

A good mentor must first be a leader.

What does it take to be a mentor to someone? Two reference points in my life shape my attitude towards mentoring.

The first comes from the days of black-and-white pugilistic and sword-fighting movies, where the masters (shifus) never passed on all their skills to their disciples for fear of being usurped by their followers using the very skills they inherited. So, these shifus would keep the most powerful skill for themselves so they could sleep well at night.

The second reference point comes from the ubiquitous debate about what a leader is and is not. Let me start with this latter point.

Attributes of a leader and a manager

I will cut to the chase and say we should all aim to be a leader rather than a manager. Let's look at what separate these two categories of people:

- A leader is confident of the decisions he makes. A manager often seeks validation for his decisions.
- A leader manages his time well and makes time for his staff. A manager usually does not know his priorities and picks things up as and when they happen. He may not have time for his staff unless it is critical.
- A leader not only points out a mistake made by his staff, he makes sure they learn from it in their own way. A manager usually directs his staff to correct their mistakes along with a warning.
- A leader does not get involved with office rumour because he is certain of his and his own team's abilities. A manager entertains rumours because he is jittery that other people may be talking about him or his team behind his back.
- A leader does not need to remind his staff that he is in charge; they know it and appreciate him for it. A manager often pulls rank to show he is boss.

The next three attributes are linked directly to my two reference points:

- A leader delegates responsibilities. He develops and empowers his staff so they get the opportunity to grow and excel. A manager seeks glory for himself. If he does delegate, it is only to relieve his own workload; he would probably claim credit for the outcome.

- A leader does not compete with his staff. For that matter, neither does he compete with his peers. His ambition is to become the best leader for his team, not hanker after status. A manager wants everyone to know he is important and views everyone as a threat to his rise in the organisation.
- A leader invests in his people. He mentors them because he genuinely wants them to become leaders one day. He views his people's success as his own. A manager only thinks of completing his immediate tasks and making sure he doesn't fall short on any of them.

Mentoring starts with a desire to lead

The last three attributes lay the foundation for mentoring. The key words are "develop", "empower", "grow" and "excel" and the key statements "a leader does not compete with his staff" and "a leader invests in his people". So, my early notions of mentoring were quickly dispelled - a mentor is responsible for developing future leaders, so he must not keep the most powerful skill to himself. More importantly, to qualify or be accepted as a mentor, we must first of all be acknowledged as a leader.

Does everyone need to be mentored?

We can be a good leader to everyone in our team but we need not mentor all of them. Mentoring is a longer-term relationship building endeavour because we are shaping the mentee's future state. It is reserved for those who have both the potential and conviction to develop their talents beyond the current state. Mentoring is not a magic pill; no one can expect to grow by simply "being mentored" or taking part in a mentoring programme. Change requires effort so the mentee needs to become more aware of himself, take responsibility for his life and be proactive with development actions, insights and plans. Hence a leader needs to spot the talents in his team who possess such potential and conviction.

So, if you wish to be a mentor, become a good leader first. If you wish to know whether you are leader material, ask your team. If you hesitate even to ask, you already have your answer. So, what are you going to do about it?