backgrounds arrive on our campus, some without a high school degree, some with no English language skills, and some with no direction. Our college’s mission is to “educate, equip, and inspire each student to achieve personal and professional goals, contribute to our diverse communities, and thrive in a global society” (EvCC, 2012). This is a tall order when students with no knowledge of or experience with a college arrive on our campus. To support students who are new to EvCC a program known as PROPELS (**P**eers **R**eaching **O**ut to **P**romote **E**ducation **L**earning **S**uccess) was developed and is led by student Azrael Howell (PROPELS Program Specialist/Coordinator). PROPELS student mentors “support, equip and inspire each other, in order to become successful students. Knowing and understand that college is not easy, the PROPELS staff believes that the keys to student success are students-supporting-students while making connections with others, having access to resources, building communities, engaging in campus activities, and believing in one another”(Everett Community College, 2013). The Coordinator monitors student success and completion rates, and student mentors help their peers overcome obstacles and provide a safe place to discuss the challenges that students face both on- and off-campus. The program takes a holistic approach, focusing on the mind, body and spirit as well as helping new students find and use important college support resources such as financial and academic tools. Goals of the PROPELS program include increasing student retention and completion, improved GPAs, increased knowledge and use of support services, as well as social and cultural competency.

Students who are chosen as mentors attend a multi-day training, and during their time as mentors they attend regular debriefs and workshops focusing on professionalism and the goals of the program. The student mentors themselves have developed a list of skills that they believe will help them help new students to be more successful: efficiency, leadership, openness to learning new things, and familiarity with their environment (the campus), ability to make a connection, being visible, clear communication, and good organization. These skills mirror those expected of mentors in any organization, whether it's business or academic. Helping college students develop these skills (and potentially passing them on to their mentees in the process) will guarantee a positive legacy for Everett Community College and its graduates.

### **Avoiding Difficult Mentoring Relationships**

Despite some careful matching of mentors and protégés, it may be the case that a mentor and protégé begin to navigate a difficult relationship. How can this be avoided? Is the mentor a *Type A* person and the protégé more laid back? Does the mentor have the depth of experience and the kind of experience that the protégé wants and needs? Is the mentor known to be highly ethical, and does the protégé respect boundaries? One way is to make sure that the mentor pair understands their responsibility towards each other. EvCC recommends seven points to be covered by the mentor pair in the first meeting: Confidentiality, frequency of meetings, punctuality, honest feedback, balancing mentor/protégé work with job responsibilities, a no-fault exit clause, and a post-mentor relationship. Setting specific goals and a regular check-in will keep the pair progressing towards those goals. Creating benchmarks and timelines and asking for help and advice when needed is also a part of progress towards those goals. Realistically, though, goals may change. In that event, the protégé and mentor should review and the protégé should ask for feedback.

What are signs that the relationship is beginning to go sour? When the protégé is not making progress, has no follow through, and becomes extra needy, which might mean that boundaries are beginning to blur. If ultimately the match was not a good one, the protégé may become stressed about the relationship and the behaviors mentioned here begin to appear. At that point, the mentor should suggest discussing the no-fault exit clause they wrote during their initial meetings to establish goals, benchmarks and timelines.

When the mentor becomes too overwhelmed with the responsibilities of the relationship and is not able to meet as planned because of a work load issue, the protégé can begin to feel neglected. Mentors must be ready to take on the time commitment needed to help the employee or student grow. A protégé from a recent pairing said, "The most frustrating part of my experiences with my first mentor was that my mentor was too busy and could not make time to meet with me. Often times my mentor would ask me to add an appointment to his calendars, unfortunately just to have it fall by the wayside to other plans. This was evident when we were unable to complete our 'Mentor and Protégé Plan' in a timely manner, this really just set the tone of the relationship for the rest of the mentorship program. It quickly became clear I was not a priority to him" (A. Zimmerman, personal communication June 24, 2016). When boundaries begin to blur and the mentor starts to show signs of possessiveness, or if the mentor begins to tell long stories rather than listen to the protégé, it's time for the protégé to exercise the exit clause. This can often put the protégé in an awkward position, and while the no-fault exit clause is in place, an important part of the initial discussion should be who will handle it. Often an outside facilitator can help

both parties save face. That person should be identified when discussing goals and responsibilities so that the pair does not become mired in a difficult situation later. Even though mentor pairs plan and discuss goals, identify an exit clause and facilitator, those difficult situations still arise.

One of the goals I was hoping to obtain from the mentorship program was to improve my professional communication skills, by means of receiving constructive criticism and acting on it. Which is something unfortunately my Mentor really did not do well. My mentor would say things like: “I am having a hard time finding constructive feedback for you,” “I think your success can be attributed to a lot of things,” “It really was a great presentation,” and “Your presentation was outstanding,” which was all nice to hear, but it was not at all helpful in achieving the goal of identifying ways for me to improve. I felt like my mentor was more concerned about being “nice” rather than being honest with me. I felt my mentor didn’t value the opportunity to make a difference in my personal and professional life (A. Zimmerman).

Many of the difficult situations mentioned here might be avoided with a careful matching plan. In cases where someone is actually making the matches, such as with our staff mentoring at EvCC which is housed in Human Resources, important questions to ask when employees apply for the program include: what are your goals or your purpose for mentoring? What types of people would be hard to work with? Who is someone on campus you admire, or a quality of someone you admire on campus? Using these questions to plan matches has led to few difficult mentoring relationships.

## **Conclusion**

“Mentoring is an effective method of helping inexperienced individuals develop and progress in their profession” (Byington, 2010). Mentoring of all kinds, formal or informal, has been shown to help new students and employees be more successful. It can contribute not only to the protégé’s professional development, but to the mentor’s as well. Mentoring faculty can contribute to the success of their students. Student peer-mentoring such as Everett Community College’s PROPELS program, can improve both retention and success for new students. Staff mentoring will provide employees with a clearer vision of their professional path. When we work to make all members of the EvCC community more successful through mentoring opportunities, the college becomes a better organization to work for.

We know that the keys to a successful mentoring experience include trust, good communication, visibility, active listening and positive responses, engagement with the protégé, curiosity and respect. The social, intellectual and interpersonal capital that is built through mentoring will empower both the mentor and protégé, and will benefit not only the individuals involved but also the institution as a whole.

## References

- Balachowski, M. (2015, October). *Practices of promise: Developing powerful mentoring relationships across campus*. Paper session presented at the UNM Mentoring Institute Conference: *New Perspectives in Mentoring*. Albuquerque, NM.
- Barbezat, D., & Bush, M., (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Career Development - Mentee Guide Managing a Successful Mentoring Relationship. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/roles/ee/careerdev/mentoring/manage-relationship.html>
- Daloz, L. A. (2012). *Mentor: Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley.
- Demystifying Mentoring. (2011). Retrieved June 20, 2016, from <https://hbr.org/2011/02/demystifying-mentoring>
- Everett Community College, Strategic Plan (2012). Retrieved June 21, 2016 from <http://www.everettcc.edu/files/administration/institutional-effectiveness/strategic-planning/strategic-plan-bot.pdf>
- Everett Community College, P.R.O.P.E.L.S Student Mentoring Program (2013). Retrieved June 22, 2016 from <http://www.everettcc.edu/programs/academic-resources/transitional-studies/bridges-center/propels>
- Get the Mentoring Equation Right. (2011). Retrieved June 20, 2016, from <https://hbr.org/2011/10/get-the-mentoring-equation-rig>
- Group Mentoring. (n.d.). Retrieved June 16, 2016, from [http://humanresources.about.com/od/coachingmentoring/a/group\\_mentoring.htm](http://humanresources.about.com/od/coachingmentoring/a/group_mentoring.htm)
- HBR guide to getting the mentoring you need*. (2012). Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Keys to Successful Mentoring Relationships. (n.d.). Retrieved June 16, 2016, from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2010december/tt8.php>
- Mentoring Process: Being a Business Mentor in a Mentoring Program. (n.d.). Retrieved June 20, 2016, from <http://www.management-mentors.com/resources/mentoring-process-mentor>
- Mentoring Tips: 7 Habits of Highly Successful Mentors & Mentorees. (n.d.). Retrieved June 16, 2016, from <http://www.management-mentors.com/resources/june-2010-mentor-mentoree-habits>

- 7 Reflection Tips for Assessment, Empowerment, and Self-Awareness. (2016). Retrieved June 20, 2016, from [http://www.edutopia.org/blog/reflection-assessment-empowerment-self-awareness-james-kobialka?utm\\_source=twitter](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/reflection-assessment-empowerment-self-awareness-james-kobialka?utm_source=twitter)
- Teaching with Confidence: Advice for New Faculty. (2012). Retrieved June 20, 2016, from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/teaching-with-confidence-advice-for-new-faculty/>
- Ten Tips for a Successful Mentor/Mentee Relationship. (n.d.). Retrieved June 16, 2016, from <https://www.amtamassage.org/mentor/Ten-Tips-for-a-Successful-Mentor-Mentee-Relationship.html>
- Want Your Workplace to Mentor Employees? Do These 8 Things. (n.d.). Retrieved June 20, 2016, from [http://humanresources.about.com/od/coachingmentoring/a/mentor\\_culture.htm?utm\\_term=coaching mentoring training](http://humanresources.about.com/od/coachingmentoring/a/mentor_culture.htm?utm_term=coaching%20mentoring%20training)
- Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Dana, N. F. (2007). *The reflective educator's guide to mentoring: Strengthening practice through knowledge, story, and metaphor*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, a Sage Pub.