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How To Keep Mentoring Alive

01/27/2010

By *Mark Breslin*

If I objectively analyze the foundation of my construction career, I find that my CEO title probably can be credited to several guys in jeans and dirty boots. It was not a professor but a contractor-entrepreneur who most encouraged and inspired me by serving as my first mentor and guide. He was spare with praise but long on wisdom; he found ways to put me in the front row for life lessons. Jobsites, negotiations and even a beer at the bar all became mentor's tools to connect me, an ambitious and raw rookie, with my potential. Simply put, he saw talent in me that I could not see, and he helped to bring it out.

I believe the majority of ENR readers are like me: You did not get where you are without someone mentoring you. I think of mentoring as someone taking a personal interest—someone with whom a real connection of trust, communication and mutual benefit can be made. Mentoring is a very powerful motivational and developmental tool that plays a key role in most of our personal and professional lives. It has helped shape our industry.



BRESLIN

Construction's tradition of mentoring is now at risk, but I was unaware of the decline until recently. Each year I make presentations to a variety of construction leaders. I ask them the same question: How many of you received mentoring on your career path? More than nine out of 10 raise their hand. Then I ask, How many of you are mentoring someone now? Less than two out of 10 say yes. That weak response is startling, and it's in our interests to find out why and do something about it.

I have asked those who don't mentor anyone why, and they tell me, "The kids today are not willing," "It's not worth the time," or "I don't have the time."

On the other hand, when I ask young industry leaders why they think they can't obtain mentoring, I often hear them say, "They think mentoring is yelling instead of showing us how to succeed," or "No one has offered, and I don't know how to find someone to mentor me."

These responses speak to both a generational disconnect and a devaluing of the mentoring time investment.

Addressing these obstacles is vital. Beyond the current economic challenges, our industry faces unprecedented demographic succession challenges. The looming retirement of the baby-boom generation will profoundly challenge construction and engineering. There has never been a time in our industry when mentoring has had more of a potential upside.

My point is not one presented as a moral imperative or benevolent obligation; it is a bottom-line business strategy that could mean success or failure for the industry.

All companies should perform a demographic analysis and integrate mentoring into succession planning.

I suggest three strategies that all industry leaders should adopt to ensure mentoring does occur. First, all companies should perform a demographic analysis of their workforce and

integrate mentoring into their succession planning. Next, managers, leaders and supervisors need to be made to understand the operational and economic necessity of mentoring. Finally, all young people need to know how to find a mentor. Both collegiate and apprentice programs need to assist them. They need to know how to find someone who is willing to invest in them.

As was done for me, I now mentor several young people. I meet with or call them monthly. I hear about their lives, work, relationships, dreams and problems. Mostly, I listen. When I do speak, I know it matters. My payoff is the realization that I have often done the right thing for the right reason for the right person—and that's enough.

Mentoring is the last and final gift a leader gives to his employees, his organization and industry. I hope you will take the time to help someone else obtain the rewards and accomplishments that construction has given to you.

Let's not let our great tradition of mentoring die.

*Mark Breslin, the CEO of the Engineering and Utility Contractors Association, is also a speaker and author and can be contacted at www.breslin.biz. His latest book, *Alpha Dog*, about leadership, was published in November.*



Reader Comments:



Anonymous wrote:

Great article and surely written from the heart. Mentoring is rearing somebody to prepare the future; and it works bothways. I mean as you mentor one continuously apply learning and researching. You, as a mentor benefits from what you are doing because you are being refreshed everytime you teach, share and pass the knowhow to another person. It is God's way of allowing people to interact, to have an interpersonal relation, notwithstanding whether he or she is a subordinate. Mentoring still is the best way of passing job know how in both technical, commercial, physical and spiritual. It was once called discipling.

Ferdinand De Chavez, Project Engineering Division Manager; email: ferdie@mashhor.com

3/27/2010 6:42 AM CDT

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Anonymous wrote:

David M. Niese:P.E.

Several years ago I went down to Arizona State University to volunteer as a mentor to any student in civil engineering. I was awarded an M.S. Degree in Civil Engineering from ASU in 1968 and liked helping students as I was an engineering P.T. instructor at the Community College. The Head of the Civil Dept. Was only interested in how much money I could donate. That turned me off. Several years ago Mesa Comm. College. hired me to teach Surveying for the Technical Dept. It was great but my feet gave out. They found a retired surveyor who wanted to teach P.T.I became a substitute and was glad that he was a PLS and could teach much more surveying that I could. I subbed for half a semester and then. The PLS took over. I am ready to be a mentor if any company or school wants me.My office phone is 480-968-0190, Just leave a number or email adress. email: annemarie@acsengineeringgroup.com.

3/16/2010 5:03 PM CDT

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Anonymous wrote:

Wonderful article. I would love to see more than just a quick paragraph on the "how to" part. The first strategy alone is worth its own article. And having been in the "don't know how to find a mentor" camp for a while now, it sure would be useful to hear more than that I need to know how to find a mentor. Any external resources you can point us to? Thanks very much for your enthusiastic support of mentoring.

2/2/2010 2:40 AM CST

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Anonymous wrote:

Thanx!

Addressing such an important issue! I believe that real mentoring in any career is in many ways far more

important and certainly more invaluable than any degree. I say this as a former college teacher in Building Technologies, a designer and experienced builder from the ground on up. Perhaps if the 'I'm special, centre of the universe' attitude was not so dominant in our advertising and culture, the desire to mentor and openness to being mentored would be more widespread. Thanx again!

Regards

2/1/2010 11:45 PM CST

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