

## Community Mentoring: A Tool for Successful Communities

### Abstract

Mentoring occurs in an ad hoc and largely invisible manner in communities. This mentoring happens through modeling, storytelling, and asking open-ended questions. If Extension specialists and agents were more conscious and intentional about teaching community members and leaders about community mentoring, we would also likely be more successful in resolving community problems and creating prosperous communities with strong economies.

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### Background

Mentoring is a great tool for helping people, especially through periods of growth and transitions (Barondess, 1995). The first story about mentoring occurs in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Ulysses leaves his infant son, Telemachus, in the care of his trusted advisor, Mentor, while he goes off to fight the Trojan war. Ulysses is gone for 20 years, leaving Mentor to raise Telemachus, with the capable assistance of the Goddess Athena, including his transition into adulthood (Barondess, 1995).

This story highlights many aspects of successful mentoring: a long-term relationship, trust, guiding through transition, and multiple mentors (Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes, & Garrett-Harris, 2006; Barondess, 1995). Clearly mentoring can be useful in a person's quest for excellence and success (Place & Bailey, 2010; Barondess, 1995). I argue it can similarly help a community be successful.

Most communities have organizations that provide formal mentoring to young people, employees, and professionals. Some examples of formal youth mentoring are Big Brothers Big Sisters, 4H clubs, etc. High-performing organizations provide formal mentoring for their new, minority, or high potential employees (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998; Barondess, 1995).

We also have informal mentoring in our community. Extended family members provide informal

mentoring to other family members. Other more ad hoc forms of informal mentoring are occurring, but they are more invisible. Research has found informal mentoring to be more successful than formal mentoring (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), and I believe informal mentoring that occurs in the community, which I call "community mentoring," is a powerful tool that could be even more powerful if a community were intentional in using it, especially if it became a part of the community's culture.

This past April I led a class exploring mentoring, including mentoring in the community. We were curious about how our community members mentor people outside of the more traditional programs. I had seen a few local leaders mentor community members, so I asked them to come and speak with us about this topic. Most of them behaved as community mentors without labeling it as such, so I had to spend a great deal of time describing what I had observed and wanted them to speak about. It was a learning experience for all of us.

## **Mentor by Modeling Behavior**

One of our speakers, a former state representative, told us that, unbeknownst to the other former state legislator who had come to speak with us, he had spent a great deal of time observing, reflecting upon, and ultimately incorporating aspects of the other legislator's argumentation techniques. Further, he disclosed that this had occurred 10 years ago and that his colleague had never known that he had observed and learned from him.

The lesson our class learned from this is that people may be observing and learning from what we are doing and saying; further, we may well never know it! Modeling is recognized as an element of organizational mentoring (Byington, 2010; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Barondess, 1995), and I argue it is also an element of community mentoring.

We are constantly modeling behavior. Community mentoring would mean intentionally modeling behavior that supports our community's vision and goals.

## **Mentor with a Simple Question**

Another example of mentoring in the community occurred at a local evening conference reception. I dropped by to network, bumped into a visiting colleague, and knew that I "should" go to dinner with him. But chatting with him during the reception had been awkward, and I dreaded another hour of awkward conversation.

As I got ready to leave the reception, I mentioned this to a respected colleague, who responded with a simple question, "Why don't you want to go to dinner with him?" I told him I dreaded the awkward conversation. As I left, I thought about his question and concluded that my colleague would NEVER avoid dinner with a client or colleague because he was worried about an hour of awkward conversation, and I shouldn't either. As a result of this simple question, I called my other colleague and went to dinner.

This story highlights the power of the open-ended question, something our class discovered was very important in mentoring overall. Here, it is difficult to know why this simple question worked so well; perhaps because it required me to articulate, and therefore listen to, my thoughts and proposed actions, further to compare them to what I projected onto my colleague. This simple story is also an

example of another key element of community mentoring: storytelling.

## Mentor Through Storytelling

Our class observed that story telling is a powerful tool in community mentoring. We saw examples of that in our class, and this is exemplified in this article. We learned most deeply the lessons that we learned through stories about people engaged in mentoring relationships and reflecting on how it applied to us (Mees, 2009).

### Summary

Our class concluded that community mentoring is most successful when the mentor:

- Is respected in the community
- Treats the mentee with respect
- Respects the mentee's decisions

Key behaviors we observed were:

- Modeling behavior for mentees
- Telling relevant stories
- Asking questions that help the mentee reflect and draw their own conclusions.

### Conclusion

Mentoring is a respected tradition in Extension (Byington, 2010; Place & Bailey, 2010; Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Extension specialists and agents often work with young people and community members who are learning and practicing new skills. This is the perfect opportunity to model behavior, use stories to mentor clients, and ask open-ended questions to help clients practice drawing their own conclusions. Arguably, Extension agents could also use these opportunities to talk about, model, and teach community mentoring skills, thus helping our communities develop a culture of mentoring.

If Extension agents and specialists, and community members, were more intentional about mentoring each other, if we consciously worked to develop a culture of community mentoring, we could significantly improve our ability to solve difficult community problems, develop our economy, and create a community with a bright future.

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