

Editorial | Six Years of Experience in Three Years

By Corey M. Matsuoka, P.E., Chair CASE Executive Committee



Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have a number of great mentors that have provided me with excellent advice and meaningful opportunities. It started right after entering the workforce as I remember my first boss telling me, “It is great working here, you work three years and get six years’ experience.” Looking back, I realize that he did not mean he would be a great mentor for me, but that he literally meant we would be working 80 hours a week.

In all seriousness though, I did greatly benefit from the mentorship and guidance I received. An effective mentor can build confidence, enhance performance, refine leadership skills, and expand the networks of their mentee. The mentors I had acted as a sounding board, drawing on their experience to offer guidance, a fresh perspective, and insights that I used to navigate my career (and sometimes life) challenges. I definitely would not be in the position I am today without their help.

So the natural question is... How does one take advantage of this?

If you are in a leadership position, then it is your responsibility to develop the leaders of the future. When creating a program, the most important thing to note is that the mentor and mentee need to **develop a personal relationship**. Mentorship cannot be forced. All too often, mentor programs fail because management simply assigns a mentor to a mentee and hopes for the best. For real mentorship to succeed, a personal relationship has to be developed between the mentor and mentee where the mentor genuinely cares for the development of the mentee. According to research conducted by Belle Rose Ragins, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and an expert in the field of mentoring, unless mentees have a basic relationship with their mentors, there is no discernable difference between mentees and those not mentored. Let me say that again... Without a relationship, a mentoring expert could find no discernable difference between people who have been mentored and those who have not.

What this says is that it is essential to find the right fit between mentors and mentees. If starting a formal program, I would recommend allowing the mentors and mentees to match up with each other on their own. This method allows for the best chance of developing that personal relationship.

Once the partnerships are made, the real work begins. Many times, the mentorships can grow and succeed on their own. To make sure this happens, having goals and action plans are

always a good idea. The action plans serve two purposes. First, it brings a focus and clarity that helps get the mentorship off to a good start. Second, it adds accountability to enhance the chances of progress. As time goes by, establish checkpoints where mentees report on their projects and discuss any challenges they are facing. These checkpoints are great opportunities to ensure movement and realignment if required.

If you are looking for a mentor, **don't be afraid to seek one out**. Mentors are not going to go out of their way to share their experiences with others if there is not some level of initiative by the other party. Don't be afraid to ask questions and seek advice from

those you admire. At the same time, do whatever you can to get noticed. It should not come as a surprise that management takes better care of those they view as superstars and future leaders. My opportunity came a few years into my career when we had trouble in our Saipan office, and a few of us were called

into our Manager's office. He explained that we had to let go of our engineer there, and asked which one of us was willing to go to take his place. Next thing I know, I am headed home to pack and the next day was on a plane to Saipan for three months. I did not even know where Saipan was!

What I also did not know at the time, but do know now, is that I made myself known to management by volunteering and they began to go out of their way to look for opportunities for me. In Saipan, they started to teach me about project management and guided me through the details of client service. Being a small office, I also got to eat and participate in conversations with the 'old guys.' I soaked up and listened to what they were saying, trying to absorb as much knowledge as I could. When I came back home, the firm allowed me to manage my own projects and my own design group soon after.

If there's no Saipan trip to volunteer for, there are also a myriad of opportunities outside of your firm to find mentors; you just have to look. For me, those opportunities came by volunteering for leadership positions in organizations such as CASE, SEI, and NCSEA. Within those types of organizations, there are always past presidents and others that are willing to pass on leadership lessons that they have learned along the way. Find a way onto their committees and boards, then ask as many questions as you can. Most will be more than happy to share their knowledge.

So whether you are interested in mentoring the leaders of the future or seeking out a mentor of your own, just remember there are much better ways to get six years of experience in three years than by working 80 hours a week. ■



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