

LEADERS ARE TEACHERS, TOO

Let your hindsight become someone else's foresight.

BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

There's no better method for a person to learn and perfect a craft than by having a mentor guide them along the way. The increased worldwide interest and growth in project management has sparked an unprecedented need for mentors in the field. And many companies and organizations, as well as PMI chapters, are stepping in to help fill that need. But the demand for capable and willing mentors appears to outstrip the supply.

I'd like to encourage you to consider adding mentoring to your toolbox of skills. You'll find great benefits in taking on the role. Here are some of the most noteworthy:

Discover the rewards of helping others. There's no greater satisfaction than giving to others in a way that helps them help themselves—and then, in turn, help others.

Pick up new skills. I may have learned more from teaching others than I have from doing things myself. When you handle tasks yourself, there's only so much knowledge you can gain from the limited environments within which you work. But when you're teaching others, many more challenges can emerge. Figuring out how to deal with those issues can help mentors sharpen and fine-tune their own skills.

Make new friends and colleagues. One of the perks of mentoring is that you can often develop closer business relationships and meet people with whom you otherwise would not have had contact.

Improve your stock value. The respect people have for you will likely increase, as will your overall worth to the organization, company or community.

Contribute to the state of the art. The more you immerse yourself in the project management craft, the more you'll experience opportunities to develop new tools, methodologies and thought leadership that can lead to the advancement of the field. You may find yourself not only assisting individuals, but helping full communities and industries.



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Are there downsides to being a mentor? Yes, but not too many, and they're not as significant as the benefits. Here are two worthy of mention:

Mentoring can demand a lot of your time. You may find yourself wanting to give more of yourself than you

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have time for, especially because mentoring is likely only a small portion of your job.

It can be hard to say "no." When you see great potential in people, you may wish that you could work with all of them.

A Working Relationship

There are many ways that a mentor can work with mentees. It can be as informal as being on "standby" should counseling be requested. Or, it can be as structured as working with the mentee to create a mentoring plan that outlines the goals, milestones and specific events to be undertaken.

Depending on what skills mentees need you to teach them, you may want to attend some of their meetings and meet some of the people they frequently work with. I often perform what I call "shadowing." I spend a full day with the mentee and attend all of his or her meetings. Then, we retire to his or her office to discuss the events of the day. I note all the good things the person said and did, but also offer suggestions for improvement where applicable. If there's time throughout the day to reflect on events immediately after they occur, do so, but the person may be too busy.

As a mentor, I have encountered two unexpected surprises. The first was related to the type of project management skills being requested. I expected most of the calls and contact

time with mentees would be about the technical skills of planning and tracking projects, applying earned value techniques, and so on. What I discovered was that most of my time—at least 80 percent—was spent talking about leadership, people skills and relationships. Now, I devote about 95 percent of my mentoring time to those topics.

The second surprise I encountered: When mentees contact me with a problem, I often ask them what they think they should do. More than 80 percent of the time, they come up with the appropriate response on their own. The greatest value I often bring to the mentor-mentee relationship is *validation* that the mentee is headed down the right path. In other words, we often know what the appropriate action is in a certain situation, but having a trusted confidant as a check and balance or a sounding board can really boost a mentee's confidence to move forward.

The best leaders are also teachers—and mentoring others can be a wise and rewarding investment. Now, go make a difference! ^{PM}

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