

# THE LOST ART OF INSPIRED MENTORING

*A guide to tapping collective expertise, heart and soul*

By Dan Holden

I arrived late to the gate on the mentoring train. I've been busy all of my life making a name for my business and myself. I've trained hard to know my customers and respond to what was in their best interests. Twenty-five years self-employed as an organizational consultant, I know with certainty that my success has come in large part because I am like my customers. My challenges, my blind spots and insecurities, my hopes and concerns are like theirs. I keep running into myself through them. An apparent blind spot we share is mentoring, or the absence of it.

---

**I have never been asked to help leaders learn how to develop a deeper bench in their businesses. I have yet to be invited to help others learn how to mentor.**

---

This mild epiphany occurred during an initial conversation with a very successful leader who heads up a large retail chain of stores. He was charismatic and

inspirational in our talk (he talked, I couldn't get in). I felt captivated by his exploits, his description of the current

challenges as well as by his hopes and plans for the future. He was boundless energy, as if a 1000 horsepower engine was exploding in a single cylinder. What was not to like? High energy and enthusiasm, a track record of success, a real super star!

Retention was a problem in his organization. It ran 40 %, which he thought was good compared to competitors. As our 90 minute session was approaching the end it occurred to me that little or no developmental learning was actually happening in this wonderful conversation. I felt that he was not really interested in my wisdom and expertise as much as he was seemingly committed to taking up the airtime with his own larger than life persona (which I enjoyed but, now, only partially). I decided

to step off the happy cliff face we were on:

“May I make a risky observation?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said, the entertainment ending suddenly.

“I am very good at what I do,” I offered, drawing upon as much of my refined arrogance as I could, “And yet it seems entirely possible that our time will end with you knowing nothing about what I offer. This wouldn’t matter at all if it were only me having this experience. But with the high cost of your retention problem I imagine there are others back at work having the same experience of you that I am: I enjoy you but leave feeling I have not been seen, heard or respected. My expertise has not been called for.”

After a short pause he whispered, “Thank you. Tears welled up in his eyes. “Others have tried to tell me what you just did. Where do I begin?”

At this point the real conversation we had both apparently come for began. During this exchange I realized how foreign the whole concept of mentoring was to me. Its absence during two decades of work with leaders was even more appalling.

Recruitment budgets are high in many organizations. We are very specific about what we seek in a candidate and our questions are aimed at finding that unique set of competencies, experience and desire that will work best in our culture.

**Once they arrive on the scene, however, the strongest pressure new people feel is often the pressure to conform to the prevailing culture. Fit it.**

There must be a better way! This is where mentors can be so effective. Cultures where talent development is a core value are vibrant, alive, and thriving cultures where people are encouraged to do their inevitable work: the work that aligns with and springs forth from their essential nature.

---

**Indicators of a need for a mentoring philosophy to build bench strength are around us each day.**

---

- A generation of senior leaders may retire around the same time and there is no recognizable knowledge transfer plan in place.
- Heroic, take charge managers are incented to, well, take charge and turn the corporate ship around. Cultural stories are told of their exploits. We don’t hear much about salt-of-the-earth types who are the rock upon which these heroes tread.
- There is little or no attention paid, beyond lip service, to developing people on performance appraisal systems, incentive plans, succession plans or the like. Individual achievement is primary; whatever comes in second is not visible from this high perch.

- Despite acknowledgment paid to diversity people are treated largely the same. People of color and those of different nationalities and sexual orientations are seen much like everyone else. Only slightly less than. No attention is paid to the reality that their experience of the organization is often radically different than those who lead from senior levels.

- You spend much of your time with those you know and there are not major lines of difference between you—age, level, race, gender, etc.

- When you with different others you spend more time telling, making statements and offering advice and opinions proportionately than inquiring into their particular reality.

- If there are formal mentoring programs they are run by HR and likely seen as an irrelevant paper chase by most everyone else. You can cover your tail with paper and there are no consequences.

- If you were to build a story board of key business processes where you work (i.e., new product development, key decision making process, capital expenditures, etc.) you would find heavy senior leader involvement near the end of the process, where decisions and resource allocation calls are made.

- You can see nothing wrong with the last indicator.

- You have been so completely consumed by business and work that you cannot recall the last time you were genuinely excited by a discovery you made while in conversation with another person.

Regrettably, I came up with this partial list of key indicators by examining my own life. We don't know what others down in the organization would contribute to this list. It would likely be much more cynical.

---

**Think about the best mentors you ever had? What was it about the way they interacted with you that left such an important imprint with you? Do these things!**

---

If you are at all like me mentors are best remembered as people of great, understated wisdom who:

- √ Listened extremely well to what I said and to what I left unsaid.

- √ Were very present when they were with me; I felt like I was the only focus of their attention.

- √ They were more interested in helping me discover for myself what I needed to learn than with demonstrating time and again how much they knew.

- √ Joined with me to discover for themselves how my experience was similar to and different than their own; they were students of life along with me, learning themselves as we went along.

- √ Made sure I was positioned to meet and work with other important people who might open doors for me in the future.

√ Their feedback was always focused on the future, i.e., what to do differently next time. I never felt they were picking a scab from something in the past and imprisoning me with an old pattern. They continued to see me, not an old concept of me.

√ They met me with sustained grace, compassion and genuine interest in me as a colleague and friend for reasons I will never understand. Their memory brings tears to my eyes as I write.

---

**A leader's path to vibrant, liberating mentoring.**

---

Fools like me value simplicity above most everything else, seeing in it a proven path to well being.

1. Don't start a mentoring program unless you've got a strange hunger for failure. Most mentoring programs fail in part because, a.) They are not sufficiently tied to business outcomes, b.) Would be mentors soon find they don't know what they're doing, c.) There is a surprisingly intimate relationship that can develop which requires courage, vulnerability and humor to navigate, d.) The real goals of mentoring and the benefit to both mentors and protégé' are not understood and, e.) There's simply too much other stuff to do.
2. Separate the life threatening technical knowledge you have that

must be taught from other non life threatening essentials that are the real focus of mentoring. If you are a neurosurgeon faculty in a surgical residency, or an engineer in a nuclear plant there are some things that are not negotiable. Strict and proven protocols must be followed. Teach your minions how to follow in these areas.

Understand, however, that the proverbial operating room is only a small part of the job. A capital investment decision is only one aspect of what's required to run a successful business. What are all the other areas required to be an extraordinary leader?

3. Choose one or two people who bring a lot to the business performance table. The best candidates are ones you secretly suspect are smarter and more resourceful than you or who can do some important things way better than you ever could. This will just have to be your secret for now. Meet with them and let them know what you've noticed about their work and/or about the way they carry themselves that stands out for you. Ask if they would be interested in periodically checking in with each other to see how work and the quality of work are progressing. "Inspired Mentoring", if you like. Marvelous mentoring sounds a little silly.

4. Inspired Mentoring begins with a different set of assumptions.

√ The purpose is not to secure the next promotion *but to discover the next step in the journey of authentic leadership, presence and impact.*

√ The mentor-protégé dynamic is a partnership. Both discover together what is required for the protégé to have his/her expertise seen, heard and recognized in the organization.

√ The best the mentor can do is share his/her experience and wisdom when faced with similar challenges. Because he is not the protégé he cannot tell the protégé what to do.

√ Inquiring into the protégé's experience, listening to how meaning is made of the experience and respecting the freedom to move forward in ways different than one's own is the hallmark of inspired mentoring.

5. The secret behind inspired mentoring: mentors get as much benefit as protégé.

---

**Mary Oliver, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet, tells a story of an old couple who had nothing except one another and their capacity to listen:**

---

...In Greece, a long time ago, an old couple opened their door

to two strangers who were, it soon appeared, not men at all,

but gods. It is my favorite story-- how the old couple had almost nothing to give

but their willingness to be attentive-- but for this alone the gods loved them

and blessed them-- when they rose out of their mortal bodies, like a million particles of water

from a fountain, the light swept into all the corners of the cottage,

and the old couple, shaken with understanding, bowed down-- but still they asked for nothing but the difficult life which they had already.

And the gods smiled, as they vanished, clapping their great wings...

(From Mockingbirds, Atlantic Monthly, 1994)

What if you could attract sacred attention by deciding to do nothing more with your protégé than to learn to be attentive and listen? What if this were enough?

**Agreeing or disagreeing are overrated. Giving advice, even more so.**

Of course the immediate problem is most of us regard ourselves already as good listeners. And we don't attract angels or gods, yet. What's the catch? We mostly

listen to see where we agree or disagree. Gods don't visit on that dime! There is much more going on in many conversations. Mentoring gives the mentor an opportunity to broaden and deepen the business conversation with little risk and much to gain.

---

**There are levels of dialogue with which mentors must gain competency to be able to grasp the full complexity of protégé experience.**

---

Dr. Kate Kirkham, Ph.D. of the BYU Marriott School of Business suggests there are levels in dialogue, each requiring more vulnerability and courage to enter. Real change tends to happen only as deeper levels are discovered in dialogue. Mentors must learn overtime how to build competency across these levels.

**Idea/opinion level.** This is where most business conversations happen and, alone, accounts for why so many meetings are boring and useless. We talk about what we think about things. Over time, we can often predict what others will say because they have said it so often before. They are tired of us, too.

Mentors may inquire at this level: "Why do you believe that? What informs your point of view on this issue?"

Did you consider other perspectives before deciding on this one?

Of the ideas you've put forth, which do you hold to be most important and why? What doubts do you have about your own position?"

Inquiring into the protégé mindset is a lost art, easily retrieved. Let your curiosity guide you and your intuition inform you.

**Behavioral observation level.** This level is often tasted during the annual performance evaluation conversation but holds much more promise when done throughout the year. Here, mentors make observations about behaviors that have been seen and heard. In doing so, we begin building awareness of one's own accountability for and contribution to both success and setbacks.

Inquiring about successful outcomes the protégé has experienced could begin with questions like these:

Tell me more about what happened, and about your strategy.

What was your role here? What did you do that played a part?

What new behaviors are you interested in experimenting with next time?

What does this instance say to you about how to proceed going forward?

Inquiring about less successful moments

allows for mentors to probe deeper:

What happened, as you see it?

What was your part of this? How did you contribute?

If you had it to do over, what shifts would you make in your approach? Why?

I faced a similar difficult moment myself. I learned something about myself that changed the way I handled things going forward:

**Feeling level.** Organizations are emotional places because people occupy them. Work, performance, transformation, collaboration and teamwork are emotional processes each; they only appear clean and pretty on a printed page. That our emotional life is as common as gravity and yet is disregarded as fact is strange to me. This important level of dialogue is the entranceway to the inner world of leaders where motivation, purpose and vision live as well as insecurities, doubts and fears and resistance to change.

This landscape is a reservoir of wisdom in people and systems beset by complexity, volatility and uncertainty. Although there are countless nuances to this rule—we are talking about human beings after all—mentors might experiment with the notion that when protégés feel excited by an achievement it is at least probable that they have struck something close to their essential nature, i.e., who they've come

into this life to be and what they've come here to do.

Likewise, when they are deeply upset, frustrated or worried about a set back or disappointment it is at least probable that they have struck against a deeply held limiting belief about themselves that they fear may be true. Concerns about performance, how they are viewed by important others, worries about whether or not they are seen as credible by others, respected for the expertise they bring may often signal a concern (which most of us share) that “I'm not \_\_\_\_\_ enough.” Fill in the blank with your favorite insecurity.

Robert Keagan, a Harvard University scholar, author and consultant has observed that many leaders seem to have two jobs: One they are paid to do and the other involving them running around most days goaded by unconscious fears, doubts and insecurities they try to conceal all the while making most tasks much more difficult than they might otherwise be...with greater self awareness.

Mentors do themselves and protégés a real service by learning how to build competency across these emotional landscapes. The good news is you don't have to go onto Oprah or have yourself a Dr. Phil moment in Conference room C. Nothing quite that grand is needed. You need to pay attention to what is and ask different questions.

When things are going well mentors might ask:

You seem to feel excited by this turn of events; what does this represent for you?

When conditions improved on your initiative, how were you feeling? You seemed especially proud by this development; is this true? Why?

This was quite a break through; are you feeling pleased? Are there other feelings you have? If so, what are they?

Where do you notice positive feelings residing in your being? Shoulders, arms, etc.

What is the most common thought you have that seems to give rise to positive feelings? Can you call this up yourself or must it be triggered by some external event?

When things are not going well...

What is most upsetting to you about this?

If this concern proved to be true, why would this be a problem for you?

You seem unusually tentative ...cautious...upset...angry...quiet (choose which is most relevant right now), what's going on? More specifically, what's going on within you?

What are you concerned this development says about or means about

you?

How can you test and see whether this is true or not?

Or simply acknowledge your own stories of how you respond when your own insecurities are triggered.

### **Judgment/assumption level.**

The assumptions we hold about ourselves and our capacity to work through the volatile times we face are disproportionately important. They are seldom neutral in charge; they either propel us forward towards what matters or keep us from realizing what's possible. They are frequently charged with emotion, which is why cultivating competency working with emotions is so important for mentor and protégé alike. Left unexamined, they largely account for why so many change initiatives (upward of 85%) fail to achieve their desired outcomes.

Mentors might practice asking questions like these when working with protégés:

When you're distressed like this, what basic thought keeps running through your mind?

What do you fear this might say about you or mean about you?

This event seems to trigger an old fear in you. Can you say more about this?



It's clear you're upset about this person or that circumstance. What concern about yourself does this trigger?

So when you have this thought, how does it impact you emotionally? What happens to the work you're doing? What is the impact on the team, your peers or other partners? How does it impact your ability, and willingness to consider other options?

You seem certain that this situation means this about you \_\_\_\_\_. Can you be absolutely certain? Are you open to an alternative perspective?

Perhaps this is an old thought, an outdated story you have about yourself. If you held it like this, instead of seeing it as some dark truth about you, what would the likely impact be?

When you are at your best, what set of assumptions do you tend to operate on? Can you call these up when needed?

---

**Teach people how to paint for themselves.**

---

Years ago I watched a documentary on one of my favorite painters, Georgia O'Keefe. It seemed she had been taking painting lessons from her teacher, whose name I cannot recall. She studied under his tutelage for many months. One day, as she walked to his studio for class it

occurred to her she would ultimately learn nothing more than to capture light, color and shading as her teacher saw these elements. What she realized in that moment was she wanted to paint what *she* saw, as *she* saw it. She turned around, never to set foot in a classroom studio again.

Most of us want the days we are in to matter. We want to know that what we do counts. Few of us awake wanting to be substandard, hopelessly below average. Inspired mentoring has everything to do with seeing, hearing and respecting others in ways that release their original greatness.

Mentors frequently discover that to be present and attentive to protégés requires they be more present and attentive to themselves. Assumptions we hold about the way things work are just that: assumptions. Our own cautions and insecurities are frequently exposed as we seek to offer wisdom to others. We are at times challenged by protégés when our view of the world differs significantly from theirs...and is equally unfounded. A new dialogue opens that allows us to move beyond our own small reactive strategies, controlling too much, acquiescing too much, critiquing too much. Mentoring happens naturally in the absence of these old habits of thought.

Examine for yourself the best, most exciting conferences, workshops or seminars you have attended. What do you remember, the instructor or the quality of

dialogue that opened up among those who were gathered? Mentoring simply means mutual learning and exchange.

The mystics say that nothing changes until we do. And everything changes when we do. Make it a point today and tomorrow to keep your eyes and heart open for latent talent around you. Given the drudgery that often passes for purposeful, soulful living in organizations today, exercising your eyes and heart this way might bring you more alive as well.

Those who wonder if anyone recognizes their innate wisdom and skill are hungry for someone like you to genuinely “see” them. Assume they routinely work to get their voices heard but occasionally it requires someone like you to call forth their treasure so sorely needed. And if they were to one day do the same thing we might very soon see a new kind of organization emerge, one where a soulful, purposeful culture allows people to thrive in the midst of a very complex, unpredictable world. We would have more trained eyes, minds and hearts focused on the issues at hand. Who knows? You might attract angels and gods to your office! Imagine having to explain that!

It starts with you and me. Today.

---

Dan Holden is President of Daniel Holden & Associates. He is an executive leadership coach and organizational

consultant with clients around the country. He is the author of *Lost Between Lives: Finding Your Light When the World Goes Dark*. He and much of his family live in Milwaukee.

[www.danielholdenassociates.com](http://www.danielholdenassociates.com)

[danholdenst13@gmail.com](mailto:danholdenst13@gmail.com)

{This article is provided with permission of the Institute of Industrial Engineers from the November-December 2014 issue of *Industrial Management*, Copyright©2014 Institute of Industrial Engineers. All rights reserved.}