



humble attitude is not enough to sustain a life-long love of learning; we must be convinced that the development activities we choose to pursue will actually create value.

The idea that teachers learn as much as their students is widely accepted. While observing a skilled colleague is an excellent way to learn, one can often learn more when given the responsibility to mentor and teach, even when skill levels are comparable. The act of teaching one another stimulates our intellectual acuity; we notice things we normally would fail to see, and our heightened sense of responsibility forces us to tap into our underutilized skill reserves. Mentoring is more than just journaling while teaming or giving feedback after an assignment. It requires a systematic and methodical process by which colleagues can dramatically improve identified skills.

### **Five Steps to a Successful Colleague-to-Colleague Mentorship**

**1. Identify an Appropriate Partner.** Colleagues who mentor each other must have compatible personalities, expectations and availability. When both individuals exhibit respect and trust, they create a healthy learning environment within which both can feel comfortable and flourish.

The partners must share mutual expectations because expectations can largely determine the perceived outcome. For example, if one colleague enters the mentorship expecting to perfect

20 aspects of interpreting, and the other anticipates modest refinement in three or four areas, both will experience disappointment. The antidote is simple: clearly communicate and agree upon expectations before beginning the mentorship.

Schedule compatibility is the most common obstacle in colleague-to-colleague mentoring. Professional-student mentorships are easier to facilitate than two professionals who may work full-time jobs. Proactive planning is essential. One successful strategy to increase face time is to notify the scheduler(s) at local interpreter referral businesses of the mentorship and, where possible, request to team with the mentoring partner.

**2. Establish specific and measurable goals.** Informal on-the-fly mentoring does have a time and a place, but for structured mentorships, the two colleagues must identify precisely what each wishes to accomplish. More specific goals are more easily measured.

An example of a specific goal might be to increase the use of one's non-dominant hand to clarify spatial relationships. The mentor could measure improvement by documenting frequency. Broad goals such as, "I want to improve my sign-to-voice interpreting," or "I would like to be a better interpreter," rarely command the level of attentiveness required for successful outcomes.

While there is no need to be overly scientific or regimented about measuring progress, professionals are often motivated by tangible results and improvements. Therefore, the partners should create a simple and consistent way to track growth. A simple matrix can often help measure tangible progress.

**3. Keep it Simple by Focusing on One or Two Skills at a Time.** Most of us are probably guilty of asking the generic question, "Do you have any feedback for me?" The shotgun approach to mentoring is generally ineffective. Aside from establishing specific and measurable goals, partners need to focus on a limited number of skills at a time. For instance, during a training session, one interpreter may ask the mentor to help him integrate mouth morphemes and improve the clarity of tense markers. The next session may be entirely devoted to reducing sentence fragments while voicing.

A similar strategy is to target one or two areas for the duration of the mentorship. This is a particularly effective approach if a certain colleague excels in a desired area or is exceptionally knowledgeable about a complex subject. An interpreter seeking legal certification may, for example, wish to devote the entire mentorship to learning courtroom protocol.

**4. Communicate Directly and Tactfully.** Mentoring interpreters must be sensitive to the partner's communication preferences. Briefly discussing preferences can usually set a healthy tone for providing constructive mentoring support. Some mentors create a consistent format for feedback and guidance. For example, one person may prefer to receive feedback in a "sand-

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wiched” approach (i.e., compliment, critique, compliment) because it may make constructive criticism more palatable. Another colleague may prefer to only receive feedback on weaknesses and skip the compliments altogether. Whatever the preferences, consistency and tact usually facilitates openness and improvement.

With that in mind, we do our partners no long-term favors if we avoid providing needed feedback and communicate in a circumlocutory fashion. If a colleague has requested a mentorship, it means that he or she is interested in improving. Failing to provide the requested feedback, especially out of a misplaced sense of kindness, frustrates the entire goal of the mentoring relationship.

Overcoming the fear of hurting another individual’s feelings when giving constructive feedback, takes time and practice. New managers are often terrified to give their employees feedback on annual evaluations, particularly if their employees are more experienced and qualified. The same concept applies to peer mentoring with colleagues who have exceptional

skills. However, remember the purpose of the mentorship and directly and tactfully support your colleague with the help he or she has requested.

**5. Be Teachable.** It takes humility to be mentored by a person who may not be more skilled, experienced or credentialed. However, if we believe that everyone has something valuable to teach, we will never suffer from a lack of learning opportunities. If humility does not come naturally, then perhaps guidance to “Fake it ‘till you make it” is helpful.

Lastly, it is sometimes a temptation to become defensive in the face of evaluation or critique. Even if the giver intends no harm, we may feel attacked or hurt. When this happens, try to view receiving feedback as free advice until the tendency to respond defensively lessens. As we practice developing a teachable attitude, colleagues will be more willing to share valuable feedback with us. The result of receiving more feedback is the opportunity to acquire and refine interpreting skills.

## Summary

Professionals in almost every field engage in mentorships with their colleagues. We must be convinced that the experience will create value to enjoy the full benefits of a colleague-to-colleague mentorship. While there are many elements to a successful mentorship, this article outlined five key steps: identify an appropriate partner; establish specific and measurable goals; keep it simple by focusing on one or two skills at a time; communicate directly and tactfully; and be teachable. As we overcome the idea that mentorships are only for inexperienced interpreters, our profession will increase in caliber and, more importantly, the consumers we serve will enjoy a higher level of service. ■

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