



Mentoring

Advice from an Expert

Julie Todaro

Introduction

As we are entering the 4th year of the formal LLAMA Mentoring program, we have asked Julie Todaro, who did a great mentoring preconference for the Midwinter Meeting in San Diego, to respond to some questions about mentoring that were contributed by the Mentoring Committee. We have put the questions in three groups, General Mentoring, Mentee Questions, and Mentor Questions.

We hope this is but the first of many features in our new "ask an expert" column. If you or a group of your peers have been pondering some questions about an aspect of library leadership development, management, or administration, or you are the one who always answers questions on a particular topic, please contact one of the editors and we will explore using it for a future column. Now on to some great mentoring advice...

General Mentoring

Many programs are pairing up mentors and mentees who are in different states. What are some creative ways to nurture a long-distance mentoring relationship?

Mentoring relationships can be established, managed, nurtured and ultimately successful if mentors and mentees work in desks or offices next to each other, in different buildings within the same library structure, in different libraries locally or different parts of the state or - for that matter- in different countries! Clearly "long-distance" - in today's business environment is more broadly defined as "other than face-to-face." That being said, however, there are different processes, techniques and tips requiring considerations such as: do mentors and mentee's meet regularly, frequently, infrequently or not at all - and - of course - how do they meet? Ever face-to-face? By phone? On email? Social media? CMS? Skype?

Although different personalities and different competency levels or skills sets of mentors and mentees may greatly alter processes, there ARE a few universal tips (but not necessarily creative ones!) for establishing a more successful "long-distance" relationship. They include more structure at the beginning of the process to establish rapport more quickly. Some specific recommendations would include:

- Guidelines for specific contacts within the first two weeks of the relationship that should be directive as to time and day AND include activities. (e.g. mentees should send an email within the first 48 hours of the mentor/mentee program with the "profile" questions answered and the title or link to the "professional content that they refer to the most in their job." Mentors should respond within the first work week with their "profile" elements and the "professional material they most recommend for their mentee" to review prior to the second mentee contact.)
- More specific mentor with mentee matching processes to strive for comparable levels of technological expertise (length and type of experience as well as ease of use with communication opportunities).
- More structure in the timeline for contacts between mentors and mentees within the first 30 days of the relationship (day of the week, time of day, length of time for discussion/meeting, etc.)
- More structured mentor/mentee activities between mentors and mentees within the first 30 days of the relationship (comparing opinions, exchanging experience/stories, etc.)

While this initial activity is very structured, it is NOT reasonable or even recommended for processes to be structured in this way throughout the relationship. The expectation is that the relationship will take on a life of its own quickly and evolve to be specific to both mentor and mentee expectations and needs.

How do you revitalize mentoring relationships when they seem to sputter, with neither the mentee nor the mentor having any real questions to ask or advice to offer? Or is this a sign that the mentoring relationship is not working and needs to be dissolved?

Not all relationships will be the best match or will be completed, however, the more prepared the mentors and mentees and the greater the structure for the process, the greater the chance for success. Relationships that sputter can be revitalized by introducing new content. This content must be such that mentors and mentees can approach it together, that is, exercises for mentors and mentees to complete separately and then compare results and/or activities (cases, simulations) that have mentors and mentees approaching issues and problems together and discussing solutions. These activities introduce new ideas, but also use the new ideas to provide additional teaching and learning activities.

An important part of the process, however, is the establishment of signs of faltering relationships. Those overseeing the process should not only articulate signs in writing but also include signs of problems (with possible solutions) in training both mentors and mentees.

Mentee Questions

What are the qualities and qualifications I should seek in a mentor?

A mentee should agree with the general goals established by the library or association, etc. mentoring process. While these goals can be all of the goals needed for a good relationship, typically mentees can and should have individual expectations. Better relationships have:

- A match of communication styles - both preferences and expertise;
- An understanding of learning style preferences of mentees and a subsequent teaching style match to learning styles;
- Knowledge that can move a mentee to his or her next expected level - that is, if the mentee seeks a management job, the mentor should be or have recently been a manager; if the mentee wants budget experience - the mentor should be working with money. While past management and past budget experience can provide a solid foundation, many studies say that the best relationships are those that have dynamic content.

What is reasonable for me to expect from a mentor?

Obviously, reasonable expectations are going to vary from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship. General expectations for mentors should, however, include:

- A commitment to the length of the relationship within the process (e. g. one academic year; a summer of youth activities; working together for two academic semesters);
- A commitment to sharing expertise and depth of knowledge and skills/abilities - both what and when (e.g. budgeting information during the standard budget process);
- An agreement of time available and time spent within the process (e.g. available on Mondays from 4:00 to 5:00; x number of hours per week in online Skype discussion); and,
- An adherence to other timelines such as length of mentor/mentee response times to questions (e.g. content (or responses) by our next meeting.... within 48 hours of receiving the information or question within the work week - within five business days of receiving the request , etc.)
- Specific expectations might include such activities as:
- Sharing unique elements of a mentor's job (e.g. access to online content available through the mentor's organization);
- Access to expertise from others in the mentor's network (e.g. introductions to colleagues, other experts, etc.);
- Sharing experience from a specific job from the past, rather than a current one; and,
- Providing feedback to the mentee with specific categories (e.g. a mentor provides feedback on a budget request document for which the mentee is responsible, etc.)

Other specific expectations should be clarified as to what is and isn't appropriate at the level of the program coordinator, rather than the specific mentor. Examples of these issues which have to be decided within the program structure for everyone or at the very least - at the beginning of specific relationship - might include:

Can the mentee use the mentor relationship to elicit a job recommendation from the mentor? (e.g. For all jobs? Agreed upon positions or functional areas within jobs? On a case by case basis? Only for external positions or only for positions within organizations - if the relationship is within the same structure?

What specific language can the mentee use on their resume when citing the relationship? That is, what competency language as well as levels of descriptions? (e.g. knowledge of? Experience with? Or in-depth knowledge of and/or extensive experience with, etc.)

Is it a good idea for my boss to be my mentor? Why or why not?

While some mentor literature recommends bosses or supervisors as mentors for direct reports, I think it is virtually impossible for a direct report to be both a mentee and a direct report, so my answer is "no" your boss should NOT be your mentor in a formal program. It could be confusing for both the mentor and mentee and it is very likely confusing for others in the organization that aren't privy to mentor/mentee guidelines or activities. Instead, they might see a manager pay more attention to one employee than another and/or one employee getting special favors or treatment from their supervisor.

In addition, the mentee might suffer from a need to move too quickly among activities or between work and mentor/mentee activities; the mentor often needs to take extra time to communicate an activity to a mentee, then possibly communicate the same activity to the same employee wearing a different "hat." Finally, the mentor may have a hard time conveying work criticism and/or evaluation to the employee separate from critical, expected and necessary feedback from the mentor to the mentee.

It must be said, however, that it is logical that an employee might regard their supervisor as a mentor within the workplace. Clearly this isn't frowned upon, but it is wise for mentees to clarify when questions are asked for advice or critique is sought that is - rather than a work question - more of a career-related goal.

Why do I need to establish a formal mentoring relationship - isn't it enough for me to learn by simply observing how more experienced librarians and leaders act in various situations?

No one should be discouraged from taking every opportunity to learn and grow as individuals and/or grow within organizations. Wise employees are those that observe the "bigger picture" around them as to how things are done, why things are done, and how might they do things should they have to make that decision. That being said, however, a structure to the relationship or program provides:

- Direction to mentors and mentees as well as others in organizations;
- Specific information on what should happen as well as what shouldn't happen;
- Limits and boundaries to communication and feedback;
- Specific outcomes for success; signs of relationship issues and/or problems; and,
- Overall expectations for teaching and learning.

Not only should a structure be designed, all elements of the structure and process should be written and available beyond the mentor/mentee relationship, that is, other employees should be informed of the relationship so that they can be clear on what might be new, but temporary activity within the organization. Other employees are often involved in mentor/mentee activities in a secondary or ancillary role which makes it even more important for employees within organizations to be aware of the relationship, relationship outcomes and the roles and responsibilities they might have.

Obviously it must be said that many relationships are formed and successful completed without any involvement from other employees, such as a supervisor. Examples of these might be an association program or a distance program where those involved are in different locations. While these would not necessarily need involvement from other employees in either the mentor

or mentee roles, there could be an organizational impact. If any activities or communications are completed on work time, individuals should inform their supervisor of the relationship and relationship expectations. Programs and activities articulated in writing in these instances protect those involved from questions about "too many" outside activities, inappropriate time spent on a phone call, etc.

Should I look for mentoring programs that are tailored for specific roles, i.e. leadership mentoring, new librarian mentoring? How will that differ from an overall mentor?

In general, one would hope that the mentor programs available to them would support both in-depth and diverse needs of mentees with broad, diverse expertise of mentors, however, the reality is that well designed mentor programs - no matter the number of people involved - are time consuming and take a great deal of focus and hard work. In addition, finding mentors who might meet "all" needs of a mentor as well as finding individuals with specific, diverse and in-depth need who also want to be mentors and have the skills to BE a mentor isn't easy. There are, however, a variety of ways to offer opportunities with depth and breadth.

Mentees seeking mentor/mentee relationships should complete mentee self- assessments that seek articulated, written outcomes. In addition, mentees need to address these needs with their own timeline, that is, they should determine which are short- term needs vs. longer-term needs. Short- term needs for a specific expertise might be an easier and timelier target to meet, while longer term needs of different employment or higher level management might better become a step II or phase II. These self-assessments should be vetted by others who can offer career advice or - at the very least - seasoned mentors or possible mentors who are willing to participate in the earliest steps of mentor/mentee programs by providing vetting to applications and/or assisting in determining general career goals and plans.

The most common mentor programs currently are those directed toward leadership in the profession and in the workplace. And while these are labeled general leadership, often these programs have a combination of activities and really are just to provide alternate avenues to "growing" individuals in organizations. Other reasons for mentor/mentee programs and other reasons for individuals to seek mentor/mentee relationships include:

- There is a desire to provide increased or expanded opportunities to learn/experience responsibility in the organization and interested employees are in jobs where their roles and responsibilities do not include needed areas.
- There is interest in learning new areas of expertise/increasing or expanding competencies.
- Staff development programs in institutions are not fully funded (or funded at all) and employees need to educate/train internally.
- Succession (in management and in specific areas of expertise) is of concern and the organization is aware of pending "brain drains" due to staff retirements and/or staff reductions so they need to pass along unique organizational and area competency or skills sets for the immediate or near future.
- The organization has and wants to preserve a unique organizational culture so relationships are formed to integrate new or changing employees and jobs into the organizational landscape.

So what's the right answer?

You need to look for a program that meets your needs, and more structured programs are recommended.

If there isn't a program that meets a mentee's specific, unique or primary need, mentees should identify a general need as a secondary choice. Beginning with general techniques then gives mentees the opportunity to learn the process. There is NO law that prohibits two mentorship relationships or a progressive relationship that begins as one then moves to another or second level with more specificity. Documenting what primary and secondary needs are on applications and mentee profiles, assists mentees in making the case that two relationships may be needed to fulfill goals.

Once a formal mentoring program ends, what are good ways to continue the momentum of what I have learned from my mentor?

Mentoring is hard work! And being a good mentee is hard work as well! Many programs, however, suggest ways to celebrate and officially end relationships. These formal endings bring closure, offer opportunities for final evaluation and allow mentors and mentees to complete the responsibility. In addition, some mentor programs recommend limited access to mentors after the relationship for specific periods of time. Limited access is designed to provide a break, give mentors a 'rest' and then avoid mentor burnout. While it is logical that mentees might want to stay close to their mentor, post-relationship networking should be designed to outline an altered relationship between the two individuals and move it to another level that would be more appropriate. These issues might need to be written into program guidelines and timelines.

So - if post-relationships are possible, how might mentors and mentees continue the relationship? The answer to this lies in the "pre-relationship relationship." That is, if the mentee is a public services contact for - for example - at the circulation desk - and doesn't routinely attend management meetings, the likelihood is that - obviously - ongoing relationships would NOT include those activities. Activities that might be ongoing post-relationship could include:

The mentee remains on email lists the mentor either sponsors/owns or recommends.

The mentee remains on external lists previously recommended and is invited to share comments and questions from the e-lists with the mentor.

The mentor and mentee agree to less frequent meetings to discuss impact, progress on the mentees general career plans. (e.g. if the duo met once a month during their relationship, then they might meet twice a year or once in the fall and once in the spring, or at pre-determined "times of events" such as the end of an academic year for review of activities or the beginning of a project or new team the mentee is going to serve on. etc.)

Mentor Questions

As a mentor, what is a good way to begin a relationship with a mentee that I have been paired with/assigned to?

Although the answers above have included some of this information, here are more ideas:

- The mentor can request that the mentee create a list of questions they want answers to in the first month of the activity.
- The mentor can review mentee general goals from the application process and request that the mentee prioritize goals and/or place goals to be completed within the calendar of their relationship.

- The mentor can share reading or viewing lists of resources the mentee should use throughout the relationship.

The mentor can share questions they want the mentee to answer such as:

- What brought you to this profession in the first place? Or what inspired you to become an information professional?
- If someONE rather than something inspired you, who was that someone?
- What two things do you like the most about your current position?
- What one thing would you change about your job that you think you can change based on our mentor relationship?

What should I expect from a mentee in a formal mentoring relationship?

A mentee has many responsibilities within a relationship and job descriptions and expectation documents should provide specific elements, but in general:

- A match to the communication style of the mentor, that is, if the mentor is less technologically gifted than the mentee, the mentee would conform to the mentor's styles
- A commitment to meeting timelines AND adherence to the process outlined in the structure for being both proactive and reactive, that is, if the mentor does not return the information in a timely fashion, the mentee should continue with the process and assist the mentor in moving ahead and NOT wait for contact
- A commitment to "doing homework" and preparing for activities - whether in person or at a distance

What are some best practices for engaging with a mentee to keep the relationship going?

- Standardized timelines for communication in general and certainly within the first week of the relationship
- Activities designed to provide engagement provided by the structure
- A third party to assist in the relationship if needed, that is, the process owner or coordinator of the process is available for advice and general Q and A

Finally, the mentor/mentee relationship is a wonderful opportunity for professionals and a cornerstone of the basic tenets of any profession. Of course, in my LLAMA workshop, I share a great deal more process and structure for recommended programs AND I have a book coming out that provides - among other things - a "23 thing" approach to activities that programs can use to make the process flow smoothly as mentors and mentees together are guided through the relationship.

I highly recommend individuals to seek out programs. We need these opportunities even more now in our economy and in our rapidly-changing work environments.

Julie Todaro (julie.todaro@yahoo.com) is Dean of Library Services at Austin Community College in Texas.

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