

Creating a Mentoring Culture

by Lols J. Zachary

Creating a mentoring culture is sacred work that connects us more deeply to one another as we take the mentoring journey that renews us individually and collectively as an educational community. To create a mentoring culture, institutions need to use available resources wisely, while committing to do the right kind of work.

There is no question that mentoring has become an increasingly prevalent practice among educational institutions and school systems today. And yet, even though many mandate mentoring, there is no standard for the mentoring practice that goes on. It is an interesting dilemma. As educators, we hold ourselves to a higher standard of practice and yet, rarely raise the bar on our own mentoring practices, even though we work in a community where we live and breathe educational theory and practice.

The presence of a mentoring culture fosters an environment that raises the bar for mentoring practice, whether its focus is teacher induction, new principalship, continuing professional education, or staff development. Individual mentoring programs and relationships achieve greater long-term impact because the mentoring culture sustains a continuum of expectation, which, in turn, generates standards and consistency of good mentoring practice.

Effective organizational mentoring can and does exist without the presence of an established mentoring culture. Inevitably it requires more work, longer ramp-up time, and unwavering conscientious persistence to maintain and ensure programmatic growth and long-term continuity.

Chances are, if you have tried implementing a mentoring initiative and it didn't succeed, one or more of these reasons will ring true: lack of time, untested assumptions, inadequate training, lack of thoughtful pairing, failure to act on past lessons, unclear program goals, failure to monitor mentoring implementation, breach of confidentiality, failure to anticipate resistance, lack of internal alignment, and/or lack of cultural congruence.

A mentoring culture mitigates these stumbling blocks by creating mentoring readiness within the institution, providing multiple-level mentoring opportunities, and embedding the right structures to support mentoring at the point of need.

Creating a mentoring culture requires the very best combination of people and process: bringing the right people to the table, encouraging them to contribute their unique talents, and creating a collaborative trusting team.

Parashat Terumah in *Exodus 25*, reminds us about the powerful combination of contribution and commitment. As educators, we pride ourselves on being part of a learning community. We are obligated as part of that community to "be a contribution" to each other's growth and to create sacred space where we help one another develop as professionals by growing ourselves. We are told that, "you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him (or her)." For the *mishkan* is built out of the goodness found in each individual, "gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple and crimson yarns; the fine linen, goats' hair."

We do this by voluntarily contributing our whole selves to the enterprise of creating a mentoring culture, whether as planners, coordinators, mentors, or mentees. "Naming oneself and others as a contribution produces a shift away from self-concern and engages us in a relationship with others that is an arena for making a difference."¹ In a mentoring culture we commit ourselves fully to the task by bringing our time, wisdom, expertise, and experience as mentors and working collaboratively to building a workplace where mentoring excellence can flourish. A mentoring culture is a culture of intention and grows out of an institution's conscious desire to strengthen the internal capacity of its people. It is a culture of inclusion and sensitivity. It values, honors, and celebrates the uniqueness of the individual and his or her unique contribution.

Creating a mentoring culture requires focus, discipline, time, and patience. It takes time to build, develop, take hold, and mature. You have to keep working, keep up the momentum, and recognize that every contribution makes a difference. It requires continuous tending and learning and commitment to the process and to some of the very specific mentoring practices described in the sections below.

Today, more educational institutions and school systems than ever before are embracing multi-level mentoring initiatives. Not surprisingly, the mentoring benefits realized by individuals redound to the school's benefit on a large scale. When educators find work more meaningful and satisfying, retention and organizational commitment are increased, ultimately saving on the costs of rehiring. Increased confidence results in improved performance and quality of work. Individuals become more adept at risk-taking. The more positive attitude contributes to increased trust and morale.

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The Building Blocks

Whether an institution is large or small, it is important to understand the wider school culture in which mentoring exists and to make sure that there is a cultural fit between it and mentoring. This fit provides the foundation for supporting its implementation and full integration into the organization. Without a fit, mentoring efforts continuously face challenges that threaten both the quality and the sustainability of mentoring programs.

A sustainable infrastructure assures that mentoring ownership is well-anchored within the organization. There must be reliable, suitable, and sufficient human and technological knowledge and financial resources to support mentoring. Budgets and time are protected. Specific individuals are tasked with spending dedicated time on mentoring education and training, mentor coaching, partnership support, and administration. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, leadership for and the time to devote to it are priorities for the long term.

The Hallmarks of Mentoring

Eight hallmarks build on and strengthen each other in a mentoring culture. All hallmarks are present, at least to some degree. They manifest themselves differently depending on the organization's previous success with mentoring. The more consistently each hallmark is present, the fuller and more robust the

mentoring culture and the more sustainable it is likely to be.

1. *Accountability.* Accountability enhances performance and produces long-lasting results. It requires shared intention, responsibility and ownership, a commitment to action, and consistency of practice. Without these elements, it is easy to miss the mark and reduce the likelihood that progress can be gauged, impact measured, process improvements made, and forward movement maintained. Accountability involves very specific tasks: (1) setting goals, (2) clarifying expectations, (3) defining roles and responsibilities, (4) monitoring progress and measuring results, (5) gathering feedback, and (6) formulating action goals.

Accountability tasks should be defined at the start of every mentoring program. The process is very specific, much like delineating learning outcomes for students. Set goals in place and identify success factors. Define what to measure, how to do it, and who will manage the process.

2. *Alignment.* Alignment focuses on achieving consistency of mentoring practices within an institution's culture. It builds on the assumption that a cultural fit already exists between mentoring and what is going on in the rest of the institution and that mentoring initiatives are also tied to goals larger than just initiating a program. When mentoring is aligned within the school culture, it is part of its "DNA." The rationale for mentoring is linked directly to educational outcomes and is communicated regularly. A shared understanding and vocabulary of mentoring practice exists that fits naturally with the school's values, practices, mission, and goals.

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Create a shared vision of what full implementation of your mentoring culture will look like in its ideal state. Work continuously to create understanding among all stakeholders. Articulate goals and outcomes clearly. Map out a strategy.

3. *Communication.* Communication is fundamental to achieving mentoring excellence and positive learning results. Its impact is experienced on many levels (individual, relationship, group, and organization). Its effects are far-reaching; it increases trust, strengthens relationships, and helps align organizations. It is critical to creating and supporting a mentoring culture. Without it, there is no mentoring vitality, much less sustainability. It is communication that creates value, visibility, and demand for mentoring. It is also the catalyst for developing mentoring readiness, generating learning opportunities, and providing mentoring support within an organization.

Do not underestimate the power of communication. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Look for multiple ways to communicate. Introduce a shared vocabulary of mentoring practice. Use consistent mentoring terminology. Communicate regularly with those engaged in mentoring and make sure the messages are clear, timely and consistent.

4. *Value and Visibility.* Sharing personal mentoring stories, role modeling, reward, recognition, and celebration are high-leverage activities that create and sustain value and visibility. A principal who talks about his or her formative mentoring experiences, or shares best practices, actively promotes and supports mentoring by encouraging teachers to take the time to mentor and, by mentoring others, models the way for others and promotes the visibility of mentoring.

Celebrating small and large milestones, bringing closure to a relationship or a cycle of mentoring (on a programmatic basis), can create huge value. It provides an opportunity to elevate and expand knowledge about mentoring, share learning, align the culture, honor achievement, provide incentives for the future, and reinforce the purpose and vision.

Create forums for sharing best practices and personal mentoring stories. Find ways to recognize, reward and celebrate mentoring excellence. Encourage leaders to take the time and mentor others.

5. *Demand.* Demand for mentoring has a multiplier effect. When it is present, there is a buzz about mentoring, increased interest in mentoring, and self-perpetuating participation. People seek mentoring as a way to strengthen and develop themselves and look for mentoring opportunities. Mentors become mentees and mentees become mentors. People engage in multiple mentoring relationships, often simultaneously. Demand spurs reflective conversation and dialogue about mentoring, adding to its value and visibility.

Look for ways to create a buzz about mentoring. Create opportunities for staff to engage in multiple relationships throughout their careers. Be responsive to requests. Involve stakeholders (teachers, staff, etc.) in planning new mentoring activities.

6. *Multiple mentoring opportunities.* In a mentoring culture, there is no single approach, type, or option for mentoring. Many exist. Although some mentoring activity goes on in nearly every school, most need to work at creating a culture that concurrently advances and supports multiple types of opportunities. For example, in some schools, group mentoring is coupled with one-

on-one mentoring; the learning from one reinforces the other.

Ask your leadership team to brainstorm a list of specific learning opportunities that might appeal to different learning styles. Identify specific ways in which your institution can support these opportunities. Add to the list over time. Develop case studies to demonstrate how to maximize opportunities.

7. *Education and training.* Mentoring education and training contribute to organizational readiness and promote productive and meaningful learning that ultimately builds individual and organizational capacity. In a mentoring culture, mentor training and education focuses more on the learner than on the program. There are regular educational opportunities to deepen mentoring practice, not just at the start of a program or relationship. Using experiential learning techniques, they encourage participants to reflect on their roles as mentor or mentee, bringing their distinct experiences, personal and generational histories, cultural contexts, and diverse socio-demographics (including assumptions, values, and behaviors) to the education and training.


Make sure periodic mentoring education and training opportunities are strategically integrated into the staff development curriculum. Provide opportunities for “next-step” education and advanced skills training for more experienced mentors. Create opportunities for mentors to meet regularly to exchange best practices and promote peer learning.

8. *Safety Nets.* Mentoring cultures establish safety nets to overcome or avoid potential stumbling blocks and roadblocks with minimum repercussion and risk. A safety net provides just-in-time support that enables those engaged in mentoring to move forward coherently. Institutions that proactively anticipate challenges are more likely to establish resilient and responsive mentoring safety nets than those that do not.

Establish reliable safety nets on multiple levels to support mentors and mentees as well as the program. Develop a contingency plan for overcoming stumbling blocks. Identify specific policies and procedures. Consider these questions: Who needs to be involved? What is the process? What should the timing be?

Back to the Mishkan

Creating a mentoring culture, like building the *mishkan*, is sacred work that connects us more deeply to one another as we take the mentoring journey that renews us individually and collectively as an educational community. An institution or initiative doesn't need to be large to successfully create a mentoring culture. However, it must be willing to enlarge its thinking. It doesn't need to possess extensive resources. Rather, it needs to utilize available resources wisely. It takes a commitment to do the right kind of work and provide space for individuals to bring their contribution to bear.

The presence of a mentoring culture expands the opportunities for individual, personal, and professional growth and development and prepares us to harness and focus our energy to create momentum that raises the bar for everyone. When the bar is raised, we can achieve amazing results. 

ENDNOTES:

1. Rosamund Stone Zander, Benjamin Zander. *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press; 2000.