

# MENTORING GUIDE FOR CAREER SERVICES PROFESSIONALS

by Gary Alan Miller



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## WHAT IS MENTORING?

Since a relatively small number of colleges and universities offer specialized degree programs in career counseling, career services professionals come from a wide variety of workplace and educational backgrounds. As such, much of the learning about how to be an effective counselor comes from on-the-job training, professional development opportunities, and mentoring from others in the profession. This handbook focuses on mentoring in career services, and is appropriate for directors, supervisors, and more seasoned professionals to help those newer to the profession thrive.

There are many perspectives on the role of mentor. The American Psychological Association states simply, “A mentor is an individual with expertise who can help develop the career of a mentee” (“Introduction to Mentoring,” 2006). Others attach additional traits and responsibilities to the mentoring function:

- A mentor is a person or friend who guides a less experienced person by building trust and modeling positive behaviors. An effective mentor understands that his or her role is to be dependable, engaged, authentic, and tuned into the needs of the mentee (OYCP, n.d.).
- A mentor is a special kind of helper who works with others in a positive, constructive way so that both mentor and protégé have the potential to grow through the relationship (Indiana University, Office of Mentoring Services and Leadership Development, n.d.).
- Mentorship is a personal developmental relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. The mentor may be older or younger, but have a certain area of expertise. It is a learning and development partnership between someone with

vast experience and someone who wants to learn (Farren, C., 2006).

While such variations do not align perfectly with one another, they each share one important core trait: The mentor exists in the relationship to serve the growth of the mentee. New professionals in career services each may bring their unique strengths to the field. However, the modern career services unit typically demands a wider array of skills than any one entrant is likely to have to be successful. Beyond the essentials of student-centered career counseling/coaching, emerging career services professionals are called upon to be project managers, marketers, event planners, graphic designers, technology specialists, administrative support professionals, high-touch collaborators, and organizational relationship builders. No new professional comes prepared with strengths in all areas. Additionally, the new professional may lack significant practice, even in the areas in which they have considerable theory, training, or formal education.

# THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR

Kram (1985) notes that mentoring serves two primary functions: career support and psychosocial support. Career support can include helping the new professional learn best practices, methods of advancement, and options for career pathing. Psychosocial support can include the emotional well-being and growth in self-efficacy of the new professional (Kram, 1985). EDUCAUSE, an educational technology website, expounds on Kram’s two categories, providing nine specific types of mentoring functions. (See chart below.)

Devos (2010) notes that in educational environments, mentors also serve an additional function. “That role relates to one’s reading of the social and political contexts of teaching and

learning, and the roles of schools in society” (2010, p. 1221). While Devos’ intention is to address the teaching context specifically, this line of thought can be widened to include the work of career counselors in an environment where debates on the purpose and return on investment value of higher education are found regularly in the workplace and the media, and among the many stakeholders of career services.

As the new professional begins to map his or her strengths and weaknesses to his or her role, the mentor can assist through the functions discussed here. The mentor can challenge and support the new professional in this journey and serve as a sounding board for self-discovery.

| CAREER                  | DEFINITION  |
|-------------------------|---|
| Sponsorship             | Actively nominates junior colleague for desirable lateral moves and promotions.   |
| Exposure/Visibility     | Gives junior colleague responsibilities that allow for the development of relationships with key figures.   |
| Coaching                | Outlines specific strategies for accomplishing work objectives and achieving career aspirations; shares understanding of important issues and players.  |
| Protection              | Shields from untimely or potentially damaging contact with senior managers by taking credit or blame in controversial situations, or by intervening when the mentee is ill-equipped to achieve satisfactory resolution. |
| Challenging Assignments | Assigns mentee challenging work, supported with training and ongoing performance feedback.  |
| PSYCHOSOCIAL            | DEFINITION  |
| Role Modeling           | Senior colleague’s attitudes, values, and behavior provide a model for the junior colleague to emulate.   |
| Acceptance/Confirmation | Both individuals derive a sense of self from positive regard conveyed by the other.   |
| Counseling              | Enables an individual to explore personal concerns that may interfere with a positive sense of self and career accomplishment.  |
| Friendship              | Social interaction results in mutual liking and understanding, with enjoyable informal exchange about work and nonwork experiences.   |

Figure 1 adapted from “Types of Mentoring Functions” (n.d.).

## CUSTOMIZED MENTORING FOR TYPE AND PREFERENCES

Before addressing specific aspects of the mentor/mentee relationship in a career services context, it is crucial to recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach will rarely be as effective as a customized approach. Although this handbook does not have space to consider every form of differentiation that may be needed, mentors should consider how the following factors could impact the effectiveness of the relationship:

- Personality types (introversion/extraversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, judging/perceiving)
- Communication styles and preferences
- “Big Five” personality factors (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness,

neuroticism)

- Learning preferences
- Cultural differences
- Biases and assumptions

As you develop the mentoring relationship, it is important to check in with your mentee to discuss his or her needs and preferences. The best mechanism to do so is through simple open communication and dialogue. Remember that the heart of the relationship should be focused on the growth and development of the mentee, which may occasionally require the mentor to choose approaches to communication and problem solving differently than is natural to the mentee.

## MENTORING THE ENGAGED PROFESSIONAL

### MENTORING FOR BEST PRACTICES AND NEXT PRACTICES

Seasoned career services professionals are likely to be well-positioned to provide mentees with perspectives that go beyond the local office in which the mentee works. The field has gone through large-scale philosophical transitions and the baseline services of today differ from what came before. Mentors should be able to help their mentees understand the developments of the past and today so mentees understand best practices related to counseling, coaching, programming, technology, employer relations, and other important aspects of current practice.

Although there are advantages to having deep insight into traditional approaches in career services, it is increasingly important for all career services professionals to be aware of the trajectory of the profession. This can be a challenge for both seasoned and emerging professionals. The great challenge of many (in all professions) is to take the advice given to hockey great Wayne Gretzky by his father: “Go to where the puck is going, not where

it has been” (Rosenfeld, 2000). In this regard, the mentor has the opportunity to help the mentee see that their “newness” can be an advantage in that they bring fresh perspective and fewer anchors to the traditions of the field.

Mentors can help new professionals learn the core competencies and perspectives of the field. They are also positioned to critically analyze those same core competencies. Mentors can encourage flexibility, adaptability, and nimble thinking in new professionals to help them identify “next practices” and help lead the profession forward.

### MENTORING FOR PLANNING

When new professionals join a career services unit, they are often surprised to find the volume and variety of demands in the role. Depending on the structure of the unit and their specific position within, new professionals are likely to find themselves attempting to balance the one-on-one counseling requirements of the role with the

need to provide programs and services for groups. In order to achieve balance, good planning is required. The mentor, with the insights gained through experience, is in a position to assist the new professional in this regard.

Of course, planning will take place in the context of the center in which they work and will be influenced by the nature of the mentor's role. Mentors can coach mentees based on their own experiences of how advance planning can assist with finding balance. But, more importantly, the mentor can help the new professional explore what approaches to organization and project management work best for them. Ultimately, new professionals need to understand how their strengths, preferences, and styles will impact their approach to planning and delivery in balancing the many hats worn by the modern career counselor.

#### MENTORING FOR BALANCE AND PREFERENCES

Consider the following scenario:

*A new professional named Kelly was generally known as a likable, social individual when she was first hired. Everyone on the team liked her. She bonded with the new team quickly after being hired and participated regularly in the end-of-day conversations that happened near the water cooler. But, six months into her tenure with the office, she began to decline offers to go to lunch with other members of the staff. Although she spoke with others in the office upon arrival, at the end of each day, she typically moved quickly for the back door without speaking to other team members. Kelly still likes her job and colleagues. But, after full days of one-on-one meetings with students, she finds she just doesn't have the energy to go out to lunch or spend time socializing at the end of the day.*

The mentor to this hypothetical new professional has an opportunity to explore this change in behavior. There may be a number of reasons this change has occurred, but it is at least somewhat likely that the Kelly of this story has a preference for introversion and is struggling to balance the energy she is giving to her students throughout the day and her own need to recharge during lunch hours and at the conclusion of the day. A mentor would provide the opportunity for the new professional to explore factors such as personality type, communication style, and other issues that may be at play.

New professionals may experience a number of transitional work-life balance issues related to their new roles. Mentors can provide a sounding board, new perspectives, and personal anecdotes to help mentees explore balance issues and develop strategies to manage the busiest times and the competing demands of professional life and personal life.

Additionally, new professionals may be learning to work within a team that contains personality and work styles that differ from their own. Any professional joining a new team must learn to operate within an existing culture while maintaining personal preferences, but the new professional may not immediately or intuitively know how to navigate such differences. The mentor can normalize the challenges and provide opportunities to explore and examine these differences in a safe setting.

# TECHNIQUES FOR MENTORS

## QUESTIONS

Asking questions is a valuable part of any mentoring relationship and can serve a variety of functions in the mentor-mentee relationship. Strachan (2007, p. 3) notes that questions work “when they contribute to the purpose and objectives of a process.” For new professionals in the field of career services, asking good questions serves not only to help explore issues and perspectives, but also as a role model for questioning techniques that can be used with student and alumni clients. Although context and individual preferences are incredibly important in deciding what questions will be effective, the list below will provide the new mentor with a good starting point:

.....  
 What are your goals for our relationship?  
 .....

In what areas do you need the most help?  
 .....

What did you learn from this (experience, situation, person)?  
 .....

What barriers are you experiencing?  
 .....

How are you getting connected to others in the profession?  
 .....

Have you noticed any patterns in how you approach professional situations?  
 .....

What has been unexpected in your experience so far?  
 .....

Describe what has excited you most in this role.  
 .....

What does success look like for you?  
 .....

What steps are you taking to learn the current trends in the field?  
 .....

In what ways are you planning to connect with professional associations?  
 .....

## ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening involves listening for total meaning, which includes both the content and the emotional context that surrounds the content (Rogers & Farson, 1987). Mentors should employ active listening as a means of support and a tool to allow for the mentee to explore issues at a

deep level. “Listening brings about changes in peoples’ attitudes toward themselves and others; it also brings about changes in their basic values and personal philosophy. People who have been listened to in this new and special way become more emotionally mature, more open to their experiences, less defensive, more democratic, and less authoritarian” (Rogers and Farson, 1987, p. 1).

## ROLE MODELING

As the trust between mentor and mentee develops, it is natural that the mentee will use the mentor as a role model for behavior, whether consciously or unconsciously. As such, behaviors—both good and bad—can be passed to the newer professional without explicit dialogue or instruction. It is possible for a mentor to verbalize all the “right” information to an emerging professional, yet still steer the individual poorly by role modeling problematic behaviors.

These can come in the form of interpersonal interactions, ethical decision making, microaggressions, general workplace etiquette, and more. For example, consider this scenario:

*A first meeting of a mentor, John, and a mentee, David, is taking place in John’s office. John holds a supervisory position in the career center, and this meeting is happening just a few days before a large-scale event is scheduled on campus. John inquires about how David is handling the demands of the peak period, and David reports being rattled by how many evening hours he is required to work. In an attempt to soothe David’s concerns, John tells a story about his first year in the office and provides several approaches to stress management he uses now. John indicates that each person in the office approaches busy times differently, such as how Sam will sometimes take long walks (even when there are students waiting). Realizing this is not good advice*

*for a new professional, he notes that Sam was actually reprimanded recently for those walks. John now realizes he has revealed private information and quickly changes the subject.*

In this interaction, John attempted to positively impact David’s stress level. But, in doing so, he actually role modeled office gossip and lack of confidentiality. Role modeling provides the mentor with an opportunity to critically analyze his or her own behaviors and improve on weaknesses that previously may not have been known. Intentional role modeling provides the opportunity for growth for both the mentor and the mentee.

**GIVING FEEDBACK**

Providing feedback to emerging professionals is essential, but can also be a challenging task for mentors. However, the mentee is likely to not only need the input, but welcome it. Using the coaching technique of asking permission is wise, but the dynamics of the mentor/mentee relationship should influence how and when feedback is provided. A key is for the mentor to use a supportive, growth-oriented perspective on the feedback being delivered and work to make it a conversation rather than a lecture.

**CLOSING THOUGHTS**

Serving as a mentor to a new professional can be incredibly rewarding. Mentors should treat the opportunity to help a next-generation professional as an honor and a duty to the field. The process of mentoring is instructional in nature, and a personalized experience will yield the best results.

Through appropriate techniques (active

Effective feedback is:

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**Specific** It is precise rather than general.

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**Factual** It details observations and information.

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**Descriptive** It focuses on what or how something is done, not why.

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**Clearly understood** It involves checking in and clarifying.

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**Timed to be most useful** It is closely tied to the action.

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**Sensitive** It is sincere in a desire to help.

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**Constructive** It focuses on controllable actions and outcomes.

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**Directed at behavior** It is not focused on assumed intent.

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Figure 2 adapted from “Giving Constructive Feedback” (n.d.).

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It is important to remember that constructive feedback is not criticism. The goal is not to tear down, but rather to develop and support personal growth. When feedback is given, the mentee should decide if he or she prefers to discuss alternative actions at that time, or if he or she would prefer to take time to reflect on the feedback and consider alternatives at a later time.

listening, good questioning, positive role modeling, and appropriate feedback), the emerging professional will grow to deliver best practices and develop next practices. Now more than ever, the field of career services needs engaged, forward-thinking professionals who are focused on student career development and meaningful professional experiences.

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