Mentoring and Preparing the Next Generation

Critical skills are best learned when passed from leader to leader.

The healthcare field has always been characterized by its complexity. While the tools and methodologies for dealing with that complexity have changed since I first began my career, the fundamentals have not. The art of listening, reading people and reacting appropriately are nuanced skills that will always be requisites for leaders in our field.

But they are not skills that can be easily delineated in a textbook. Rather, they are best acquired by following the example set by other successful leaders. I was fortunate to be mentored early in my career by someone who guided me while demonstrating the skills and attributes that were ultimately essential to my career success and fulfillment. Thus, as I became a more experienced healthcare executive, I was compelled to “pay it forward” as it were and reach out to young healthcare leaders who could not only be good at what they did, but could be great.

In the late 1980s as the director of the Pasadena Laser Center in St. Petersburg, Fla., I was putting together a laser program for the surgical specialists at Palms of Pasadena Hospital. As part of my duties, I met periodically with the hospital’s Laser Committee to discuss policies and procedures as they related to the hospital’s laser program. During those committee meetings, without fail, a particular physician leader and I would clash. Reynold J. Jennings, FACHE, was the executive director of the hospital at the time and participated on the committee as well.

Recognize Mentoring Opportunities

After witnessing the tensions between the physician and me several times, Jennings scheduled a meeting with me. He recognized my potential, drive and commitment to the project; but at the same time, he also saw my struggle as I tried to rein in my feistiness as I interacted with the physician. Jennings knew that the difference between succeeding in my role and failing depended on finessing my communication skills.

That initial meeting changed my professional life. Jennings coached me on how to conduct myself in a confrontational situation. “Make your statement, sit back and wait for a response,” he said. “Listen to his response. If the physician lashes out, don’t take it personally and don’t become defensive. Look at him when he is speaking and acknowledge that you have heard.” Instinctively, I may have known this was the most effective way to handle the situation, but at that point, I had not seen that behavior modeled in my career. Those skills were not yet part of my toolkit—and certainly not something I had learned in my formal classroom education.

That first coaching session with Jennings evolved into a four-year, informal mentorship. When the laser program started at Pasadena, the committee meetings ran weekly, then monthly after the first year. Jennings committed to meeting with me for an hour prior to those meetings to review the agenda, update the issues that had developed since the last meeting and proactively consider issues that might be on the table for the upcoming meeting. Under Jennings’ guidance, I thrived in my role and was able to deal more effectively and productively with all committee members.

I left the laser clinical area after eight years to pursue my master’s degree. Upon completion of my master’s, I was hired as the director of Services Development and Implementation for the Eastern Division of a major healthcare system, reporting to Jennings, who had become president of that division. In this role, I was actually a corporate employee, and as such,
the waters were a bit more treacherous for me. I had always believed that my passion for patient care and my ability to do my job well were all that mattered in being successful. But I quickly realized that hospital-physician relationships and having a “give and take” approach factored heavily not only in my personal success, but also in creating a productive, efficient and high-quality hospital environment.

Seek Continuing Guidance
Once again, recognizing that I needed guidance, Jennings and I restarted our regular meetings during which I learned the importance of staying on point during discussions with senior-level colleagues and physicians by knowing and stating the facts without surmising or embellishing. Respecting everyone’s time and knowing the appropriate tone for any given situation were other lessons that became critical to my success.

This kind of in-the-moment, tailored learning opportunity can only happen through a mentoring relationship. It is the most powerful educational tool we can provide our early careerists. As my career progressed and I became a healthcare consultant, I began to seek out younger staff who possessed natural intelligence and drive but lacked the interpersonal skills that define a respected leader.

Pay It Forward
Because of the learning opportunities I had with Jennings as a mentor, I realized the importance of showing people the gray areas. For example, rather than simply assigning budget responsibilities to nursing directors, I took time to educate them on how to communicate with CFOs to accomplish their goals. In another instance, a perioperative director was concerned about the performance of one of her supervisors. After spending time with the supervisor, I realized she had much to offer but lacked the confidence she needed to succeed. While our mentorship was informal in the fact that nothing was documented, it was formal in so far as we met each day. I
asked her questions such as what we could have done differently the day before, her opinion about the way a meeting went, how she thought we could gain the buy-in of a certain physician or what the next step in getting from point A to point B might involve.

She had definite answers to these questions; the problem was that she had never been asked to project what the end result might look like and what it would take to get there. Simply articulating these answers to an objective source gave her the confidence to accept responsibility and ownership of her department, rather than defer to her director. This pay-it-forward approach required only a bit of extra effort on my part, but it made a world of difference to her performance.

Many times our early careerists can benefit from the coaching of someone from the outside looking in. Without my mentorship with Jennings, I am not sure I would have been aware of that need—or even willing to extend myself. But because I experienced the benefit of that relationship, I knew just how essential it can be to someone’s success.

I have found that being a mentor has been incredibly rewarding because it:

- Reinforces the lessons I have learned over the years and keeps my own skills sharp
- Satisfies my need to contribute to the betterment of the individual and the organization
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The skills I learned from Jennings, and in turn have shared with my colleagues, are those that are best learned as they are passed from leader to leader. The importance of taking the time to work with an early careerist in your organization cannot be overemphasized.

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