**INSIDE OUT PODCAST SERIES: THE SCIENCE BEHIND SUCCESS**

**EPISODE 3: THE SCIENCE OF MENTORSHIP**

Hello and welcome to today’s podcast. As you may remember, in this podcast series, we’re taking a look at the science behind success. That’s right, we’re trying to examine what facts, if any, we can relate to what makes a person or an organization successful. We’ve looked at the science behind organizational transformation, the science behind learning curves, and today we’re going to look at the science behind mentorship. The topic of mentorship is one that’s a personal favorite of mine because throughout my career I’ve had several opportunities to experience the value of it firsthand. As I’m sure many of you can relate to, whenever I was fortunate to get a promotion, there was always that period of “now what do I do,” and sometimes the bigger the promotion the bigger the question. I can truly say the times I seemed to do best were the times when I had someone to help show me the ropes, be a resource for me when I had questions, and someone who showed confidence in me even when I did not feel it. Those were the mentors who helped shape my successes. So in today’s episode, I’m going to take a deeper look, a more scientific look, at mentorship and why it can help us be successful.

According to an article in the National Library of Medicine, mentorship is an activity in which professionals in a particular industry or profession engage to help develop the next generation of professionals in the same industry or profession. Pretty straight forward definition, but let’s take a deeper look. **What exactly is mentorship?**

As the article in the National Library of Medicine relates, historically the word “mentor” comes from the character Mentor in Homer's *Odyssey.*  When Odysseus, king of Ithaca, went off to fight in the Trojan War, he asked his trusted friend Mentor to advise and teach his son, Telemachus. In time, the term mentor came to refer to someone who is a guide and educator, and a mentoring relationship was seen as a relationship between a teacher and student. The notion of mentorship is largely idealized as a positive thing, and a mentoring relationship, like any relationship, has good and bad moments—and good and bad outcomes—and mentoring experiences can range from effective to dysfunctional.

A review of mentoring literature done in 1991 by Jacobi identified 15 different definitions of mentoring relationships, but noted that they all shared the following three commonalities:

1. Mentoring relationships emphasize helping the individual grow and accomplish goals and include several approaches to doing so.
2. A mentoring experience may provide professional and career development support, role modeling, and psychosocial support; mentoring experiences should include planned activities with a mentor.
3. Mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal, though online mentorship options are creating opportunities to build virtual mentoring relationships.

Fast forward almost 20 years when Crisp and Cruz did another literature review in 2009, and by this time, researchers had created more than 50 definitions for mentoring.

And although the definitions of mentoring vary widely, they often refer to core functions of mentoring relationships. In fact, in 1983 Kram published groundbreaking work identifying two primary functions in mentoring:

1. Providing psychosocial support
2. Providing career or instrumental skill development support

**So, what makes mentoring effective?** Since every mentoring relationship is different, because no two people are alike, let’s examine the behaviors of the mentor and the behaviors of the mentee. There is actually research that supports that some core behaviors of mentors and mentees are more likely to yield effective mentoring relationships. According to that article in the National Library of Medicine, such core behaviors include aligning expectations, building rapport, and maintaining open communication. Furthermore, in a 2011 study by Blake, Beard, et al, effective mentorship occurs when mentors and mentees develop trust, share strengths and limitations, and identify and authentically engage with one another. Some researchers call this mentorship attribute “interpersonal comfort”; namely, the ability to speak freely and express opinions without repercussion. This attribute by itself may explain why a person’s supervisor or boss may never be the best choice for a mentor. I can attest that in my own experiences, my boss was never my mentor, ever though I often had very good bosses.

Taking a look at an effective mentoring relationship through the eyes of a mentee is also pretty interesting. In a 2019 article entitled “Making the most out of being mentored” by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, the author identifies 10 insights from his perspective as a mentee that he feels have enabled him to experience transformative mentoring. The 10 insights are these:

**1. Vulnerability:**The first step to establishing an effective mentoring relationship is to slowly expose your weaknesses so that your mentor can focus his or her efforts on what you need to do to achieve independence and success. Let your guard down so your mentor can build you up.  
**2. Adaptability:**To maximize the relationship, you must be willing to adjust to changing circumstances, even if they pull you away from your plans or take you out of your comfort zone.

**3. Accountability:** To gain the respect and admiration of a mentor, you must be accountable for your actions, good or bad. Your mentor is in a superior position to judge your actions, provide encouragement or initiate correction.

**4. Responsibility:** To demonstrate your willingness to learn and lead, take charge of the relationship by doing things within your control and sphere of influence. Chances are the mentor has something you want or need, so you have to show initiative and own development of the relationship.

**5. Reliability:**To respect and honor your mentor’s time, you must perform under routine, hostile or unexpected circumstances to make the mentor feel confident that you will be there and ready when opportunity knocks. No mentor wants to be embarrassed by a mentee.

**6. Confidentiality:** To add value to the mentor, create a safe environment for the mentor to share ideas, thoughts and feelings about things that are top of mind, but not for public consumption. You must prove yourself to be trustworthy to move from a surface relationship to one of real depth that energizes you both.

**7. Invisibility:**Acknowledge the time and other demands placed on your mentor; know when to retreat. Learn the art of being felt and heard but not necessarily seen all the time. Mentors are human and sometimes need a break from the time and effort needed to invest in relationships. Knowing when to fall back will make your mentor want to spend more time with you.

**8. Credibility:**For the mentor/mentee relationship to work optimally you must demonstrate, among other things, all the points above. This will assist in the development of integrity, expertise and authority in certain matters, as well as the personal charisma or dynamism that causes the mentor and others to respond to the mentee in positive ways.

**9. Creativity:** Demonstrate enthusiasm for the relationship and the benefits derived. Think outside the box to discover new ways of interacting with a mentor. For example, one of my mentors liked to lift weights, so we met in the weight room and talked while we trained.

**10. Opportunity:** Show genuine appreciation for the mentor’s investment. Look for opportunities to publicly and privately display your gratitude for the relationship. It makes a difference.

Now let me add my perspective to the author’s ten insights. When I was in graduate school at Auburn pursuing my doctorate degree (which by the way took me 8 years), one of my best mentors ever was my major professor, Dr. Dave Martin. I had been introduced virtually to Dr. Martin long before I started my doctoral program by a mutual colleague, and Dr. Martin invited me to campus for a visit. From our very first meeting, I felt a connection with him. I honestly can say that I felt that “interpersonal comfort” that I shared earlier. To say in my words, “we hit it off right away.” Then over the next decade of years, Dr. Martin mentored me in such a way that he brought those same behaviors in me that the author shared as his insights. Dr. Martin’s mentoring guided me to be vulnerable, adaptable, accountable, and responsible. Our conversations, of which there were hundreds, always were done with reliability, confidentiality, invisibility, creativity, and opportunity. Our talks took place on walks across campus, before and after class, in the student union, at Starbucks, in his office, and even the occasional shared lunch. In my last couple of years in grad school, Dr. Martin was the chair of my dissertation committee, we co-authored an article, and he even asked me to co-teach a class with him. The best part about my talks with Dr. Martin was that the talks were not always about grad school; in fact, more often than not, they were about life, my job, my future, my family, and the topics list goes on and on. Most importantly, there always seemed to be a nugget in every conversation we had – something I would think about after the talk, something I would learn, and something I would reflect on about myself. He was a gem.

**Next question,** **what does modern day mentoring look like now?** Today, the word “mentor” suggests a more experienced individual guiding a less experienced one through some part of their life. Most mentoring relationships are one-on-one, though there are some group programs. And according to research by Olivet Nazarene University, [the average mentor-mentee pair meets less than once a month but spends four hours per month interacting](https://online.olivet.edu/research-statistics-on-professional-mentors). According to a recent article by Elizabeth Perry in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, large organizations are increasingly seeing the benefits of mentoring as they learn that mentoring initiatives improve employee retention, increase profits, and help build a strong [company culture](https://www.betterup.com/blog/what-is-company-culture). Believe it or not, currently, [84% of Fortune 500 companies and 100% of Fortune 50 companies have mentoring programs](https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2022/05/19/does-mentoring-still-matter-for-fortune-500-companies/).

Why do these companies support mentoring? Well, what’s science say? According to an article by Matthew Reeves in 2023 for the Forbes Human Resource Council, there are six benefits of mentoring in the workplace:

1. **Boost employee engagement and productivity.**

Think about a time when a teacher provided you with one-to-one assistance on a topic. Your interest levels were piqued, right? Similarly, the individualized assistance that mentoring provides boosts employees' engagement with their work. In turn, higher engagement levels help mentees develop fresh perspectives and improve problem-solving and productivity.

1. **Improve employee retention.**

Workplace trends of the past few years have revealed that employees want to work at companies that help them build their skills because it shows investment in their careers. Mentorship programs facilitate skill-building and continuous learning in a way few other initiatives do. The process also builds bonds that encourage employees to stay with the company for a longer period of time because they feel valued and supported.

1. **Build a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration.**

Mentoring is a medium for employees to share their knowledge and experiences. Mentees receive vital knowledge and perspectives as mentors impart their ideas and best practices, which help employees tackle their obstacles skillfully. Mentoring also encourages cross-departmental cooperation, dismantles silos and fosters a culture of ongoing learning.

1. **Develop high-performing employees and a leadership pipeline.**

During mentorship, employees often receive constructive criticism and feedback. The coaching provided by mentors helps mentees develop their skills quickly. This can help them get promoted faster. As one 2020 survey showed, those who had the opportunity to be mentored were [five times more likely](https://www.gartner.com/en/documents/3981575) to be promoted. As mentees learn industry best practices and tried-and-tested strategies, their performance and capabilities soar. These employees become high-performing assets for the company. Ultimately, this helps companies recognize and cultivate potential leaders. By assisting employees every step of the way, mentors support the development of a pipeline of future leaders.

1. **Build a healthy work environment.**

As a Workplace Happiness Survey found, nine in 10 employees with a career mentor [feel happy at work](https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/16/nine-in-10-workers-who-have-a-mentor-say-they-are-happy-in-their-jobs.html). They're more likely to report being well compensated and to feel like their contributions are recognized—important factors in overall job satisfaction.

1. **Increase company profitability.**

Nearly 70% of businesses reported [an increase in productivity due to mentoring](https://nationalmentoringday.org/statistics/), and more than 50% say these programs had a positive impact on profits. Mentoring helps increase employee engagement and productivity, which boosts profitability for companies. Like they say, follow the money.

It appears as though there really is some science that supports mentoring as a method for success, both for individuals and organizations. I can attest that it certainly did for me. So, in closing today’s episode, I thought it may be helpful to share two tips if you are interested in having a mentor and an effective mentoring relationship:

**Tip #1: Find a mentor who understands you**

The first step in building a successful mentoring relationship is [finding the right one](https://www.betterup.com/blog/how-to-find-a-mentor), which you can do through either formal or informal channels. If your workplace doesn’t have a structured mentoring program, seek an informal relationship within or outside the company.

**Tip #2: Even the best mentor isn’t magic.**

Most of the benefits of mentorship come from the work you do to put their advice into practice. But as you do, they’ll be cheering you on.

That’s it for today’s episode. As always, thank you for listening. Be well and do good.

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