



The Power of Mentoring: Pass It On

By Richard Weeks, RSBA

Unbeknownst to you, your assistant may perceive you as his or her mentor. Your assistant could be the school accountant in a cubicle outside your office or perhaps the procurement officer or technology director located elsewhere in central administration. Whoever your assistant is, he or she has a reporting relationship to you.

In many cases, neither the person acting as a mentor nor the person being mentored may realize or recognize that mentoring has occurred. Sometimes people involved in mentoring do not actually use the term “mentoring” and instead describe their relationship as influential or learning oriented (Peer Resources 2007).

Most ASBO affiliates have formal mentorship programs, linking colleagues experienced in school business administration to novices. The programs are geared toward relationships between equals who work in different school districts. This article focuses on the more common manager-employee mentoring relationship between school business officials and their assistants.

One day, your assistant will succeed you or strike out on his or her own in a new school district. It is time to think seriously about mentorship for succession and the advancement of our assistants to the profession of school business administration.

Undertaking a new position requires leaders to remain professional and positive yet acutely aware of the dynamics within the district and the community.

A Mentorship Program by Mutual Agreement

In a workplace survey, Lois J. Zachary (2005) reported that 73% of the employers polled believed mentoring helped retain their next generation of leaders. And 71% said that mentoring improved everyone’s leadership and managerial skills.

Ask your employer for the time and resources to mentor your assistant. Ask your assistant whether he or she is interested in school business administration as a career, and whether there’s interest in your serving as a mentor. If your assistant says no, then contact your affiliate executive director and volunteer your services to mentor newly minted colleagues in other districts.

Ask your superintendent or director for a written directive to you and your assistant, acknowledging the mentoring program and clarifying expectations between you as mentor and your assistant as protégé. You both will be devoting many extra hours of work that will benefit your school district. This should not go unrecognized.

Decide on the level of formality that seems appropriate. Is it more practical

to meet your assistant on an as-needed basis throughout the day, or does it make more sense to establish a meeting schedule? Will you require your assistant to maintain a diary that charts his or her mentoring observations and experiences?

You may not want to use the more formal written guidelines, evaluation tools, or signed “expectation agreements” that some affiliates have adopted. Your assistant will be doing real-time work that will be used by your school district—not textbook practice exercises. The two of you will have considerable direct contact without having to communicate via telephone or email.

“Mentoring” itself has become a profession, as evidenced by the growth of the International Mentoring Association (IMA), which was established in 1988 to offer formal training programs for those who want to become mentors.

The IMA defines a mentoring relationship as “the developmental relationship of a mentor and protégé which is characterized by confidentiality, trust, caring, and mutual support and challenge for growth.” It further states that “mentoring is the all-inclusive descrip-

tion of everything done to support protégé orientation and professional development” (Sweeny 2003).

The well-intentioned goals of IMA must be handled within the context of today’s legal environment of you as a boss working for the employer and your subordinate as an employee. Both of you must maintain your distance in your roles as mentor and protégé. Perhaps your role should be similar to that of a coach. IMA supports this as well, and states that “coaching is focused on learning job-related skills. Coaches must use open-ended questions to help the other person more objectively see [his or her] own patterns of behavior and to prompt reflection, goal-setting, planning and action to increase the desired results” (Sweeny 2003).

Useful Mentoring Resources

ASBO’s Professional Standards, with their seven skill sets and detailed subsets, provide a good framework for your mentorship program. You can assign work to your assistant and follow up with a conference to review and discuss completed projects. In your position, you may not handle job responsibilities that cover all the standards. In that case, you can draw on previous experience, materials, and exhibits, and teach your protégé about those skill sets. You could also direct your protégé to other personnel within your school district for observation and guidance.

Other frameworks include the numerous documents and materials in your office, including your and others’ job descriptions, office procedure manuals, and the school district’s strategic and emergency planning guides. Build a business office calendar of events, including the entire annual cycle of responsibilities and duties within your domain. Your bookshelf should contain ASBO publications relating to all seven professional standards, and several years’ worth of *School Business Affairs*, for convenient reference.

Most states have licensure requirements for public school business administrators. If your assistant is seriously interested in the profession, he or she may have to meet certain expectations

for state certification. Mentoring is typically one important key expectation. Your state’s education department may already have policies, procedures, guidelines, and evaluation forms that can be made a part of your mentorship plan. One commonly required form is a mentorship log, in which your assistant enters the dates of mentorship meetings, the specific work tasks that were discussed, and new assignments suggested by you.

Your affiliate may have prepared a mentoring program handbook, useful for effective administration of an affiliate-based mentorship program. The handbook may detail the roles and responsibilities of mentors and protégés and may include helpful forms and checklists. Ask your affiliate’s executive director for assistance.

The Supervisor as Mentor

Why does mentoring matter to mentors? It matters because mentors derive satisfaction from helping others learn their profession. The day will come when you hang up your abacus and head for the fairways. You will look back favorably on the important insights, experience, and wisdom that you shared with your assistant.

The two skills that I think are essential for successful mentoring are (1) in-depth listening, that is, suspending judgment, listening for understanding, and providing an accepting and supportive atmosphere; and (2) asking powerful questions, that is, questions that are challenging in a friendly way and questions that help the other person talk about what is important to him or her. I seldom ask why. Most of my questions can be described as “open-ended” and usually start with how or what.

You must provide your protégé with answers to very specific questions and concerns because you may be the only person in your school district with the knowledge, experience, and resources to help him or her. However, many successful mentors have a different view. As one school business official stated, “I do not see my mentor role as one in which I ‘tell’ another person what to do or how to do it. I freely share what

I have done (or have learned), not as a prescription, but more as an example of something from which I gained some wisdom.”

The Assistant as Protégé

Your assistant should not be given your job—he or she must earn it. It is a time-honored tradition.

Your assistant has to play an active role in the mentoring relationship by offering critical reflections on his or her own work, and by identifying areas in which assistance is needed. To develop as a successful school business administrator, your protégé should understand that he or she must seek out assistance, be forthright in communicating business office issues, and remain open to feedback. There must be some excitable attitude on the part of your protégé to enable mentoring to work.

“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand,” states an ancient Chinese proverb. It may be more relevant for you as the mentor to keep this in mind. However, your assistant must not simply settle for “show and tell.” It is incumbent upon your protégé to get involved in most aspects of your work to really understand the profession.

When the Mentorship Program Concludes

Mentoring relationships generally last from two to five years. Throughout those years, the foundations of mentoring are trust and sharing. The individuals involved must be willing to trust each other and share their knowledge and experience. Remember that mentoring relationships can become destructive if individuals’ needs are out of sync, or if either party enters a crisis of esteem.

When you begin to sense that a relationship is no longer supportive, it is time to rely on other alliances and to let this one go. Most importantly, do not blame yourself for a failed relationship; more often than not, such a dramatic change in a previously supportive relationship has little to do with your behavior and more to do with the other person’s personal concerns, or with organizational politics.

Learning from Mentors Past: Ebenezer Scrooge

London was teeming with small financial firms or “countinghouses” as they were called in the 1830s. Typically, an owner and his partner(s) would employ assistants. In time, the assistants would themselves become partners, or depart and build firms of their own. Today’s school business administrators share much in common with these owners. The skills of the trade were taught to the assistants and the culture of the business was inculcated in a new generation.

In Charles Dickens’s classic tale *A Christmas Carol*, we observe the mentoring relationship between countinghouse owner Ebenezer Scrooge and his assistant Bob Cratchit. The mentoring aspect of the story is greatly overshadowed by Mr. Scrooge’s rebirth as a human being after the third apparition’s visit.

In the story, assistant Cratchit reminds Mr. Scrooge that the following day is Christmas, to which Scrooge replies, “You’ll want all day tomorrow, I suppose?” “If quite convenient, sir,” says Cratchit. “You don’t think me ill used, when I pay a day’s wages for no work.” The clerk observed that it was only once a year.

It is easy to believe that the unreformed Scrooge was a cruel man. After all, he refused to give anything to charity and he is represented as being abusive to his employee Bob Cratchit. In fact, Scrooge treated Cratchit quite well: Cratchit was able to live in a house, rare for the time, and his salary supported a large family. Altogether, Cratchit was doing well for a member of the early 19th-century middle class (Cowans 1991).

Also overlooked is the fact that the venture capitalists like Ebenezer Scrooge provided the working capital to fund what became known as the Industrial Revolution. It was good business for them to lend their money to visionaries who invented the machines and technical processes that eventually helped the poor, rather than simply giving shillings to the poor so they could continue to live in squalor. Dickens teaches us that venture capitalists should be able to strike an equilibrium between making money and giving some to charity.

How sad it is that Mr. Scrooge did not have the resources of a professional association such as ASBO International! (We did not burst upon the scene until 1910.) He would have found ASBO’s *Professional Standards* booklet, iden-

tifying the following seven major skill sets in the profession, particularly helpful:

- Educational enterprise
- Financial resource management
- Human resource management
- Facility management
- Property acquisition and management
- Information management
- Ancillary services (risk management, transportation, and food service)

Perhaps Mr. Scrooge would have come to accept that “a successful school business manager [countinghouse owner] must have specific knowledge and skills gained through past experience, formal education, or professional development. However, to be a professional, an individual must be willing to continually acquire new skills and knowledge” (Aronstein 2003).

Had Mr. Scrooge consulted Dr. Susan Stratton, she might have advised, “If values reflect beliefs and ethics are demonstrated behaviors reflecting those values, then it follows that *professional persons are ethically bound to continue their personal and professional growth and development*. Time for reflection and learning should be an integral part of the professional’s schedule and routine. In other words, *professionals are people who spend their lives as learners*” (Stratton 2002, p. 40).

Mr. Scrooge could have learned from Dr. Stratton the importance of establishing competency assessment forms, drawn from ASBO’s standards. Bob Cratchit might have completed a self-assessment form, which could have helped him realize his existing levels of knowledge and skills using the scale provided (Stratton 2002).

Cratchit’s assessment is entirely fictional. ASBO’s standards, defining and delineating our profession’s tasks, functions, roles, and responsibilities, are very much a part of the fabric of our association. For Cratchit, the self-assessment would have served as a tool for greater self-awareness and understanding at the initial stage of the mentoring relationship. Scrooge could have used it as a competency assessment, on which he would have built an effective mentoring program for Cratchit. It would have served as a benchmark to measure progress over the months.

My guess is that your mentoring will reaffirm Zachary’s 73% statistic. Through your efforts, you will contribute to retaining the next generation of leaders in school business administration. Even Charles Dickens (1843) may have predicted it at the end of his tale when the reborn Ebenezer Scrooge intimated that Bob Cratchit might become a partner in his firm, Scrooge

and Marley: “I’ll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop [holiday punch].”

Lifelong Effect

ASBO members have lasting memories of mentors, long after their mentorship programs have concluded. Consider

the reflections of Deborah Hefner, director of business operations for NUAMES Early College High School in Farmington, Utah:

“Gladys Gardner was a mentor who taught me the most and helped to take my career in a new direction. When I was hired at the Utah State Office of Education in 1987, Gladys was a child nutrition specialist. Gladys knew every-

one in the state of Utah, and when a policy or procedure needed definition, the phrase most often heard was, 'Gladys says. . . .'

"She had an incredible passion for making sure that the children of the state had the best meals possible. Gladys would always sit and talk with the children at the schools she visited.

"As I watched this, I knew these young people were the reason we were there, and that what the children had to say was important. She would listen to the district director as well and would converse with the school's food service manager in a way that was never offensive. These were the communication skills I learned that helped when I began to do reviews on my own.

"Previously, I had been a classroom teacher for 11 years and had little administrative experience. It was through Gladys's efforts that my responsibilities included financial management of the

Child Nutrition Programs, and I was able to become supervisor of the Ogden City Schools Child Nutrition Programs.

"In my current position, I often think of how important it is to listen to students, whether about their classes, their meals, or even their bus ride. Gladys understood how good school meals translated into children ready to learn. The children of Utah are benefiting from her passion for quality nutrition programs." ■

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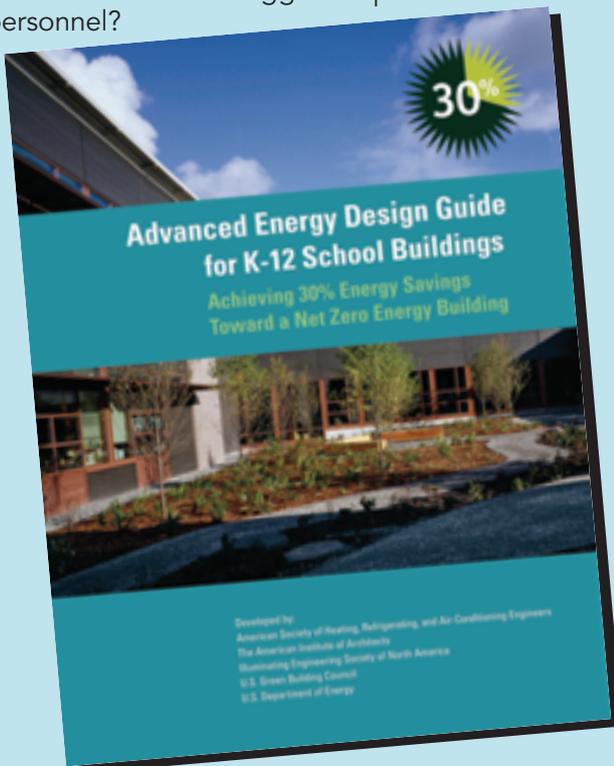
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Save Money on Energy Costs with ASHRAE's Energy Guide for Schools

Did you know that energy costs are typically a school district's biggest expense after personnel?



But energy costs can be controlled. The new ASHRAE Advanced Energy Design Guide for K–12 School Buildings will help your school district save money—savings that can be devoted to educational resources. Follow the guide and help your school save 30% or more on its energy costs.

The Advanced Energy Design Guide was written to help owners and designers of elementary, middle, and high school buildings save at least 30% on their energy costs compared with the minimum requirements of ASHRAE Standard 90.1-1999. It features easy-to-follow recommendations for various climate zones and how-to tips using real-life construction case studies of schools around the country that have achieved or exceeded the 30% target.

The guide was developed through the collaboration of ASHRAE (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers), the American Institute of Architects, the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America, and the U.S. Green Building Council, with support from the U.S. Department of Energy.

Download it free at www.ashrae.org/freeaedg or look for your copy in the mail. Copies were sent to every school district in the United States.