

Renovate Your Mentoring Program:

Add flexibility and engaging tools to strengthen connections and impact.

This document outlines a simple framework you can overlay on any existing mentoring program, or use it to launch a new one. The approach is grounded in **nonformal learning theory**, bridging formal and informal teaching. It provides 14 simple, but highly engaging tools (“conversation-starters”) mentors can use with no training.

There are a total of 40 conversations-starters available from “*The Encouraging Mentor*” (Westbow Press, 2024). **Free** non-commercial use permitted. Visit: encouragingmentor.com

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Mentor Program Renovation: *Introduction*

Regardless of your sector—nonprofit, government, business, higher education—research literature and popular press articles tell us most mentoring programs need a make-over. In March 2025, the Chronicle of Higher Education posted an article outlining why “*Faculty Mentoring Needs a Makeover.*” In April, a national faculty development center (<https://www.ncfdd.org/>) and Harvard’s COACHE published a 35-page guide, “*Redefining Mentoring in Higher Education.*” In brief, these (and numerous articles in nonprofit and business literature) say most *formal* mentoring programs are not working well, and that *informal* mentoring impact is unsubstantiated.

These articles suggest: **1.)** shifting the focus from mentor to mentee, **2.)** emphasizing humility and listening (versus mentor as “advisor”), **3.)** adding flexibility.

These recommendations mirror the approach to the “*nonformal mentoring*” construct I outlined in 2022 based on *nonformal teaching* and adult learning theory. My framework also included **4.)** providing easy-to-use tools for mentors, and **5.)** encouraging topic choice to meet mentees where they are. I subsequently assembled *The Encouraging Mentor* book with “40 conversations”—mentoring tools anyone could use with no training—based on my teaching, research, and practice at Ohio State. The tools provide simple step-by-step outlines on how to mentor others. They are now in use nationwide, and evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive.

The Nonformal Construct Explained

One of the most important things an organization can do is encourage its employees (or volunteers). Mentoring is a huge show of faith (and an investment) in your most valuable resources: people. But as noted, sometimes *formal* mentoring programs feel forced, or disingenuous. Pairings might be awkward. Evaluations are often less than stellar. Conversely, *informal* mentoring often boils down to casual coffee or lunch, but rarely incorporates goal-setting or evaluation components. Informal mentoring can also perpetuate inequity in who actually gets mentored. The informal mentoring experiment often results in little-to-no substantial advancement in either personal or professional growth. Effectiveness is anecdotal at best.

Is there an alternative? Yes. → Nonformal mentoring.

Nonformal mentoring is grounded in adult learning theory and nonformal teaching practice (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). It also draws upon established methodologies in adult development and transformation (Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 2000) and adult learning literature (Knowles, 1968, 1980, 1984). It includes a component of motivation theory as applied to education (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) as well.

Adults want to be involved and have some level of control in what, when, and how they learn (Knowles, 1995). They also like to solve problems using reasoning skills gained from life experiences (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2014). When we add application and analysis, i.e., explicitly sharing *how* they can apply information in relevant areas of their own lives (Bloom, 1956), the lessons (mentoring conversations) become remarkably powerful.

The key idea to renovating your mentoring program is to ground it in nonformal education and adult learning. This will allow the shift to an engaging, *nonformal* framework. Here are my main strategies:

1. **Be flexible:** Remove rigid guidelines of formal, prescriptive programming.
2. **Topic choice:** Allow (and encourage) self-direction and choice of topics to meet interests and time-based needs. This shifts the focus from mentor to mentee.
3. **Multiple mentor model:** Allow the freedom to organically engage with varying mentors based on current interests and needs of the mentee.
4. **Matching:** You may start by aligning matching criteria such as personal and professional interests, demographics, and values. Use these for the primary mentor, but encourage multiple pairings.
5. **Diverse pairings:** Create (and encourage) mentor pairs (secondary mentors) that have *dissimilar* backgrounds. Factors may include differing age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, or ability. This provides opportunity for learning, discovery, and growth by both mentee and mentor.
6. **Provide tools:** Brief outlines (e.g., “40 conversations” that do not require training) allow mentors to approach their task with humility and listening (versus trying to be an “advisor”).

The last item (tools) is critical. You may already have a set of great questions or curriculum guides for your mentoring program. If so, use them. But rewrite them to be one page or less to make mentor preparation easy, and to allow mentee choice in topics.

These flexibilities will transform your mentoring program, fundamentally shifting the historic approach of an overly-structured formal system. The nonformal adoption will lead to better engagement and positive impacts in the work and personal lives of both mentee and mentor.

Launching this 32-page resource:

Use these conversation-starters to improve your existing mentor/mentee pairings, or use it to launch a new or renovated 12-month program. Remember to give participants permission to be flexible, and shift conversations / topics to meet timely interests or needs that may arise. Agency and control are key components.

Invite people to pair up organically (or use your existing pairing process). Encourage them to try a conversation. If it works, continue. If not, shift and try a different topic, or connect with a different mentor. Each person brings knowledge and experience and culture and concepts that others do not have. That’s part of the beauty of nonformal mentoring.

I suggest printing each conversation as a handout for both mentor and mentee. Use it to guide the conversation. It’s literally that simple. I hope you’ll give it a try.

The Free License: *No attorneys. No contracts. Simple trust.*

These materials are available at no cost for nonprofit, government, and educational organizations. (This does not include for-profit education.) You may rebrand materials for your institution if you acknowledge the source (standard citation) on each page. It's that simple.

Then, let us know about your use of the materials. We want to ask your ideas for improvement. We want to make these materials better, add new topics, and ultimately meet the needs of organizations and people who are doing this important work in mentoring.

Thank you.

The 14 Conversations: *1 year of nonformal mentoring*

1. Who Are You? The Launch Conversation
2. The Being Remembered Question
3. Five Things to Have, Do, Help, and Be
4. Your Personal Mission
5. Leveraging Gratitude
6. From Why? to What?
7. What Motivates You?
8. Handling Critics and Criticism
9. Financial Health: Two Keys for Success
10. Hidden Diversity
11. Seek Diverse Relationships
12. Perspective Shifting

Bonus Conversation: Leading with Humility

Bonus Conversation: Spirituality & Faith Traditions: Honoring Diverse Perspectives

Conversation 1: ***Who Are You? (The Launch Conversation)***



Background: As noted, this journal extracted question prompts from a companion book, *The Encouraging Mentor*. If you are completing this journal with a mentor, your entries will reflect talking with another person. But if you are using this resource on your own for personal and professional development, you can *still* ask yourself these questions. (I modified some of them slightly, so they make sense either way.) In completing this journal, you are engaging in self-reflection and metacognition—thinking about how you think. These are invaluable exercises. Let’s begin.

Question 1

If you were meeting someone for the first time, what would you want them to know about you?

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Once you have thought about the basics, take the time to follow trails of your interests. *Be curious*. Let me repeat that one: *On your own or with a mentor, be curious*. Ask yourself why you wrote some of the items above. Then proceed to the next question.

Question 2

What are your goals for this time invested in personal and professional growth?

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On the surface, the question above sounds heavy duty, but don’t let it weigh down your thinking too much. The idea for today is to just get started. Goals will shift and change over time. That’s okay, and it is a natural occurrence. So no worries there. For today, simply name one or two ideas that come to mind about what you want to achieve during this journey.

If you need a prompt, some examples might include gaining insight and wisdom on your career, or reflecting and finding new approaches for life issues.

Prompting Questions

If you stall on the questions above, here are a couple of additional prompts that may help. Regardless, jot down a few ideas below.

What are one or two favorite memories from your childhood?

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The question above is reflective. By using the qualifier “favorite,” it aims to start an appreciative inquiry in your brain. Imagine how you might let favorite memories help direct a positive path forward. That idea might be furthered by considering the next question.

What do you hope the future holds for you?

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The question above is broad by design at this early stage. After jotting a few ideas, consider what else you’d share if a mentor said, “Tell me more.”

Summary: Remember these introductory prompts are to jump-start your thinking about the foundations of your life *so far*. From here, you will begin diving into questions that will challenge you to go deeper, considering possibility and potential. Investing time to reflect starts you on a path that will help you clarify your purpose, advance your career, and identify potential to create the future you want.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I’m still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 2:

The Being-Remembered Conversation



Background: *How do you want to be remembered?* This is a rephrase of the classic Steven Covey question from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It is one of the most powerful questions one can ever ponder. (Note: Versions of it will show up in the *Bucket List* and *Personal Mission* conversations later in this book. This is intentional.) Throughout recorded history, people have pondered the question of life’s purpose.

Look at the question below. Spend some time with it. It is a definite brain engager because we are often too busy to pause and reflect in this way. So for most, the question will linger for a while.

What do you want people to say about you when you’re gone from this earth? (That is, how do you want to be remembered?)

Jot down a few phrases or ideas.

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Let these ideas ruminate a bit. If able, go outside or take a walk or roll. Be curious about what you’ve written. Consider questions that might come to mind, including, “*What else?*” You may even let your responses sit for a week. But then, go deeper. Think about how to boil it down to the basics:

Look at your responses above. Are there some items you could group together or summarize? Jot down a few summary ideas.

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Challenge:

Can you boil this down to one or two words? _____, _____

Homework: Return to this after completing Conversation 6, the *Personal Mission* challenge. Compare your responses. Chat with a mentor or good friend about this reflection.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I’m still pondering (and may seek more information on): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 3:

Five Things to Have, Do, Help, and Be



Background: Everyone—every company, every non-profit, etc.—has two options for the future. There is the one that *will* be if we do nothing (continue the status quo) or the one that *could* be if we work to achieve it (plan and act to reach desired ends, goals, dreams, mission). Peter Drucker said it best: “The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

At a very early age, most people are asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We often prompt young minds with examples: “Do you want to be a firefighter? A teacher? A farmer?”

But what if there is a more important question: “Who do you want to become?” This is qualitatively different. This is perhaps the best question to ask to prompt future thinking, focus, and goal setting.

Read over the chart below. Then fill in each box with some ideas.

What are five things you want...

<p>...to have: (These can be tangible or intangible.)</p>	<p>...to do: (This is about <i>what</i> you might do: jobs, careers, things for fun, bucket list items, etc.)</p>
<p>...to help: (These can be big and small. Think broadly.)</p>	<p>...to be: (Not <i>what</i> you might do, but <i>who</i> you might become.)</p>

Analysis: Look at your responses. Will the things you want to do move you in the direction of things you want to have and to help? If not, add some actions to the to-do list, then prioritize. But remember, you cannot do everything. A prioritization strategy is to put some broad target dates next to your to-do items (e.g., within five years).

Challenge: The “to be” category will reflect how people remember you, now or when you’re gone. Consider two action items that will help you accomplish *who* you want to be and *how* you want to be remembered. These may be short or long-term actions. Jot these down.

- 1.
- 2.

Homework: Carry this around, think, reflect, and update it over the next few weeks. You might discuss insights with your mentor, a trusted friend, or a family member.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I’m still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 6: **Your Personal Mission**



Purpose: A personal mission is a statement about your *why*. This is what drives you to get out of bed in the morning. It describes what you believe is most important in life, what you wish to focus on, and what you want to be known for. If you allow it to direct your thoughts and actions each day, it has the *potential* to direct your life and achieve the future you want.

I often tell my students to consider holding on to this paper. When one finds themselves applying for a promotion or future job, having (*and referencing*) a personal mission can help them stand out from other candidates. Many graduate school applications request a personal philosophy and/or mission statement as well. This can be an excellent start.

Four Steps to Your Personal Mission:

1. Think about your Core Beliefs and Values. Write down three or four key words or phrases under each of the following.

Core beliefs: What are some key things you believe?

Core values: What are some key things you value?

Overall, what really matters in life? What's most important?

2. Hopes, Dreams, Desires, Goals: Think about your hopes, dreams, desires, and goals. Write these based on current circumstances. Jot down two or three items under each category. These can be whatever comes into your mind. These are not commitments but *possibilities*.

Personal:

School/Career:

Community/World:

Family/Friends:

Spiritual:

3. Leaving a Legacy: These questions are to help focus your long-term thinking.

How would you like to be remembered? What one thing do you want people to say about you (now or after you're gone)? [Do not look back at your answer from Conversation 2 until you write your thoughts here. Then, look back and compare.]

What have you contributed to the world during your life so far? What do you dream of contributing in the future?

What steps can you begin to take to achieve your desired contributions, hopes, dreams, and goals?

4. Drafting Personal Mission Statement:

Review everything you've written so far. Circle or underline any words that stand out in your mind.

Using key words and ideas from above, write your mission. Don't worry about getting it perfect. Just get down the basics. Refine it later. It will evolve over time. You could begin with: *My mission in life is to...*

You in Two Words:

You now have a draft mission. Try to quantify what it says in just two words. What are the two most important words that could define you?

1. _____ 2. _____

The signature line below is meaningful. It conveys the seriousness of missional living. Sign your name. Then live it.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Homework: Do your friends, coworkers, and family members know these things about you? How might you begin to let others see and understand what is most important in your life? How might you share this newly written mission with others? Jot ideas down. Then do them.

Conversation 7: Leveraging Gratitude



Background: The science of gratitude has expanded greatly in the past twenty years. Studies increasingly show that regularly practicing gratitude contributes to better relationships, decreased anxiety, and increased internal satisfaction. These bolster what Daniel Goleman labels emotional and social intelligence, key items for success in our careers and lives.

When we pause to focus on things we're grateful for, we shift our thinking from negative to positive. This can energize and reinvigorate us even on a bad day.

What are you grateful for? Jot a few items.

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The Challenge: Could you increase your practice of gratitude? This may sound simple, but if you write down three things you are grateful for each day for twenty-one days, former Harvard researcher, Shawn Achor, says you will train your brain to look at the world differently. Once the habit is formed, you will start scanning the world for positives instead of threats. It's a game changer.

Researcher Robert Emmons, likewise, said that even though we do not have total control over our emotions, "being grateful is a choice that can sustain us through the ups and downs of our lives." When we become more grateful, we are more stress resistant and our self-worth increases. This often shows outwardly. When that is noticed, it can result in career progression and success.

Are you willing to take the 21-day gratitude test? (i.e., Will you write three things per day for which you're grateful?) ___ Yes? ___ No?

How might increasing gratitude help your career? (Make a list of ideas here.)

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Here are some additional thoughts around gratitude, along with some ideas to try at the office:

1. Start your next meeting with a gratitude question. For example, ask attendees (or your teammates) to:
 - a. Name a project you're thankful to be working on.

- b. Name a work colleague and tell how you're grateful for them.
 - c. Describe a recent lesson you have learned, and how are you thankful for it.
2. In work situations, think about how you can be grateful for the person, not just their output.
3. Gratitude and appreciation go hand-in-hand. Review Dr. Gary Chapman's *5 Languages of Appreciation* (<https://www.appreciationatwork.com/>). Consider folks with whom you work, and how they prefer to receive gratitude. How might you show gratitude and appreciation for them this week?

Homework: Start and maintain a gratitude list. Keep it simple so it's not a chore. Carry it with you and refer to it weekly (at the very least). Try one of the three ideas above at your office.

Additional Reading: Dr. Gary Chapman's *5 Languages of Appreciation* ([appreciationatwork.com](http://www.appreciationatwork.com))

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 9: From Why? to What?



Let's just jump into this one. Think about the question below.

When bad news hits, can you change the question in your head from, "Why is this happening?" to "What can I learn?"

Why might that be difficult? Jot down some ideas / thoughts.

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My story:

"I am sorry Mr. Raison. You have cancer."

I heard nothing after that.

It was August 2014. I had gone in for a routine colonoscopy as screenings had become recommended for those aged fifty. But I knew how these things were supposed to go. If they find anything suspicious, the doctor says, "We found a small spot and have sent it out to the lab for a biopsy. We'll not even call unless there's a reason for a follow-up test."

Right? No doctor ever just walks in the room, sits down, looks you in the eye, and says, "You have cancer." That's not how it works. Or so I thought.

It's remarkable how many things can run through your mind in an instant. There is an explosion of thoughts—pictures of those you love, of your hopes and dreams, of questions like, "How long do I have?" After a few hours of settling down, one question emerges and lingers:

"Why is this happening to me?"

This is a legitimate question, and it is natural to ask it. It is also dangerous to remain in that space. Asking *why* does nothing helpful because *there is no answer*. Cancer happens.

And guess what? Job loss happens. As does stress. Emotional breakdown. Pain. Death. Or how about criticism? That can be extraordinarily painful. Write your own list. Better yet, don't. Instead, see if you can reframe the question and your thinking.

The Switch:

When faced with a major life challenge or pain-point, here is one of the most powerful things a person can do:

Instead of asking, "Why is this happening?" ask, "What can I learn?"

How might that feel? Would that help? Jot a few thoughts here.

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What might change if you could do that?

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If you can shift your response from *why* to *what*, you can improve both your mental and physical health. They are intertwined.

The Final Challenge: The next time you experience a significant pain or stress point, and *after* you have changed the question from “*Why* is this happening?” to “*What* can I learn?” ask yourself this:

What can I do?

Think about some options you might pursue. What action or strategy might help?

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It’s okay to take some time with this question. After my cancer diagnosis, I asked myself this question. That led to action (innovative surgery) that today, finds me still cancer-free after ten years. That gratitude is with me every single day.

Homework: The next time you encounter a trigger-event (at work, home, or play), *try to change the question in your head from Why to What*. Then consider sharing your burden, talking with friends, or making an appointment with a counselor. They can help. In my case, we took additional action to lower our mental stress by leaning into our family’s faith tradition. Here, we found different, but significant comfort. Try moving from *why* to *what*. You’ll be glad you did.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I’m still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 16: **What Motivates You?**



Purpose: This reflection is designed to help you understand the basic premise of motivation. It begins by asking a simple question:

What are some things that motivate you?

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At the most basic level, humans are driven by two forms of motivation: *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*. Extrinsic motivators come from the outside and include things like money, power and prestige, and where you work. Here, people pursue the goal simply because of the visible, external reward or punishment. Intrinsic motivators (such as gaining knowledge, mastery, curiosity, autonomy, or fulfillment) come from within. People pursue these because they enjoy the work and find some kind of inherent satisfaction that feeds their life purpose or mission.

Author Susan Fowler outlines four components that *intrinsic* motivation has in the workplace:

- **Competence:** you have the necessary skills to perform work / activities
- **Meaning:** your work goal or purpose aligns with your personal ideals or standards
- **Autonomy:** you have some level of control over your choices or behaviors
- **Impact:** you can influence the strategy, administration, or outcomes

Question for reflection:

How might you activate these intrinsic motivators in your work, especially if you're feeling bored or stuck?

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Here are two strategies that might help.

1. Find ways to make tasks more interesting. Ask your supervisor if you could try different projects to add variety to your work.
2. Think about how your work has meaning. Ask yourself how it can have a substantial impact on the lives and work of other people. Make a mental link between your specific job tasks and your organization's mission. This is powerful.

Challenge: Jot down a few items over the next week or so that come to mind about your motivations. Separate them by category. Which ones feel stronger? Which ones resonate with your soul?

My Meaningful Motivation List:	
Intrinsic:	
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Extrinsic:	
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Homework: Return to this list on occasion. Pick out one or two motivators. Then set a goal to try and increase your focus on those meaningful items.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 19: **Handling Critics and Criticism: A Growth Mindset Approach**



Purpose: To help you build resilience and leverage critiques and criticism for good.

Background: Have you ever felt the gut-punch of a poor annual evaluation? Or have you had so much red ink on a paper it was hard to see what you originally wrote? How might you reframe this kind of feedback from critiques and critics without giving up or feeling beaten up? Could you leverage the input to help you grow? Here's a question to consider:

How do you currently handle input (feedback, criticism, red ink) from critiques and critics? What is your initial reaction?

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Many people hear feedback as outright criticism that is pointing directly at them as a person. While some critics are throwing darts *you*, *meaningful* evaluation or feedback is aimed at the work, not the person. Here are two-steps outlining how to receive a critique:

1. Remove yourself from the equation. Even if the criticism appears (or is) aimed directly at you. Change the words in your head from, "I'm no good at this," to, "This is something I still need to learn," or, "This is a critique aimed at helping improve this work."
2. Dispassionately use the input to find areas for improvement. Look at each suggestion (critique), evaluate how it might help, and then begin making changes for improvement.

Adopt a Growth Mindset: Carol Dweck (2008) identified a *fixed mindset* as only focusing on the outcome, and telling yourself you cannot change anything. Conversely, with a *growth mindset*, you realize the *critiques or criticisms are data that can help you* tackle problems, chart a new or redirected course, and continue working for success.

4 keys to Growth Mindset:

1. Believe that your *effort* leads to achievements. It's not just inherent talent.
2. Be willing to learn from mistakes. Leverage criticism as input to improve.
3. Know that intelligence and ability can be developed (again, through effort, grit, determination).
4. Embrace asking questions. Ask for help when needed. And admit when you don't know something.

Look at the 4 Keys above. Then consider this:

Which *key* above resonates with you? (It might resonate by making you feel positive, or one of them might make you feel angry.)

What might you do to improve in this area? Key #: _____

Action:

Summary: We *will* on occasion receive input, feedback, evaluation, and criticism that feels like a gut-punch. Everyone does. But changing the *aim* of the critique (from *me* to *my work*) and adopting a growth mindset can powerfully redirect the situation (and our emotions), leading to improved output.

Important Postscript: There are critics who may attack *you* personally. Those people are not interested in helping. You do not owe them your attention. Every single person has value and worth, regardless of skills (or ability to do some specific task). So if someone belittles you, take leave. Find an encourager who can help you get back on track and make the improvements you want to make. Then, pass it along and encourage someone else.

Additional Reading: Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Ballantine Books.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 25:

Financial Health: Live and Give



Purpose: To suggest two critical (yet doable) actions that can put you on track for financial stability while you are working. They will also set you up to retire the way you want.

The Discussion: The first thing everyone can do that will enhance future financial security and success is to *decide* how they're going to live. This works at almost any salary level. [Though I must note that there are folks today who are not paid a living wage. Here, we must be mindful of that situation, and advocate for improvements while still working to help them formulate a budget or plan for spending.]

Here's how living decisively works. First, think about your finances and future. Many people procrastinate planning or saving. You must sit down and draw up a plan now. *Living and retiring well is not about math.* It's psychology and *how* we think about money. It's about discipline. We must learn to live *below* our financial means. That's a decision.

When you live on less than you make, you are automatically set up to survive a lower retirement income. For example, experts mention needing 70-80% of your pre-retirement income to live comfortably in retirement. Let's talk about how to make that work.

Action: Live (and pay attention to the details)

1. Write a spending plan (a.k.a., a budget).
2. Reduce eating out (which is the number one expense for many).
3. Check your subscriptions (cable, streaming services, magazines, music online, and your kids' expenses).
4. Compare car and home insurance rates. Switch if you can get similar coverage at a better rate.
5. Do an Internet search for: "Biggest unnecessary expenses." (Think about your *wants vs. needs*.)
6. Do a "debt snowball" (See Dave Ramsey's approach of paying off your debt from smallest-to-largest).
7. Start a Roth IRA (now).

Challenge to achieve financial freedom: Look at the seven items above.

1. Which could you begin doing now? Seriously. Today.
2. Which could you begin next week?
3. Imagine your life in five years: What does it look like if you have followed these concepts? How might you feel inside?

How much will you need in retirement? These questions will help you plan:

1. If you have a house/land, will it be paid off?
2. What are the ongoing taxes, insurance, and upkeep each year?
3. If you plan to rent, what's your ongoing monthly cost (with inflation)?

4. Are you the *new car type*?
5. Do you want to help kids/grandkids pay for college?
6. Do you want to travel?
7. Do you want to work part time?
8. Do you want to do volunteer work?

Challenge to achieve retirement freedom: Look at the eight items above.

1. Which is most important?
2. Which is not necessary, but perhaps a desired option?
3. Imagine your life in your retirement years: What does it look like if you have followed these concepts? How might you feel inside?

For additional reading: Ramsey, Dave. (2007). *The Total Money Makeover: A Proven Plan for Financial Fitness*.

General Reflections: One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Financial Health: Part 2, Give

The Discussion: Again, living and retiring well is not about math. It's *how* we think about money. There is a tremendous amount of ancient wisdom on giving. In Judaism (the Mosaic Law), they stipulated a *tithe* which literally meant giving 10% of your wealth. In Christianity, Jesus extended the meaning of a tithe to make it less legalistic and more heartfelt. In Islam, the Zakat (alms giving) is one of the *Five Pillars*. In Sikhism, they encourage the Dasvandh (giving one tenth). And outside of religious tenets, non-religious and secular writings have wonderful ideas of *Giving What We Can* (GWWC) for altruistic associations in which members pledge at least 10% of their income to charities.

In *The Book of Joy*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (with Doug Abrams) say, "It seems money can buy happiness, if we spend it on other people." They cite research that shows how generosity is one of the four fundamental brain circuits that track with long-term well-being.

Giving questions:

1. How do you feel about giving?
2. Has it been a partial or consistent action / philosophy in your life? Why or why not?

Action: Give (to causes or needs of others). Giving changes your thinking. When you freely give away money or things or your time (with no strings attached) several things happen:

1. You help others (a cause, a person, etc.).
2. You focus on others and become less self-centric (which research shows is a positive path for joy and satisfaction in life).
3. You learn self-discipline. (Again, read the research on the benefits of this.)
4. You train your brain to recognize and remember your good fortune (e.g., of having a job). This increases internal gratitude and improves health according to research studies.

Here are some key questions:

Challenge to achieve giving freedom: Look at the four items above.

1. Which sounds most important to you? Why?
2. If you could learn more about one of the items, which would it be? How might that help you?

Summary: We can train our brains on living and giving. When we tell ourselves we can live on 80% or 90%, we begin to change how we think and feel and act with money. The actions of living and giving can absolutely provide financial peace and security for our future.

Homework: Make a retirement bucket list. Whether you're twenty or forty or sixty years of age, make a list of what you want to retire *to*. That is, don't retire *from* something, but retire *to* something new. Then ponder how adopting *living and giving* now can make it happen.

Retirement Bucket List:

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-

General Reflections: One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 28:

Hidden Diversity



Purpose: This is a reminder that most aspects of diversity are not outwardly visible, but recognizing hidden variables can be of great value to your personal and professional life. Let’s jump in.

When you think about diversity among people, what things do you notice?

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Now, consider what aspects may *not* be visible?

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The Discussion: I regularly meet new people, and I talk daily with people I’ve known for years. But how well do I really know them? How well do they really know me? Aside from a couple of friends in the counselor and clergy professions, I know few who can set aside their first visual impression (or their one-hundredth time seeing someone), truly look beneath the surface, and remind themselves that this person may have sadness or joy of which I know nothing. They may have recently experienced loss or gain, an acute mental health crisis, an ongoing battle with dyslexia, addiction, food insecurity, or any number of other afflictions (or prosperity). We may observe signs, but we simply do not know.

If we do not pause and remind ourselves of these hidden differences, it is easy to interact on the surface in an “I - It” transaction. In *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman describes this as treating others as objects, not persons. The inverse is the “I - You” relationship in which others’ feelings not only matter to us but change us. This is a picture of empathy.

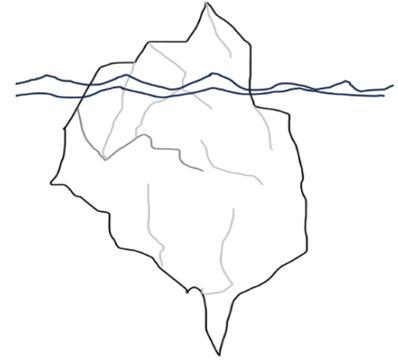
So how might focusing on *hidden diversity* improve your EQ (emotional intelligence), a skill which Goleman contends is learnable? Let’s quickly review hidden aspects of diversity.

What people see (above the water line):

- Outward appearance
- Physical behaviors
- Sound of voice (including accents)

What's hidden (beneath the waves):

- Values
- Beliefs, worldviews, faith traditions
- Socioeconomic status
- Intelligence, ability
- Mental and physical health
- Pronoun/gender identity, sexual orientations
- Ethnicity
- DNA / physical variation
- History, geography, and more



I love that last point with history and geography. We sometimes miss these aspects. For example, I am fully Appalachian—a geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural designation. But people do not *see* that outwardly, nor do they *hear* much of an accent when I speak. But my family holds close this proud heritage. We celebrate our unique foods and music and family and faiths. We also experience stereotyping and degrading humor. Raising awareness of hidden diversity can help everyone become more sensitive and considerate of others. It can also strengthen friendships and teams at work, quickening goal attainment.

Here is a closing question to consider for more personal reflection.

List some aspects of hidden diversity that others may not know about you. - - - -

Homework: This week, casually observe someone with whom you interact and wish to know better or improve the relationship. Become curious about hidden diversity, and initiate a conversation. Think about how learning more about others can help you improve your leadership skills.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 29: **Seek Diverse Relationships**



Purpose: To consider the benefits of having diverse relationships. To increase our thinking on how aspects of diversity and inclusiveness can help broaden our perspectives, discover solutions, and energize creativity.

Here's a simple but critical question:

How might having increased diversity in your personal and professional relationships be helpful?

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Explore your thinking here. Do you presently have many relationships with people who differ from yourself? Here are some prompting questions that might help:

1. What might you learn from a person twenty years younger than you?
2. What wisdom might you share with someone ten years older?
3. Are you comfortable with friends or coworkers who have different skin colors?
4. Do you have friends or colleagues with language barriers?
5. Would you be comfortable with someone who dressed differently (e.g. wore religious-based clothing)?
6. What if they had a different sexual orientation or gender identity?
7. Would you be comfortable working with someone who may be on the autistic spectrum?
8. How might working with someone from a different socio-economic class feel?
9. What if someone looked the same as you outwardly, but you think or feel you have nothing in common?
10. Is it possible to connect with someone in a meaningful way even though they may be different?

The Discussion: We don't always stop to think about diversity or inclusion in our day-to-day work and life. But deliberately thinking about these things can benefit all involved. Diversity adds richness to planning, problem solving, and strategic communication. Diversity expands perspective, a critical component of navigating the varying pathways to mission attainment. Diversity energizes creativity and improves organizational culture. With open, honest, and authentic engagement, you can more quickly build trust.

Challenge question: Look at the ten items above.

1. Which two or three stand out in your mind?
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2. What might you want to learn about the items you listed above?
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 -

-
- 3. How might expanding your diverse relationships benefit you and your work (or volunteer) organization?
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-
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Homework: Choose one of the ten items above where you would like to grow. Do some reading. Reach out and connect with someone who could help you.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Conversation 35: Perspective Shifting



Purpose: To consider *perspective* more deeply and challenge yourself to consciously employ perspective shifting *on a daily basis*.

Background: In prior conversations, we have talked about *changing* your perspective. Now it's time to go deeper and truly challenge yourself. *Shifting* perspective can be one of the most powerful devices in anyone's personal or professional tool kit. True perspective shifting opens our eyes to more diverse, unique, and creative solutions to problems. It unlocks doors and identifies sometimes hidden possibility. Again, this works both personally and professionally.

Below are three questions designed to help you think about shifting your perspective. But first, try this brief kinesthetic experiment. I learned it from my OSU colleague, Steve Brady, nearly twenty years ago.

Stand if you are able. (Seriously. Do this. Standing or moving provides an immediate perspective change.) Now, fold your hands, interlocking fingers. Look down at your hands. Which thumb is on top? (Some will find their right, others the left.)

Now unfold your hands and refold them, this time *with your other thumb on top*. It feels a bit weird, doesn't it?

Okay. Now, fold your arms in front of your chest. You have done this a million times. It's natural. Look down. Which arm is on top? (Again, some will find their right, others the left.)

Now for the challenge: Try *folding your arms the other way* with the "wrong" arm on top. You may have to focus to find success. For most people, this feels very awkward.

[Pro tip: Use this as an opening experiment with a group who is trying to solve a problem or make an important decision. It awakens brain cells and can remind people that there are *other ways* of doing things. It's also quite funny to watch.]

What does this perspective shifting really mean? We are creatures of habit. Our brains are conditioned to our personal reality, our own singular-sighted perspective. So how can we get out of our comfort zone and discover a different way of thinking, a new approach that might move us more quickly toward our goal? Like crossing our arms the "wrong" way, it might be uncomfortable at first. But when we challenge ourselves to be open to new, more diverse ideas and ways of thinking, new possibilities arise.

Use the questions below as an exercise to try to change or expand your perspective. Think of a problem you are facing, or a difficult decision you need to make.

Problem or decision: _____

Is my thinking about this a *fact*, or is it my *opinion*? (How might someone else look at it?)

Challenge Q: Humility plays a role in this scenario. What are two ways to increase humility or to be open to other ideas or approaches?

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-

Problem or decision: _____

If I could be five years in the future looking back at this issue, what might I see?

Challenge Q: Projecting your vision into the future is pure perspective. Do you think you could deploy this approach during a stressful event? Describe how you might do that.

Problem or decision: _____

Am I noticing the storyline in my own mind around this issue? (Could you shift the narrative or your interpretation to open new possibilities?) Jot down a few ideas on how you might do that.

Summary: Perspective shifting is a powerful tool. But it takes practice. Like $E+R=O$, you can know about it and that it is effective. But it can take a lifetime to master. That's okay. The best time to start is now.

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Bonus Conversation 40: **Leading with Humility**



Purpose: To remind us that potential is expanded when we lead with humility. Though the final of these forty conversations, it might just be most important. Humility is a critical skill in leadership. It can be cultivated and developed. Here’s an initial question for consideration.

Can an attitude of humility help a leader expand potential and positive outcomes?
Describe how that might work.

Background: It is reported that Frank Lloyd Wright defined an expert as “someone who has stopped thinking because he knows.” We all know that person. Or maybe several. If they are leading a team, organization, volunteer project, or (this last one might be uncomfortable) your family, they could likely improve outcomes if they’d simply stop talking and invite others to provide input.

The painful question we all must ask ourselves is this: *How often do I think I’m the expert?* (Ouch.)

The Discussion: In 2013, Former MIT professor Edgar Schein published *Humble Inquiry*. Schein asked how an organization can get all the bosses (leaders) to create a climate where those under them feel free to engage. He said upward communication is often lacking in business, but leaders could make strides if they did three things:

1. Do less telling.
2. Learn to do more asking.
3. Do a better job of listening and acknowledging.

Of the three items above, where are some places you might:

1. Do less telling. _____

2. Learn to do more asking. _____

3. Do a better job of listening and acknowledging. _____

Schein claims that if we wish to find our own *original, individualized answers* (solutions to problems), then we will be required to do a deeper kind of search. In other words, our human *experience* is a necessary component of adult learning, knowledge synthesis, and the ultimate application. When we lead (at whatever level), we must humbly acknowledge this.

What does this mean for us today? In brief, when we face challenging questions, Schein suggests we “live with the question” for a bit. Sleep on it. Allow our imaginations and our brain power time to work while also inviting naïve questions. Those naïve questions can be the best kind because they look at the issue with a beginner’s mind and ask about the fundamentals. Again, the experts are often too close to the subject to see what they’re

missing, or (as in Wright’s quote) they quit thinking or asking because they believe they already have the answer. Even if you are not leading a team or project, using a humble inquiry approach can bring results. This holds true professionally and in our personal lives as well.

Questions to ponder:

What is a current project where you might do less telling and more listening? (This could be at home or work.)

How might your team (or colleagues or family) respond? (Might they become more creative? Might they take more ownership? Might they grow personally or professionally by being permitted to try, even if they fail?) Jot some ideas.

Summary: What do you think about Schein’s approach? Here are two more questions to ponder:

How can you use *humble inquiry* to expand potential and positive outcomes?

Could inviting diverse input lead to the discovery of opportunity? (Describe an example or two.)

Homework: Think about approaching your own leadership with humility. During this upcoming week, look for an example of a time when you might have a choice to *inquire and listen*, or to *talk*. How will you respond?

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I’m still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Bonus Conversation 33: **Spirituality & Faith Traditions**



Purpose: This conversation asks us to consider a topic some find difficult or perhaps not apropos for the workplace, but It aims to increase acknowledgement of, and honor for, diverse traditions among those with whom we live and work. Conversations like these may also challenge us to reflect and introspect.

Background: Psychologists, medical doctors, leadership researchers, wisdom writers, philosophers, rabis, pastors, imams, gurus, and others have long observed that people inherently yearn for a purpose-driven life. We want to do or serve something beyond our personal goals and economic self-interest. We want to be remembered for doing something good during our lifetime. For many, faith traditions help fill this void.

Multiple research studies have shown positive mental and physical health benefits for people who practice some sort of faith tradition. In a 2012 comprehensive review of hundreds of studies, Koenig found research clearly shows people with more religion and/or spirituality have better physical and mental health and recover more quickly from health problems. Other studies from Azar and Sweeney have linked adults' religious involvement to better health and well-being outcomes, including lower risk of premature death.

In addition, various faith traditions bring beauty and diversity to our workplaces.

Here's the introductory question:

Do you have and/or practice spirituality or a faith tradition? _____

Why or why not?

Do you feel there are things beyond what we see and observe in our everyday world?
Jot some ideas here.

Discussion: What does it mean to have faith in a spiritual sense? Some people see faith or religion as another way of knowing, empirically tested and verified by the observable fruits of love and action. There are changed lives that attest to something unseen. These are powerful arguments and evidence. On the other hand, some contend there is no need or room for the spiritual.

With the thought of bringing people together and bridging divides, I undertook a study of seventeenth century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. In his posthumously published manuscript, *Pensées*, he posited the idea of a wager, "betting" that there is a God.

A lot of people misunderstand the nuance of his wager idea. In short, Pascal reasoned that even if there is no creator or God, if we live as if there were, we will have a better life while alive here on Earth by following the general moral conventions of caring for others, respecting life and property, and etc. These ideals are repeated in numerous belief systems. Conversely, if God is truly real, we need not fear death. We gain some sort of life for eternity when we trust therein.

Here's the disconnect: Most people focus on the wager—the bet—thinking Pascal is hedging. In doing so, we completely miss his actual thesis: *We don't have to wait till we die to win the bet. We can have life and love and completeness now, essentially creating our own paradise here on Earth while we are physically alive.* It's a fascinating idea. In early 1971, John Lennon essentially intoned this same general concept when he sang, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace."

Please take a few minutes to think about these questions:

How might learning about (and acknowledging) various faith traditions enrich your workplace?

Whether you have a strong faith tradition, or none, could you be open to discussing topics (such as the purpose of life) that are very meaningful to many? How might these discussions strengthen your work culture and objectives?

Summary questions for pondering: Regardless of your faith tradition, spiritual practice, or contentment with not needing a religious construct, could Pascal's notion of practicing kindness and love and care for others in this world pay benefits (personally and societally) now? If we become more respectful of deep convictions held by others, especially when they are different from ours, might we improve our work culture and outcomes?

Challenge: Look back at your response to the introductory question in this conversation. What might you do to investigate your existing personal beliefs more deeply, or to learn more about those of others to further your understanding? How might that enhance your working or personal relationships?

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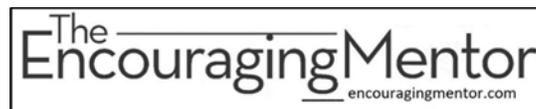
General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____

Wrapping up your conversations: *The next steps for your journey.*



I hope the question prompts have helped mentors and mentees to grow personally and professionally. I hope you will continue to reflect on these ideas (returning to your notes on occasion) as you move to create the future life you want and fulfill your personal mission. This kind of deep thinking and reflection can help you discover positive pathways in life and career trajectories with great possibility... and meaning.

If you enjoyed the process, please explore the entire 40 conversation journey available in “The Encouraging Mentor” book or free online.

You’re on your way. Press on with gratitude. Enjoy the journey.

A Challenge:

Now that you have thought through some of the most important questions in life, consider this.

How might you feel about mentoring someone else?

You do not need formal training. You do not need a structured program. You do not need to spend time preparing for mentoring meetings. The only requirement to become an excellent mentor is your willingness to ask a few prompting questions, *and then to listen.*

That’s it. Oh, and guess what? You can extract the prompting questions from this free resource.

Who might you begin encouraging (or mentoring) in the *next two to four weeks?*

1. _____
2. _____

Again, the question prompts can open very powerful and encouraging conversations. If you wish to learn more and be more deliberate in your mentoring (including learning the basics on how mentoring parallels adult learning theory, and behind-the-scenes context for doing great mentor work), you could read *The Encouraging Mentor: Your Guide to 40 Conversations that Matter*. This book includes these and more prompting questions you’ve just completed, but with expanded background, context, and some extra teaching / mentoring tips. It is available at <http://encouragingmentor.com>

One last thought: Encouragement has a dual impact. If you are feeling down or sad or tired or depressed, *go encourage someone*. Taking action will help *you* to feel better. It will lift your spirit as you lift theirs. Like love, the more encouragement you give away, the more you receive.

Who needs your encouragement today?