

AAA mentors

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Abstract

Mentorship is recognized as one of the most important features of a modern job. Applicants seek jobs that will allow them to grow and that provide a clearly identified/accomplished mentor to help facilitate this growth. This has become more critical in recent years with mentorship playing a key role in employee retention for millennials. In fact, providing a mentor for an employed millennial can double their five-year retention rate.

Seventy-one percent of Fortune 500 companies have recognized the importance of mentorship and implemented formal mentorship programs but a much small percentage of small businesses recognize or utilize the importance of such a mentorship program. For this reason, a program for the basic education of mentors and the facilitation of the launch of a mentorship program is needed. The AAAs of mentorship focuses on instructing prospective or current mentoring techniques to improve their availability to mentees, improve affirmation techniques, anchor their mentee, and instruct them in post-doctoral school scholarship.

While many ways exist to improve these four areas, this presentation will focus on techniques that can have the largest and most immediate impact. Growth in these areas will provide a solid foundation and measurable improvements for mentorship programs.

Key words: mentorship, retention, employee development, knowledge sharing

Introduction

Anyone can be a mentor. Often experience and a willing attitude is all that is needed to become one. This however does not necessarily make you the “best” mentor you could be. Therefore, we need to focus on active training models to facilitate the growth of our mentorship traits.

Before we begin investigating these traits it is prudent to step back and identify why we need to have mentorship in our businesses. Most modern mentorship programs evolved from the changing desires of a new generation of hires.

Millennials more than ever are seeking out mentorship. In the author’s experience, mentorship, after salary and benefits discussions, ranks as the #1 concern among new and recent graduates. Discussions of how to find practicing mentors and what they can teach the candidate are common themes among these individuals as well.

So why has this thought pattern shifted to mentorship in recent years? Like many business trends it has had

to evolve as the workplace adjusts to a new generation of employees. This generation prefers feedback and positive reinforcement more than previous generations. Luckily for us this has spawned a mirade of research in the public and private sectors with bloggers, private companies and researches all adding great factoids to the mentorship discussion.

First, and most concerning is that 54% of individuals DO NOT have a mentor currently.⁷ This is concerning because 80% of learning in the workplace occurs informally, usually through a work mentorship relationship.⁹ This means employees are learning these skills themselves, via their peers or a mentor. If these employees lack a mentor, there is a good chance they are picking up bad habits or practical drift (the slow and steady uncoupling of actions from written protocols) changes that could detrimentally affect their work or medicine and in turn the business.

Additionally, 84% of employees that are mentored become more proficient in their roles faster.² By providing a mentor, a business can improve the plug and play nature of new employees, decreasing the time to their profitability and independence in practice. While the exact cost of training a new associate is difficult to determine, many owners would agree that it takes about a year for many of them to become full contributors to the business’s bottom line. Any way to decrease this timeline should be looked upon as a positive for the employee and the financial status of the business.

Besides decreasing the amount of time it takes to fully onboard a new associate, mentorship can also improve the critical statistic of employee retention. Deloitte found that providing a millennial a mentor doubled their retention rate vs their peers without a mentor.³ While Gartner found that employees that were provided a mentor showed a 72% retention rate over five years vs only 49% in their mentorless peers.⁵ It is a small wonder why 71% of Fortune 500 companies seek to take advantage of this statistic by offering a formal mentorship program within their business.¹

Finally, mentorship creates a self-perpetuating system, with 89% of mentees going on to become a mentor themselves.⁸ This allows you, as a primary mentor, to have a LARGE impact over the lifetime of the business even with a limited number of total mentees. Positively effecting the business for years to come.

By this point we can see that mentorship is a key trait for any clinic owner or experienced associate. But this skill is often self-taught or modeled after the individual’s own mentorship experience. Rarely, does CE focus on identifying and training the skills needed to excel at this role. The

objective of this review will be to propose a more formal system which will focus in on four traits that can help develop “AAA” mentors.

AAA Mentorship

What does an AAA mentor do that others do not? First, they seek out formal education on how to become a mentor; seeking to develop the growth, coaching, leadership, and motivation skills needed to make them a great mentor.

To this end the AAAs program seeks to develop 4 major categories in prospective or current mentors. The first being approachability or access of the mentee to the mentor. The second being affirmations or the up-lifting of the mentee’s confidence. The third being a focus on anchoring or providing a solid foundation for the mentee to grow from and act upon. The fourth and final trait being the fostering of a love for lifelong scholarship and networking.

Together these traits will provide the mentor a solid foundation in which they can begin to cultivate and grow a relationship with their mentee upon.

Approachability

“A genius hangs around his laboratory day and night. If anything happens, he’s there to catch it.”
–Thomas Edison

Even the greatest mentor is useless if their mentee cannot contact or communicate regularly with them. This is a common problem especially as mentor-mentee relationships lose their novelty or perceived “usefulness” by one or both parties. Olivet Nazarene University found that 41% of mentees said it’s hard to contact their mentor. That means that ALMOST half of mentored individuals cannot contact their mentor effortlessly. In doing the math, this means 46% of individuals are mentored overall but 41% of these individuals essentially have a defunct mentor-mentee relationship. This means that only 27% of people have a successful mentor-mentee relationship!

How do we change this? We live in the age of technology. No more letters, telegrams, or smoke signals! Harness modern technology to assist your relationship. Use phone calls, text messages, Vower, Zoom, email or in person meetings to connect with one another. However, having these tools is not enough. You will need to establish a routine. This means setting up a daily, weekly, monthly, or annual routine for meetings. This relationship goes both ways; the mentee must reach out and let the mentor know they need X amount of help while the mentor must reach out and allow the mentee to know their promised time commitment and availability. Open communication will help facilitate this relationship.

Next, the mentor MUST break their old habits. Many times as practitioners age in their careers they establish

habits that help them win the day; improvements to efficiency, solo-type work, leaving for family time right after work is done, unwillingness to share clients or work processes, etc., etc. These habits STUNT the growth of mentees. They limit their experiences; they limit how they view the future of their work and they limit the ability of the mentee to access their mentor.

The mentor must seek to review both their work and personal habits and be sure they are conducive to teaching and facilitating the growth of the mentee. The most common of these habits is “the tendency to do solo-work” or “here let me do that mentality” and “the work and done efficiency model”. These are prime examples of limiting experience and availability. Instead, seek to let them do and advise as they are, fixing what needs fixing along the way. Also, forfeit efficiency for the choice of mentee growth. This may make for longer days, but it will help fuel the mentor-mentee relationship.

Finally, mentors can improve their mentee relationships by creating opportunities for the mentees to seek consultation. Some of the best moments in the author’s mentor-mentee relationships have been unplanned. Often, mentees do not realize they need help until they are mid conversation with their mentor.

Foster these opportunities using daily rounds, weekly meetings, monthly/quarterly idea and reflection sessions and annual goal setting. The role of each of these sessions will change as your mentee grows in their career, but these are great examples that can be used to create learning opportunities for the mentee.

No matter how mentors accomplish the task they MUST be cognizant of their availability to a mentee. Ignoring this negates even the best mentors’ abilities to help their mentee.

Anchoring

“Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit home and think about it. Go out and get busy!”

–Dale Carnegie

Every so often a storm comes in someone’s career; an animal inexplicably dies; a client blows up or personal struggles rock an individual. This is when a mentor who can provide calm, unshakeable confidence in their mentee can shine. They are the unmovable and unconditional believer in the mentee.

I like to call this the “Rock” tactic or that calm that comes with experience. The mentor’s ability to reduce fear and anxiety for the mentee will win the day. Encouraging a back to basics approach, whether it is basic anatomy, medicine, pharmacology, OR relationship building, empathy and a clear-headed approach. This will allow the mentee

to approach any problem knowing someone has their back and believes in them.

Next a mentor needs to anchor their mentee in what is known as their “First Principles.” First principles are the undeniable truths in what they do. This is what is profoundly important to them; things like family, faith, empathy, service etc. Re-centering a mentee in these principles during a storm will ground them and help them realize what is profoundly important in the larger scheme of things.

Discovering a mentee’s first principle requires them to discover their “Why.” A “Why” is the core driving factor behind what they do. For some people it is money, others it is to help animals and still others it is to fulfill some other mental obligation to themselves. This “Why” can act as an anchor and be used to identify first principles that help the mentee fulfill it. Finding a person’s “Why” is not as hard as you might think. For the reader, I recommend the 5 Why’s exercise pictured in Figure 1 or checking out Simon Sinek’s *Find Your Why* book. Both will prove excellent resources and exercises for discovering your mentee’s “Why”.

Participating in this exercise together can prove eye opening for both mentee and mentor. It will help improve the bond between both parties as well as help them understand the driving factors behind everyone’s decisions and advice.

Finally, mentors must anchor their mentees in accountability. Young associates all too commonly have many different ideas but a lack of action on these ideas stunts their progress and growth. It is the mentor’s job to get the mentee to identify the steps needed to accomplish their

dream and then make sure they take those steps to realize the growth. This sharing of ideas is critical because 75% of verbally shared goals or ideas are accomplished vs 50% of written only goals being fulfilled⁴. Yet another advantage of the mentor-mentee system.

Affirmation

“We should seize every opportunity to give encouragement. Encouragement is like oxygen to the soul.”
–George M. Adams

Occasionally, the mentee will lack confidence, be pigeonholed in their career, or feel stymied at work. This will commonly happen in the first year of practice as they learn and build experience and again as they reach years three and four as their knowledge and experience plateau. Both of these times are major milestones in associate’s careers and come with unique challenges.

Establishing confidence during these trying times often relates to a psychological phenomenon known as “Impostor Syndrome”. This syndrome has been shown to occur in 70% of American adults and is probably the most perverse professional problem in the veterinary industry (Sakulku).

Wikipedia defines impostor syndrome as the psychological pattern in which one doubts one’s accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud. As associates grow, they often transition from lack of confidence from sheer inexperience to this perception of being a fraud.

Entire courses could be taught on this, but the author will provide a short guide to managing these feelings in your mentee. First, have the mentee ID the exact topics and feelings associated with it, discuss with them why they feel this way, encourage them to justify why these feelings are false and move them past the feeling. This is often easier said than done and can be one of the most difficult and ongoing series of conversations a mentor will have to have with their mentee.

Other tactics that work well when seeking to destroy Impostor Syndrome include:

1. Instill Self Confidence – This tactic is twofold. Talking with them encouragingly to help them see the positive and helping them to discard the negative thoughts that tear them down.
2. Re-enforce Past Growth – Revisit and review the progress they made. Reflect on how far they have come vs where they started.
3. Revisit Personal Value – Discuss the value in dollars earned, relationships made, and people helped personally and professionally. Be sure they understand that they are seeing returns on their efforts.
4. Establish Expertise – Compare them to their peers and show how far they have come. Ask them for their consultation or expertise as needed to re-enforce this expertise in their mind.

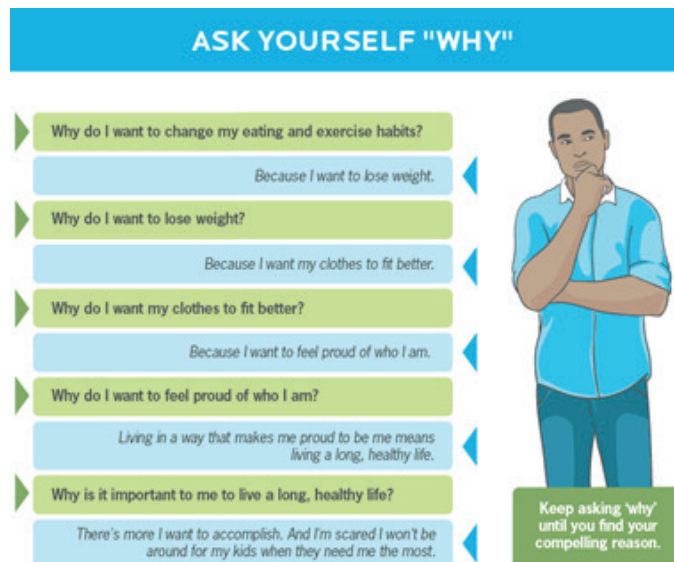


Figure 1. An example of a Five Why’s Exercise. This activity involves asking the mentee a series of five questions each building off the other until they get to their core driving factor. (Credit to Joe Martin Fitness⁶ for the image)

5. Build Resilience – Help them to understand that challenges come but they are there so they can learn and grow. Also, encourage them to let go of negative people or experiences and hold on to successes instead.
6. Share Personal Impostor Syndrome Stories – One of the most beneficial tactics is the sharing of your own personal story and struggle with Impostor Syndrome. This is something most of us have experienced and your personal story will strengthen the mentee-mentor bond as well.

Next, a mentor can improve their skills by identifying common stereotypes their mentee is subject to or may experience and then help them break these stereotypes. Some common stereotypes encountered in large animal medicine include:

- Women vs Men in Practice
- “We’ve always done it that way”
- Being a Minority in Practice
- Young vs Old
- Generational Assumptions

Mentees need to be reminded that someone’s opinion about them does not have to become their reality. They can and should use these differences as leverage to improve a situation, practice more intelligently or just change the way things are done. If they embrace their uniqueness, they can change things for the better; being a mentor that shows them this will lift their spirits and outlook.

Finally, mentors need to encourage this uniqueness. Help the mentee identify and develop their unique skills and abilities. This may be an area of consultation, practice development or relationship building; it will vary mentee to mentee BUT the important part is to help them identify these strengths.

You can begin to identify your mentees strengths by encouraging them to read and complete the quiz in the *StrengthsFinder 2.0* book by Gallop. This book will ID where their strengths are and will help you and the mentee target skills that play to these strengths. The author so strongly believes in this book that he personally reviews one of his strength results from the provided quiz per day to make sure that he is applying them to his own growth appropriately.

It does not matter how you apply these above principles if you lift up your mentee. Encourage them as if you are the only person in their life doing so, because you may be!

Scholarship

“Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.”

–Helen Keller

Time and time again we are reminded of the story of the tortoise and the hare. The fact that slow but continual progress will always beat out short intense bursts of activ-

ity. Now where is this truer than in the realm of scholarship and the best mentors set an example of lifelong learning for their mentees.

Mentors first need to lead by example. When mentees graduate from vet school there is a learning style transition that is remarkably like the transition from high school to college or college to vet school. Suddenly the mentee goes from being told what to learn, to no guidance whatsoever. This can stall career growth as well as cause the mentee to be overwhelmed.

AAA mentors will seek to share their system for learning with their mentee. Leading by example. This means sharing knowledge resources, personal challenges and discussing your own personal findings with them. This way they can observe what you do and pick what works for them. A sort of hybrid “See one, do one teach one system”.

This type sharing naturally lends itself to the formation of a mutually beneficial relationship between the mentee and mentor. This area of the scholarship trait is where the mentee mentor relationship begins to feed into the mentor as well. Via the Law of Reciprocity, the deep-seated psychological urge to return a favor, the sharing of facts turns into a two-way street that places both parties on a level playing field and helps both mentee and mentor grow together.

Mentors should never discount what your mentee can provide, and a mentee should never discount the value of the information and knowledge they themselves can share. Often new techniques and ideas are developed or created by molding old facts or traditions with new information and techniques which require the marrying of experience with the cutting edge; often an environment that can only be achieved in a relationship such as this.

Finally, mentors need to seek to plug their mentees into their network. Avoid keeping your network a secret for you never know what connection may help them or when you may be unable to help (death, loss of mentor-mentee relationship, distance etc). By introducing your mentee to your network, you create connections that would not have occurred and strengthen your own network. It also adds confidence to your mentee as they begin to see how much you trust and value your connection with them.

A great way to do this is what the author calls the “3 Person Dinner”. This is where you invite your mentee and one other person you think they should meet to a dinner. You are then able to introduce them while facilitating the integration of the two network pieces together in a controlled setting. All over good food and drink in a business setting.

The continued growth of a mentee should be the paramount objective of the relationship. Teaching them the means to undergo this growth via scholarship and the ability to enjoy the process without outside influence, will be a skill that will serve them well throughout their career. Because, in the words of author Marie Forleo, “Everything in the material world is first created on the level of thought.”

Conclusion

In the end mentorship is NOT hard; nor should it be taken lightly. A mentor is responsible for the directed growth of his or her mentee and therefore should continuously seek to grow himself in his/her role/knowledge of being a mentor. Have a basic plan for meeting your mentee's needs and communicate that plan with them.

Those of you who are looking for a mentor it is quite simple. At your next CE conference look to your left, look to your right. If you see grey hair, that is a great indicator of someone with great knowledge that might be willing to share! Reach out and start a conversation, you will be surprised how it ends.

Finally, the author would like to put a specific plug in for the AABP Mentorship Program which can be found at www.aabp.org/jobs/mentorship. This program pairs mentors with >8 years of practice experience with younger graduates and serves as an excellent resource for solo or multidocor practitioners seeking mentorship. Please go and check it out.

The author wishes to leave you with one final thought, a quote from Sam Altman CEO of OpenAI. Sam's quote should serve as motivation to mentors so they may see the greatness they can cultivate and encouragement to mentees so they may understand that with guidance and persistence they can achieve their greatest dreams.

"A big secret is that you can bend the world to your will a surprising percentage of the time—most people do not even try, and just accept that things are the way that they are. People have an enormous capacity to make things happen. A combination of self-doubt, giving up too early, and not pushing hard enough prevents most people from ever reaching anywhere near their potential.....Ask for what you want. You usually will not get it, and often the rejection will be painful. But when this works, it works surprisingly well. Almost always, the people who say 'I am going to keep going until this works, and no matter what the challenges are I'm going to figure them out', and mean it, go on to succeed.

—Sam Altman

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