

MENTORING

Finding our way to the future

LOOKING BACK OVER A LONG CAREER IN THE MILITARY, THE SENIOR COLONEL PREPARED HIS REMARKS FOR HIS RETIREMENT CEREMONY AND REFLECTED ON THE MANY PEOPLE THAT HAD HELPED IN HIS DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER. THERE WERE COMMANDERS THAT TOOK INTERESTS IN HIS ASSIGNMENT, PEERS WHO SHARED INSIGHTS AND EXPERIENCES, SUBORDINATES WHO ENSURED HE WAS SUCCESSFUL AND SENIOR LEADERS WHO TOOK THE TIME TO EDUCATE HIM IN THE WAYS OF THE MILITARY AND THE WORLD. YES, HE HAD BEEN MENTORED BY MANY OUTSTANDING PROFESSIONALS, BUT HAD HE MET HIS OBLIGATION TO MENTOR OTHERS ALONG THE WAY? AS HE REFLECTED, THE OLD COLONEL KNEW THE ANSWER – HE HAD NOT DONE ENOUGH TO MENTOR AND DEVELOP OTHERS. HE DID MANAGE TO MENTOR SOME OUTSTANDING SUBORDINATES, BUT THE PROCESS ALWAYS SEEMED HAPHAZARD AND ILL-DEFINED...

By COL James Lackey and Professor Gene C. Kamena

Our nation has been at war since 2001. Repeated deployments and a sustained high operational tempo continue to take a heavy toll on our people, families, equipment and the development of junior and mid-level officers who are particularly bearing the brunt of separations and the stress of combat. The fast paced cyclic existence of going to war, returning and training, and returning to war affords little discretionary time for leaders to conduct developmental activities such as establishing a mentorship plan and program. If not carefully managed, professional development, particularly mentorship, may become one more casualty of the Long War. An additional challenge is that doctrine concerning mentoring is not specific and often is nothing more than a career counseling program. What is needed is an agreed to framework for mentors and mentees to operate within. Common expectations must be established. This article proposes just such a framework, a lens through which mentoring can be viewed by all concerned.

Professional development is a broad concept that includes experience (assignments and deployments), education, training, self-deployment and of equal importance – mentoring. In fact, if done properly, mentoring fills in gaps or shortcomings of the developmental process and acts as the cement to keep the process together. The challenge is that there is no standard or agreed upon framework for mentoring and leaders are not trained or educated for the process of mentorship.

The reason mentoring is so important to any organization, particularly the military, is the vehicle through which the next generation of leaders and followers are molded. Mentorship is a professional obligation of military leaders. To fulfill this important obligation, some semblance of structure and emphasis must exist.

Framework. Before we get into a framework for mentoring, let's examine some definitions, roles and relationships in

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the mentoring process.

The mentor is a person who is either experienced or mature enough to pass on to another person in the profession of arms lessons that cannot be taught, trained or gathered in another way. A mentor must be committed to the process of developing the next generation.

Traditionally, the mentee is inexperienced and less knowledgeable than the mentor. This traditional view of mentorship is changing. In any event, a mentee must be committed to the process of self improvement and is willing to heed the advice of the mentor.

Mentorship is built upon personal and professional trust and commitment for improvement, which allows tailored knowledge to pass from one person to another. The goal of mentorship in the military is to help develop future leaders, fill in voids that other professional development activities cannot address and make people the best they can be in their present duty positions. Mentorship is not career counseling, having a senior officer influence assignments or positions to one's personal advantage or developing one subordinate at the expense of another subordinate. If done well, mentorship benefits the mentee, the unit and the service.

Factors that affect the mentoring process. Many factors affect the mentoring process since no two mentors or mentees are alike. There are, however, some factors that must exist for successful mentoring to occur.

Commitment and trust must be established between the mentor and the mentee. Commitment is a critical factor in any mentorship program – commitment built upon respect and trust. This does not happen overnight. The bonding between mentor and mentee may take a long time before there is enough trust established for mentorship to occur.

Generational differences also have unique influences that make effective communications harder to achieve. Mentoring becomes even more complex due to the fact that multiple generations are members of the military; Boomer's, Xers and ever increasing numbers of Millennials serve side-by-side. Each generation possesses unique views and behavior characteristics. The important point to remember is that every generation views the world a little differently. Communications and understanding are critical elements in cross-generational mentoring.

Technology can facilitate mentorship. Do not rule out technology as a medium to assist in mentoring others. Younger members of our military, specifically Millennials, are very comfortable in establishing relationships through Web 2.0 applications and other virtual means such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and iPhones.

Mentoring traps. Since mentoring involves people, there are numerous things that can derail the mentoring process. Perceptions are always at play, particularly when a senior and subordinate are involved. Mentoring can be perceived as 'the good ol boy network' or favoritism at work. Mentees that receive too much personalized attention from superiors can be perceived as 'suck-ups' or 'yes men' by their peers. One cruel fact of military mentorship is that not everyone will receive the same amount and intensity of mentorship.

If mentorship is left to happenstance, basically working with no rules, expectations will not be met. No written contract exists that requires a mentee to accept advice and guidance from a mentor. Successful mentorship depends on mentors and mentees establishing a gentleman's agreement based on trust and confidence.

Relationships matter. Immature mentees often mistake the superior to subordinate relationship of a supervisor as a mentoring relationship. Supervision is not mentorship. The supervisor typically is more interested in training and perhaps coaching a subordinate than in ensuring they are developed for future assignments. This is not to say that a supervisor cannot be a mentor, but it should not be a foregone conclusion.

Time management. The military and its leaders are busy and, if allowed, the schedule will drive the pace of mentorship; we cannot allow this to happen. Mentors and mentees must first be committed and then make time to seek advice and give advice.

The selection process. Who picks who? How many mentors can a mentee have? How many mentees can a mentor provide advice? The answer to all these questions is – it depends. Unfortunately, mentees often choose mentors for the wrong reason. Mentees should select mentors based on their professional qualities and personality, not on the prospect of what the mentor can do for them for future assignments, influence and political aspects.

One size does not fit all. Mentors cannot take a one size fits all approach. Mentorship must be tailored to the potential and personality of each mentee. Some will require more attention than others, but all must be treated as an individual.

Techniques. True mentoring is never harsh. Dignity and respect certainly are applicable in the mentoring process. If a mentor or mentee gets to the point where the relationship is strained, then it is time to step back and reassess or end the relationship.

Avoiding mentoring traps. Mentors, once you commit to mentoring someone, follow through. A plan helps, but is not always feasible or necessary. Commitment, energy and initiative are more important. If the mentee is shy about coming to you, then seek them out. Be aware of your surroundings and the environment in which the mentee works and lives. A mentor, if not careful, can smother a subordinate. Be aware of perceptions and look for the right time, occasion and manner to provide advice. Mentor preparation is essential to ensure the mentor relationship is a positive one. The mentor should spend some time prior to the mentoring session in self reflection. This will allow the mentor to bring enhanced perspectives to the session. Also the mentor must clearly understand the mentee's developmental needs. Positive feedback is essential and often the most difficult task for a mentor. Focus on ensuring your feedback is very specific in nature, candid and constructive. Remember, your role is to foster the mentee's growth as a leader.

Mentees must first commit to the relationship and then communicate goals to their mentor. Later, as you progress in the mentoring relationship, you must reevaluate your goals. Mentees and mentors must reevaluate goals and progress toward achieving them. Mentees must avoid being overly sensitive and emotional about the feedback received from the mentor. Listen carefully to the feedback provided by your mentor. In order to get the most from your mentoring session, ask questions and seek clarification on aspects of any feedback you do not understand.

Steps of mentorship development. Prior to establishing the mentorship relationship, observation and assessment occur for both the mentor and the mentee. The mentor is assessing the potential of the mentee and the mentee is assessing the personality and professionalism of the mentor. Next, a relationship is established which allows each party to better understand the other. If trust and respect exist, then the mentorship will progress to a mutual decision, commitment and follow-through. Once an understanding is achieved the mentorship process begins. (Figure 1 provides the steps of mentorship. All steps must not only occur, but must be successful. The steps of mentorship cannot be rushed).

Framework for mentoring. If mentoring is meant to prepare people for future responsibilities or mend personality or character shortfalls, then as long as the process occurs, it does not matter who does it. If done correctly, a mentorship program reinforces suggested changes and actions. Mentoring can be senior to subordinate, peer to peer and subordinate to senior.

Senior leader to subordinate. Senior to subordinate mentoring is the relational mentoring we are most familiar; it is the traditional form

of mentoring. *The commander saw unique qualities in Captain Jones and, for a recently promoted captain, he was mature beyond his years, was well liked and respected. Jones had a desire to learn his craft and demonstrated the potential to lead at higher levels of responsibility. The commander wanted to ensure Captain Jones received the added attention required to develop his talents for the next level of leadership. He saw a future leader in his profession in this young officer.*

Peer to peer. Peer to peer mentoring typically is called something else – collaborating, cross-leveling knowledge or idea exchange and often is not considered mentoring. Peers exchanging ideas and information actually broaden all involved. *Captain Smith was surprised to see his friend Captain Johnson, a fellow staff officer from an adjacent staff cell, walk into his office after the meeting. His friend told Captain Smith that he was on the verge of disrespecting the colonel when the colonel did not approve Smith's plan after months of work. His friend suggested not showing disappointment in public in the future and thought Captain Smith should see the colonel in private to discuss the incident further. Smith knew his friend was right and he appreciated the advice and insight.*

Subordinate to senior leader. Sometimes called reverse mentoring, this type of mentoring usually is not the norm, but may become more common given the vast experience our junior leaders are receiving. The question is, "Will senior leaders accept mentoring from subordinates?" *This was Colonel Allen's first deployment. Colonel Allen's reputation was that of a very flexible and adaptable leader who was receptive to new ideas and was open to input from others. For Captain Jackson, this was his fourth tour of duty in theater. The captain sensed the colonel needed some advice and points until he got his feet on the ground. So, Captain Jackson made it a point to stop by and discuss his observations and thoughts about the theater more often. Captain Jackson also invited Colonel Allen out to his sector.*

Categories of mentees. A mentor must decide first who to mentor and then how many mentees are appropriate. Mentees can be placed into two broad categories.

One category is professional mentees; these mentees come with the duties, scope and responsibilities of a specific job. For example, a commander has the obligation to mentor all subordinate officers, commanders and NCOs in their command.

A second category is personal mentees and they usually fall into two subgroups – the future and the flawed. The future mentees are the best and the brightest. This group demonstrates the highest potential to lead the organization at some point in the future. Mentoring the future leaders tends to be a long term, multiple assignment endeavor. Flawed mentees are capable, but have demonstrated a character, personality or professional flaw. Mentoring this group tends to be

Figure 1: Steps of mentorship



Figure 2: Steps of mentorship development



shorter term effort and is secondary to mentoring the future leaders.

Mentoring can be either formal or informal and the mentor can be an active participant or a passive, behind the scenes participant. (Figure 2 provides examples of mentoring in a formal active, formal passive and informal active and informal passive setting. The chart is not meant to be all inclusive.)

Recommendations for the military. The military continues to provide emphasis on mentorship, but does not provide specific doctrine or resources. The recommendations below are offered to focus mentoring efforts in our military.

Educate and train leaders in the mentoring process. As part of cadet leadership instruction, mentorship should first be introduced to junior leaders through the service academies and Reserve Officers' Training Corps programs. Later, when junior leaders attend their service's particular officer basic courses, they should be provided more in-depth training and education on mentoring. This will expose our young leaders to mentorship and really what to expect in terms of mentorship when they arrive in their first unit. It also will serve as foundational training for them to build on as their careers progress and they become mentors to others.

Mentorship instructional periods must be built into all our senior service college curriculums. A distance learning module must be developed for officers selected for fellowships in lieu of senior service college attendance. Mentorship training should be included in all pre-command courses. Distance learning is probably the best available vehicle to deliver mentorship training in the gaps between a leader attending the officer basic course, a pre-command course and senior service college attendance.

For our noncommissioned officers, they should first receive

training on mentorship at the service-particular NCO basic leader courses. The service sergeant majors academies should develop instructional periods to further train and educate our most senior NCOs on mentorship. Again, distance learning is the vehicle to fill in the gaps in mentorship and education on mentoring for our NCOs. Mentorship needs to be included in the instruction provided to our first sergeants during their attendance at the First Sergeant's Course prior to assuming duties as a first sergeant. Our first sergeants are engaged daily with a large number of junior noncommissioned leaders. This training would provide them an invaluable tool to further assist in the development of these leaders.

One of our senior service colleges should host a mentorship conference to capture ideas and best practices that could be incorporated into an effective mentorship training and education program. Representatives from corporate America as well as members of the academic community who have researched and published works on mentoring should be invited to participate in the conference. Representatives from the service academies and service schools' leadership departments should also be invited to attend as well as senior leaders from all services. Given the high operational demand of our current military environment and the expense of bringing participants to a particular site to conduct this conference, this important conference could be conducted via video teleconference.

Provide effectiveness feedback to mentors. This can be accomplished annually and when mentors change duty positions by sending a mentorship survey electronically to all junior leaders a particular mentor rates or senior rates. This survey could be generated at Department of the Army, Air Force or Navy level and sent out. Results would be compiled at the department level and made available to the mentor only. This would provide mentors with timely and regular feedback that would allow them to continue to refine and development their mentorship skills.

Recognize that not everyone will get mentored in the same way or to the same degree. Mentoring is personal, but should not be a secret activity. All parties involved must understand that perceptions are at play – particularly when a mentor is outside the chain of command. Upfront and open communications are essential to protect the mentee and curb unnecessary friction in the mentoring environment.

Develop a mentorship quick reference guide. This guide should be cargo pocket sized and not more than four or five pages. It should contain some brief thoughts on mentorship and a framework for a mentor to review before he or she conducts a mentoring session. This guide would be particularly useful while deployed or conducting informal mentoring sessions. This guide would result in fewer missed mentoring opportunities.

Mentorship is the one true endeavor that affords leaders today the ability to influence future generations. It is not a perfect process and can be energy and time draining. However, good mentorship is similar to the popular theme of 'paying it forward.' Mentoring



Mentorship is the one true endeavor that affords leaders today the ability to influence future generations. It is not a perfect process and can be energy and time draining. However, good mentorship is similar to the popular theme of 'paying it forward.' (Photo by PFC Adam Halleck U.S. Army)

does not just happen. Mentors must know and understand their mentees, assess their needs and craft a unique process to fill those needs. No two mentoring efforts will look exactly the same; this is a human-based activity. Leaders must not use the current event and pressure filled environment as an excuse to not invest in the future and not mentor. Your legacy as a leader depends on your personal investment in those that will follow. The time is now to find our way to the future.

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