

Is your career success linked to mentoring?

I have never met a person who doesn't see some value in mentoring. Which begs the question, why isn't there more going on? Is it going on in informal ways and we just don't hear about it? When I speak with association managers about mentoring, they almost always seem to know the benefit to mentees – it's rare to hear about the benefits for mentors. Perhaps this is why there is a perceived shortage of individuals willing to serve as mentors and little activity going on in a formal way.

Serving as a formal and informal mentor for at least ten individuals in the association community, I'm often asked how I benefit from the activity. What keeps me at it? I find the following benefits in mentoring:

- I gain satisfaction in knowing that I am paying back, as mentors took the time for me.
- have a great interest in developing capacity in the association community and perhaps I can have an impact by helping associations as public benefit organizations and therefore help fellow Canadians.
- It is often hard to find appreciation for what you do in a work environment and mentoring provides recognition and rewards.
- I gain insight into the thinking of other generations.
- I make new friends with like minded people.
- I identify future talent for my own organization and for others.
- I learn about different work practices and issues in the association community.
- By sharing I can learn from both my mistakes and those of others, and validate past, current and future plans.

While I think and believe I am a mentor, until sitting down to write this article I never really gave consideration to specifically defining the word "mentor". A mentor helps mentees with strategy and focus to help them actualize their career management plans. I believe most of my mentorships are informal - we do not agree to standards of mentorship conduct or sign off on targets reached as laid out in the mentee's career management plan. I listen, encourage, provide advice and feedback on options, check progress, assist with resumes and share related opportunities as applicable.

When I am involved in a mentoring relationship, either formally or informally, I always suggest mentees develop a career management plan. Having a career management plan is important if you want to plan and guide your career and achieve specific desired success. Students in the last course of the CAE Program complete an assignment that requires them to develop a career management plan. I am often told that this is the most difficult assignment in the CAE program. I hear comments such as, "I would rather do a marketing plan, a new product benchmarking

project, or a program or business analysis." It is tough to face reality and look at oneself. Some students will review their career management plan with a mentor. These students are serious – many of them sign their plan and treat it as a personal contract.

Most plans I have seen call for improvements in mentoring activity. Many in the CAE program are looking for first time mentors or, are hoping to add one or more mentors to their existing complement. I am sure there are many others not taking the CAE program who are looking for, or should be looking for mentors. For those not in the CAE program, mentors may suggest if they plan on a career working in association management they should take the CAE program. One thing is certain - there is a need for more mentors in the association community.

I regularly get calls or emails from students who go on to get their CAE designation. They let me know they have a new job, and that their plan is coming to fruition. Many have stated that one of the best things CSAE has done for them is provide a learning program that forced them to look at themselves. Discussion around job success reveals that a career management plan and mentoring play key roles.

There are different types of mentors, and it is not unusual for a motivated individual to have several professional and life skills mentors. It is also important to realize that a mentor does not have to reside in the same city or province. One or more mentors can provide different perspectives, and keep a mentee on track and motivated.

Some mentees don't even know when mentoring is taking place. In some cases they may think someone in their organization is just butting in and being critical. Mentees need to understand what mentoring is. Perhaps you can recall a particular situation when you failed to realize that a mentor was trying to help you get back on track.

Mentoring works. To make it happen, it often needs to start with mentees who will establish the relationship based on their requirements and then set the stage for arrangements. This puts an onus on the mentee to understand mentoring and how to seek out and educate/develop their mentor to support them based on expectations. Despite driving the arrangement it is critical to never overlook the mentor's expectations. Mentors are usually very busy and will want a focused arrangement.

Taking a leadership role in the arrangement, mentees need to speak up and express concerns to ensure their expectations are met. This may require the mentee to be frank. Being frank is important as some mentors can preach, may not listen, and make mistakes, even if they have a big title. Being frank will prevent both the mentee and mentor from wasting time.

Mentors need to ask how they can help the mentee and if they as a mentor are meeting expectations. To meet mentee expectations, mentors need to not only share their resume and successes, but also their mistakes. Most importantly, mentors need to sit on their egos on occasion and receive constructive feedback in a gracious manner.

Not all individuals seeking a mentor are able to make a cold call approach. Some large private sector and government organizations have formal employee development programs that support mentoring activity. Facilitators are used to help with mentoring activities and they are able to bring people together. The association community is made up primarily of small organizations and most have no dedicated human resources department to promote and support mentoring. Perhaps CSAE can look at establishing a quasi-confidential online registry and provide mentoring "how to" tools or other information to increase the level of this type of important activity.

If you are looking to experience the benefits that mentoring can provide and would like to talk about the concept as a possible CSAE service or share information or experiences, I suggest you log on to www.csae.com and use the discussion forum titled "mentoring." And, by the way, whether you are a mentee or a mentor, it is prudent practice to brush the dust off of your career management plan, or establish one if you have not yet done so. The rewards are many.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.