Mentorship Program: Modern Outlook of Traditional Knowledge

Steven Spielberg famously said – “The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves,” and these lines aptly describe the concept of mentorship. The word mentoring originated from the famous Greek mythology of the Trojan War. Mentor was the friend of Odysseus who gave him the responsibility of shaping the personality of his son while Odysseus was gone for war. The magic began when Mentor started teaching all the aspects and experiences of his life to Odysseus’ son regardless of the importance of the experience. Eventually, his guidance helped Odysseus’ son become a better-groomed individual.[1] His method of teaching was adopted in the modern mentorship programs.

Mentorship was observed in almost all religions. In the Indian epic Mahabharata, Sri Krishna acted as a mentor of Arjuna. He guided and advised him throughout the war, but never acted as an active participant. Thus, it could be observed that mentors played a crucial role in the life of a mentee. It was also considered an important part of the earlier education system and was known as the gurukul system. The role of mentor was played by the guru, while shishya played the role of the mentee.[2] Despite the absence of formal education as in case of schools or pathshala, the students grew up to become renowned individuals. This system provided the mentee with the inspiration and motivation to bring out the best out of them. It is important to note from the above references that this program was useful both during earlier and later education. However, the impact and the importance of this education program during the later part of life is much more than during the earlier phase of life. It could help individuals in all the education fields.[3]

Mentor plays an important role of being the guiding spirit of the mentee. Mentor must provide information to the mentee, even if it is considered as naive and presumptuous. It is important to understand that any information can be considered naive, since experience could only be acquired and is nontransmittable. Imparting knowledge is also considered presumptuous since it cannot be owned. It has been proposed that the mentor has approximately seven roles while training a mentee [Figure 1].[4]

The first role played by the mentor is that of a teacher. Merely imparting knowledge or facts does not suffice, it is important to build the character of the mentee. It is rightly said by Henry Adams “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” The second role played by mentor is that of a sponsor. Introducing the mentee to the current norms of the society and making him/her suitable for the society is necessary. The values and norms that build the norms associated with science have to be introduced in the mentee.

Mentor also plays the role of an advisor and counselor. Mentee must be provided with the necessary experience, and a reality check, if necessary. Mentor must not provide direct solutions, but must create the path necessary for solving the problem in front of the mentee. The greatest quality of an advisor is to listen to all the problems and speaking only when necessary. Advice must be provided only when the mentee requests for the same. Mentor must act as an agent for removing the obstacles in front of the mentee. However, it is important that the mentee exhausts all his/her attempts for removing the obstacle, before taking assistance.

Mentors are mostly considered as role models, thus greatly influencing the life of a mentee. Such a role requires the mentor to themselves follow the values preached to the mentee. These values can be instilled with the help of deeds instead of words. The role models are often confused with the mentors. Role models may or may not become mentors, but mentors can become role models through their deeds. The mentor has to play the role of a coach and push the mentee for attaining the required action, while tolerating the occasional inaction of the mentee. The necessary motivation (such as the thrill of discover) must be supplied by the mentor. The mentee must be inspired to work outside the comfort zone for achieving success.
The mentor has to play the role of confidante, thus discussing the problems of the mentee and keeping it a secret. The confidence of a mentee has to be won by the mentor by maintaining constancy, reliability, congruity, and integrity. The mentee has to be liberated and treated as a peer, thus avoiding overprotection. In addition, appropriate criticism is necessary for the overall development of the mentee.

Apart from the above roles, a mentor has to provide the best method for handling failure. A mentee has to be assured that dwelling in the past would only cause damage to the future. The key to success, namely hard work and persistence, has to be inculcated in the mentee. They must be taught to maintain a strong focus, thus ensuring mental discipline. Managing time is another important parameter for success. Getting rid of the people who waste time from the life is another key to success. Learning to keep a check on the way to handle success would help in overcoming the remorse during failures.

The success of mentorship program rests on the shoulder of an experienced and motivated mentor. The mentor is required to be self-motivated with the main goal of inspiring the mentee to work in a synchronized manner. The mentor has to ensure that the mentees enrolled under them are given the lions’ share of their time. This time has to be dedicated equally to listening, as well as inspiring the mentee to achieve new heights. This task can only be achieved if the mentor takes the front row and leads by example rather than theoretically. Mentor has to show commitment and competence in this task. It is also necessary to empathize toward the difficulties faced by the mentee, rather than simply sympathizing.

Mentor can only achieve laurels from the followers, if their role is justified by their action. Proper mentoring skills have to be developed or inculcated while mentoring the mentee. The glory, if achieved, during this task has to be equally shared with the mentee. This would help in strengthening the respect in the relationship. Mentor must focus on ensuring the personal and academic growth of the mentee. Any personal bias must be avoided as it may influence the growth and development of the mentee. It should be ensured that the mentee must grow to become a better individual, rather than being a mere shadow. Overprotection of the mentee would hamper the overall development.

A detailed study based on evaluating students of undergraduate medical program enrolled in Karolinska Institute reported a lack of continuity among students.[5] The study also showed that students often felt anonymous while posted in hospital wards due to encounters with random individuals for shorter duration. It was observed that the students felt the need to share their experiences and emotions with someone of their own age group and profession, rather than the teacher of the course that they often attend. The students attending the mentoring program wanted to understand how this program would benefit them professionally and personally.

Mentorship program is considered as a boost to the professional and personal development of the mentee. This program had acted as a mean for increasing the self-confidence. Mentees described their mentors as rewarding, good, important, fun, and reassuring.

The mentor is merely considered to act as a road sign, rather than a passenger toward growth. It is believed that there is no “Guru Dakshina” as observed in the gurukul system. On the contrary, this program has to offer large number of advantages to the mentor.[6]

Mentorship program helps in improving the knowledge of the mentor through new contacts with colleagues and other students. It helps in gaining better perspective of the topic and concepts. A good mentor requires an improved knowledge regarding different skill sets. This requires detailed discussions with colleagues of different fields, thus adding to the current knowledge. Through mentoring, many mentors can hone their leadership skills.

Mentorship program helps build confidence in the mentor. It provides strength and skills necessary to stand confidently and boosts his or her life professionally and personally. There are several skills that are learned during this crucial phase of mentorship. In addition, volunteering as mentor shows that the person is willing to help others. It may also be added to the resume. These skills together act as a highlight to the resume and help in bringing it to the top in front of the potential employer.

To conclude, mentorship program is a bumpy ride in a car with shock absorbers. Both mentor and mentee face a variety of difficulties, but together they grow and improve to become better individuals. This program helps both the mentors and the mentees to achieve success in personal and professional areas. It provides better career guidance and a chance to make new contacts. Summarizing with a quote by Bob Proctor “A mentor is someone who sees more talent and ability within you, than you see in yourself, and helps bring it out of you.”

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