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# Mentoring: Critical Assistance for the SOF Community

*by Major General Sidney Shachnow, U.S. Army (ret.)*

**T**hroughout most of history, the conventional mentoring paradigm has defined mentors as those who impart wisdom, advice and guidance to their protégés.

The word mentoring is taken from the *Odyssey*. Odysseus is getting ready to fight the Trojan War and realizes that he must leave behind his heir, Telemachus. Odysseus recognizes that he won't be around for several years, and that someone will need to coach and teach Telemachus.

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Odysseus must find someone to complete Telemachus' education. He chooses a trusted family member named Mentor to be the tutor. Mentor possesses wisdom and sensitivity — both of which are important ingredients in any mentoring situation, even today.

The form of mentoring, as many envision, has as its aim to increase the ability

of key personnel to achieve organizational goals while at the same time inspiring them to more easily realize their own wants and needs. As a result of this process, protégés will have gained improved performance, increased satisfaction and greater knowledge. The context is therefore different from counseling, which focuses on the evaluation of an individual's performance, from an organizational perspective, by someone within the individual's chain of command. Counseling is hardly a situation in which an open, wide-ranging, and frank discussion can take place.

The problem with mentoring in the SOF community is that it just "happens" spontaneously or naturally — it's a matter of being in the right place at the right time to be noticed by the right person who provides the right kind of help. This is not the systematic assistance that key personnel need in order to enrich themselves and add value to their organization. Too many people "fall through the cracks" and do not get the mentoring they require when it is most needed.

It is doubtful, in spite of all the zeal and idealism surrounding mentoring, that the Army or the SOF community will establish a formalized mentoring program. The reason is simple: Mentoring is critical, but it is not urgent. And, as we all know, most of our time and energy are spent on urgent stuff that is not critical. However, although it is spotty, mentoring does occur in our com-

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## Pick 'em up, dust 'em off ...

In one of my assignments as a young infantry officer, I was sent to the 48th Infantry near Frankfurt, Germany. In those days our prize weapon was a huge 280-mm atomic cannon. Guarded by infantry platoons, these guns were hauled around the forests on trucks to keep the Soviets from guessing their location. One day Captain Tom Miller assigned my platoon to guard a 280. I alerted my men, loaded my .45-caliber pistol and jumped into my jeep. I had not gone far when I realized that my .45 was gone.

I was petrified. In the Army, losing a weapon is serious business. I had no choice but to radio Captain Miller and tell him. "You what?" he said in disbelief. He paused a few seconds, then added, "All right, continue the mission." When I returned, uneasily contemplating my fate, Miller called me over. "I've got something for you," he said, handing me the pistol. "Some kids in the village found it where it fell out of your holster."

"Kids found it?" I felt a cold chill.

"Yeah," he said. "Luckily they only got off one round before we heard the shot and took the gun away." The disastrous possibilities left me limp. "For God's sake, son, don't let that happen again."

He drove off. I checked the magazine and found it was full. The gun had not been fired. Later I learned that I had dropped it in my tent before I ever got started. Miller had fabricated the scene about the kids to give me a good scare.

Today the Army might hold an investigation, call in lawyers and likely enter a bad mark on my record. Miller gave me the chance to learn from my mistake. His example of intelligent leadership was not lost on me. Nobody ever got to the top without slipping up. When someone stumbles, I don't believe in stomping on him. My philosophy is "Pick 'em up, dust 'em off and get 'em moving again."

— General Colin Powell, *U.S. Army (ret.)*

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munity. For an individual who is contemplating becoming a mentor, a good start is to keep in mind the six universal desires that motivate people to work, volunteer, join and affiliate:

1. The desire for recognition, which causes a person to seek experiences that bring social approval, commendation or prestige, and to avoid experiences that result in ridicule, scorn or disapproval.

2. The desire for affection, which causes a person to seek experiences involving appreciation, understanding, intimacy or support, and to avoid situations in which there is a lack of appreciation or support.

3. The desire for power, which causes a person to seek experiences that promise achievement, success, self-determination

or mastery; and to avoid situations that promise frustration or a sense of failure.

4. The desire for new experiences, which causes a person to seek novelty, adventure, thrill, excitement or change; and to avoid dullness, monotony or boredom.

5. The desire for security, which causes a person to seek experiences that give a sense of protection, belonging or confidence, and to avoid situations involving disloyalty, abandonment, insecurity or fear.

6. The desire for friends, which causes a person to seek experiences that involve meeting and interacting with people who share some common values.

If one has an appreciation of what motivates people, knowledge to impart, and a willingness to give his or her time and

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effort to help an individual, one is ready to be a much-needed mentor. At the same time, the mentor will enjoy a rewarding and satisfying experience.

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place. Mentoring is not lecturing. The protégé may seek information, propose or exchange ideas, express feelings, solve a problem or pursue opportunities. This is not a complete list, but merely a sampling of topical exchanges. The mentor's role, on the other hand, is to coach, nurture, collaborate, advise and support.

At the individual level, the benefits of having been mentored will vary widely, depending on the protégé's particular needs, aspirations and situation. One may:

- Have the confidence not simply to tag along with organizational changes but to lead the organization and to champion the new culture.
- Have improved leadership and management skills.
- Have improved listening, challenging, and empathizing skills.
- Have the confidence to set and achieve performance goals.
- Have someone with whom you can speak freely and candidly.
- Be more ordered and reflective, rather than rushing into things.
- Have a wider perspective on the impact of his or her leadership and

management style.

- Be less ruled by feelings and more able to cope with difficult situations.
- Have the courage to be more bold and to sell one's ideas more strongly, thereby opening up additional ways of thinking.
- Be more mindful of the need to be compassionate and understanding, and be able to deal with the underlying problems, not just the symptoms, of subordinates.

Needless to say, the list could be much longer. Mentoring is one of those rare activities that makes everyone a winner — the protégé, the mentor and the organization. ✂

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