

Venturing Your Concept

Staff development 9

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Have you ever worked with a master mentor? Few of us have. I do not claim to be such a master, so hold on—what I think I know about mentoring came only after long experience and reflection. I had many mentors along the line, including Danny Field, a Paiute miner, who taught me a thing or two about welding. Staff development for a start-up begins with mentoring. But as a start-up grows, the emphasis naturally shifts toward group development.

Venturing requires the works of many hands and heads. Much people-work must be done before we can bring our venture into being. Mentoring and group training are desirable long-term activities.

Many positions, such as marketing and accounting, are best filled with ready-made pros. But since we are bootstrapping our venture, we need to save every penny we can. One way to do that is to grow our own operating and professional staffs—by the time they reach professional level competence, we should be able to afford the salaries their competencies command. College students working part-time are one convenient source, and some stay on—my experience with several protégés.

Given the complexity of responses each person has to situations, it is not possible that everyone in any shop will be harmonious. So we must be flexible in our approach. But generally, nearly everyone can learn the basics of effective communication. Mentoring is a most useful one-on-one technique. Dialogue and role-playing work well for groups. Because many of us have hang-ups that get in the way to some degree, mentoring and dialogue do not just naturally happen.

How We Develop Hang-ups (Defenses).

Hang-ups are the main reasons for dysfunctional mentoring and group activities. If we can understand how hang-ups develop, and how to recognize them, we are better able to work with both individuals and groups.

Our first years on earth are new and exciting. Yet for many of us, those years had their dark sides. Perhaps a bully at school made our lives miserable. Perhaps we had to deal with an erratic but demanding parent, teacher, or sibling we could never satisfy.

Perhaps we developed coping mechanisms that saw us through the tough times. But after a while, as the stressful events continued, our coping methods went on autopilot—we no longer had to think about it. Our autopilot protected our physical and emotional beings. What began as a healthy coping ability may have become habitual, below our level of awareness. In this way we develop one or more hang-up(s).

In later life, with the “danger” long passed, our habitual behavior may persist, but is now ineffective or even dysfunctional. A response we learned, to get along with the bully in school, may be completely inappropriate when trying to get along with a supervisor with a strong personality. The worst of it is this: *we are not even aware of the defenses we bring to interactions with others*—and neither is anyone else, boss included. It is hard to see our own hang-ups.

The following table gives a partial listing of some common hang-ups (defensive responses) and consequences.

| Hang-up | Possible Consequence |
|--|---|
| A person cannot face and denies a particular fact or belief. | Irrational decisions made without considering all the information. |
| A person directs or displaces an emotional response inappropriately toward someone having nothing to do with the triggering event. | The primary issue remains unresolved while the innocent target gets angry. |
| A person is totally intellectual and rational, acts as if he/she has no emotions. | Seemingly cold detachment alienates others and the rational person needs to recognize emotions. |
| A person attributes or projects his/her own traits or motives to others in spite of evidence to the contrary. | That person has no insight into self or others—and is handicapped in personal growth and mentoring. |
| A person finds “acceptable reasons” to justify his/her behavior. | That person never faces his/her real deep hidden feelings—and relates in a “fantasy world.” |
| A person depends too much on others for decision making, has temper tantrums, or pouts. | Childish behavior reigns in an adult world. |
| A person appears not to feel any pain when most people would, and seems to have an “I don’t care” attitude. | There is neither joy nor sadness—just flatness; unlikely to motivate others. |

Interacting Productively

Given the variety of ways in which people respond, how do you proceed with individual staff development? I have found the following to be effective:

First, *respect the personhood of others at all times*. This is fundamental, and is as important as being open and honest. It helps develop and maintain trust and respect. Creating a state of mutual empathy is the goal.

Second, *look at yourself*. If we think we might tend to behave defensively or if someone else says we do, we should examine why. Remember, hang-ups may have started with successful coping—an ability we can each be proud of. Most people at one time or another will employ one or more of these mechanisms.

Third, *be whatever you really are* openly. Own up to your mistakes. Build such an atmosphere that the defense is totally unnecessary for you or for your employees. By openly admitting your own mistakes, you let every employee know that that is the way everyone must handle errors.

Fourth, *be persistent*. If something the other person says or does doesn't fit reality, restate the reality—they may realize their responses are inappropriate. Be patient and compliment progress. Hang-ups are years aborning and do not go away easily.

Fifth—if necessary to keep an otherwise good employee who cannot get along, for example—*make professional help available in an unobtrusive way*. Make sure that your service-provider has sufficient protection for client privacy.

Mentoring.

Basically, a mentor is a wise, loyal advisor and coach while a protégé is the receiver. My experience has been that in the best mentor / protégé relationships, each person ideally plays both roles.

If one word can capture the essence of healthy relationships, it is empathy. Empathy is actually feeling the other person's emotions *with* them. Personality and character each play a role. Personality in my context means a person's operative disposition while character means moral constitution and self-discipline. Each is embedded in our genes at birth and modified by our environment thereafter.

If you do not have the traits—openness, candor, honesty, teaching skill, ability to facilitate, and empathy—to be an effective mentor, you might do well to find someone who does and get them involved in your venture.

Group Development.

Dialogue

The levels of communication are: argument (emotions prevail), debate (most logical case wins), dialectic (seeking compromise) and dialogue (search for truth). Staff development is facilitated most effectively when everyone employs dialogue regularly and thoughtfully.

Dialogue is an interchange of ideas and a search for understanding of ourselves and of one other. It is how we polish our communication techniques to open the doors to everyone's ideas. Techniques of dialogue can be learned and that is a lot easier once hang-ups are out of the way.

Dialogue for the group is at least as important as mentoring is for the individual, and I strongly recommend further reading. An excellent place to start is *Dialogue and The Art of Thinking Together* by William Issacs. This book is full of gems. His introduction to listening is just one example; it follows:

"The heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen. Listening requires we not only hear the words, but also embrace, accept, and gradually let go of our own inner clamoring. As we explore it, we discover that listening is an expansive activity. It gives us a way to perceive more directly the ways we participate in the world around us... This means listening not only to others but also to ourselves and our reactions."

Issacs points out that while we may work hard in preparing to speak, we do not work equally hard in preparing to listen.

The listening element of dialogue cannot be overemphasized. Dialogue is the art of relaxing our hang-ups to the point where we hear eagerly and naturally think of extensions to what others are saying. We can then reply thoughtfully instead of defensively in search for truth.

Michael Brannigan: *Dialogue: The First Step in Philosophy* has this to say:

The truth emerges through a sincere, authentic transaction of ideas in which the participants possess intellectual integrity.

Where opinions are examined logically and openly via mutual questions and answers, we collect the best thinking of everyone. This can have profound effects on decision-making and on morale as well. Participants feel an ownership of the decision taken. Group cohesion is enhanced.

What dialogue is, is one thing, what underlies it something else. Here, Kris Rosenberg: *Talk to Me*: has insight to offer:

Only when we fully realize our extraordinary ability to provide the ultimate sense of belonging can we find the confidence to open up real and basic emotional communication.

What we are and how we feel about one another is what really counts.

Role Playing

Role-playing is an effective method for becoming aware and dealing with dysfunctional communication. It is effective for both groups and individuals in mentoring relationships. Empathy and dialogue are the key words. Emotional and intellectual openness are both facilitative for all participants. Have several individuals act out various hang-ups while interacting with one another—then discuss results. You know you are there when people begin to laugh as they recognize their *own* hang-ups.

Other techniques for staff development

1. To gain insight into the effectiveness of dialogue, divide your group into small teams. Give each team the same problem, one that is tough enough to require real thinking for resolution. Have each team use a different level of communication and allow all the time needed. Compare results with the method used.
2. Social activities and events enhance staff interactions and pride in the venture. The venture takes on some positive attributes of family.
3. Consultants can provide new perspectives—good consultants become part of the team—if you choose them carefully. Look for the consultant who asks endless questions, draws answers out of you, and identifies with you. They are the facilitators of creative solutions or new directions.
4. Training by in-house experts is also well worthwhile, especially with group-wide activities such as new software all personnel will be using.

Developing staff is one of the most rewarding experiences a person can have. And one of the most important too. It is excellent practice to nurture an attitude of life-long learning on the part of everyone. Few experiences are more exhilarating than an “Aha.” *Life long learners live for new insights.*

We are ready now to discuss venture organization and governance—our subject for the next chapter.

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