

Mentoring: A Flexible Relationship

By PA2 Judy Silverstein, Rescue 21 Project, Commandant's Leadership Advisory Council

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Historically, the word “mentor” has its origins in the Greek epic poem, “The Odyssey,” written by Homer. It describes a scene when Odysseus selected Mentor to serve as teacher, guide and wise counsel to his son, prior to his departure to fight in the Trojan War. In the Coast Guard, mentoring involves advocacy, guidance, support and listening skills.

“If you do not have a mentor, you’re doing yourself a disservice,” said Lt. Cdr. Adrian West, special assistant to the Commandant. “If you aren’t mentoring someone else, you are doing the Coast Guard a disservice.” Those words are critical as mentoring results in building strong leaders, an especially important focus for our multi-mission, maritime service.

“Studies show successful mentoring partnerships lead to two-way knowledge sharing coupled with personal and professional success for both the mentor and the mentee,” said Bridgette Brandhuber, mentoring program coordinator for the Coast Guard. “The relationship can be flexible, depending upon the needs, goals and objectives of the mentee.”

Mentoring and Retention

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Mentoring offers preservation of organizational culture as traditions and practices are shared. It also has a positive impact on recruitment and retention. One of many positive outcomes is the development of leadership skills. Difficult to define, mentorship and leadership seem intertwined.

“Mentorship comes from natural born leaders,” said Master Chief Ann Tubbs, quickly ticking off the names of seven who provided her guidance and advice as she rose up through the ranks. “The common thread was that they all saw the potential in me and provided the guidance I needed or was seeking.”



CARIBBEAN SEA -- Coast Guard Academy cadets from New London, Conn., and crew members of the Coast Guard Cutter Barque *Eagle* from New London heave around on lines to move the ship's sails. The crew of the *Eagle* mentors more than 600 cadets and officer candidates each year. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Donnie Brzuska, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

As a Machinery Technician in the 1980s, when female counterparts were hard to find, informal mentoring filled the gaps, said Tubbs, now serving as special assistant to the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard. Supporting her claim is a study from the Harvard Business School, stating 44 percent of CEOs list mentoring as a prime strategy for retention of female executives. Another proponent of mentoring is Petty Officer 3rd class, Wyatt Werneth, a reservist who drills at Station Port Canaveral in Florida.



CARIBBEAN SEA -- Coast Guard cadets are taught the basics of shipboard fire fighting while aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Eagle*. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Donnie Brzuska, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

“I have attached myself strongly to mentoring because I didn’t have the guidance and focus growing up,” he said. “I saw the implications of what mentoring can do for you and try to make myself available to anyone who needs it,” said Werneth, who serves as chief of the Brevard County Ocean Rescue in his civilian life. A critical ingredient for success is enjoying people, said Werneth, who also works as a personal trainer.

Petty Officer 2nd class, Josh Mitcheltree concurs. He knows that mentoring is a vital skill in the world of rescue swimming. “I’m blessed because there are so many people I look up to that have been there for me,” said Mitcheltree, an Air Medal recipient for his work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Mitcheltree tells the story of someone who ensured he was physically and mentally ready for “A” school, even advising him to wait an extra two months until a subsequent class started. The waiting period allowed Mitcheltree to develop stronger muscles and improve his fin work, thus ensuring he was set up for success — and graduation — the first time through the challenging

school. Many of the lessons taught by his mentor are ones Mitcheltree now uses when he works with new recruits. Listing traits such as honest feedback, investment of time and genuine concern as the virtues of his mentor, he noted the two still keep in contact. While these examples help describe specific mentors but the structure of the mentee-mentor relationship is worth examination.

"Casual" Mentoring

In the business world, much has been written about structuring a mentoring program. However, many find a more informal relationship works best during their Coast Guard careers. It may be as casual as seeking advice about specific tasks, critical decision-making or obtaining information not readily available or understandable. In the case of an aviation survival technician, discussing rescue equipment modifications might spark a conversation between senior and junior personnel. According to West, his list of mentors ranging in age, gender and rank — provide him with information on a variety of issues

and philosophies. However the relationship is structured, mentoring is a dynamic and flexible partnership that matures and evolves when nurtured.

“We highly encourage informal mentoring relationships,” said Brandhuber. “However, because of the nature of this service, you may find yourself in a remote area where it is impossible to find an appropriate mentor match. In this case, we want you to look to our Web-based mentoring program,” she said.

That program, along with a step-by-step guide to becoming a mentee or mentor can be found by logging on to: www.uscg.mil/leadership/mentoring.htm.

This article addresses the following leadership competencies: “Self Awareness and Learning,” “Technical Proficiency,” “Effective Communications,” “Influencing Others,” “Taking Care of People” and “Mentoring.”

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