



# 75 THINGS TO DO WITH YOUR MENTEES:

Practical and Effective  
Development Ideas  
You can Try

by Linda Phillips-Jones, Ph.D.



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# 75 THINGS TO DO WITH YOUR MENTEES

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Author, *The New Mentors and Proteges*

You and your mentee have met, started to get acquainted, and talked in general terms about what you'll both accomplish during your mentoring partnership. You've had lunch, toured your organization, and talked about your job responsibilities. Now what?

One of the most dramatic changes in mentoring in the last 15 years is the addition of *focus* to formal mentoring relationships. Focus entails: specific objectives on which mentees work; scheduled times to meet; a process that includes a beginning, middle, and end; agreed-upon ways of giving each other feedback; and other procedures for you to help each other be successful in your mentoring roles. Another striking addition is focused *development activities* for mentees: effective learning experiences that help them grow and reach their objectives.

In a typical formal 12-month mentoring program, you'll usually connect one or two hours per month with your mentee. That means, in a year, you'll have contact only about 12-24 hours—a half-day or day! How can you help change a life in a day?

The Mentoring Group interviewed and observed hundreds of mentors and mentees, some of whom struggled and even failed and many who excelled in their partnerships. The following list is a sample of development activities used by the effective pairs. These are things you can do with your mentees. Some require your active involvement and might take place during your official "mentoring sessions" or spontaneously as

they come to mind or become available. Others allow you to play the role of "learning broker," where you encourage your mentees to pursue the activities on their own, then report back to you with the results.

Here, in no particular order, are 75 tested actions and activities. You'll see, in shaded boxes, some quotes from mentors and mentees and descriptions that present an activity in more detail. Read through the list, discuss possibilities with your mentees, and try the ones that make most sense.

1. Teach your mentees **how to get the most from you**: what expertise you actually have, why you're mentoring them, the boundaries you want to set, your pet peeves, and your typical styles of communicating and thinking.
2. Spend time getting to know each other and **building the relationship** before formally tackling the mentees' objectives.

**Relationship building** could include **talking about** the relationship, as well as about your interests and backgrounds. (With youths, it's usually good to start **doing** something together, not talking about the relationship per se.) Take plenty of time to build trust, especially in cross-difference (cross-cultural, cross-gender, cross-style, cross-age, etc.) mentoring partnerships.

3. Negotiate and come to **agreement** with your mentees on your **expectations**: how you'll work together during the formal relationship, where and how often you'll meet, the length of the relationship, confidentiality, and other items.
4. Urge your mentees to be **career self-reliant**, taking responsibility for their own development rather than waiting for you or others to develop them. Suggest they read (and discuss with you) Cliff Hakim's excellent book, ***We Are All Self-Employed***.
5. Have “**mentoring sessions**” or meetings every month. These can be as short as 15 minutes and as long as a couple of hours, often including lunch. Schedule these official times on your calendars.
6. Do some of your mentoring by **telephone**. These meetings will usually be shorter than in-person sessions and yet will still need structure. Help your mentees manage these meeting by arranging times, proposing agendas, and summarizing follow-up actions.
7. At the beginning of your mentoring sessions, enjoy some **small talk** and ask mentees to give you an **update** on their lives, projects, and objectives.
8. Offer to tell your **career story** in some detail. How did you start your career? What changes did you make along the way? Include high and low points and how these learning experiences helped you.
9. Help your mentees clarify their **personal visions**—what they would

like to be/do/own/influence/be with/be remembered for in the next one to five years.

Give them a **vision-related assignment** to write down their ideas for discussion with you next time. Have them picture a **perfect week** in their lives: *Where do they live? What are they doing? Who's around them? How's their fitness/health/appearance? What do they own? What are people saying about them?* (If it's too difficult for them to narrow down choices to one set of answers, ask them to create **two or more inviting scenarios**.)

An alternate activity: It's their 45<sup>th</sup> (or 60<sup>th</sup> or 85<sup>th</sup>) birthday party. *Who's there? As the guests raise their glasses to make a toast, what are they saying about the mentees as persons? About their accomplishments?*

10. Go to **lunch or coffee** throughout your relationship, and talk about **non-work topics**: family, hobbies, upcoming vacations, news events, movies, etc.
11. Ask them to **describe** the tentative goals that could be part of their visions. Avoid discouraging responses (“*You want to go into MANAGEMENT?!*”), even if you’re dubious. Maintain a neutral (or positive) tone and body language. Ask, “*If you had x, what would that bring you?*” Help them **take some steps** down their dream paths and come to their **own conclusions**.
12. Ask your mentees to “**triangulate**” **data** about their strengths and their weaknesses (better called *growth areas*).

**Sources of mentee skill data** can include: comments appearing in their past performance reviews, observations they've made about themselves, objective assessments, grades from educational experiences, their managers' comments, your observations of them as their mentor. If *at least two* (and preferably three or more) of these data sources point to the *same* strengths and growth areas, your mentees can reasonably assume they're accurate summaries.

13. Suggest that your mentees choose **one to three objectives**, preferably **skills**, to work on with you: one of their *strengths* (to leverage or build upon) and one or two of their *development/growth areas*.
14. Compare the **benefits and costs** of mentees' goals based on **their values** and **own past performance** (rather than goals that compare mentees with others' values, performance, and achievements).
15. **Introduce** them to at least two people who could be helpful to them. Give them tips on what to do and what to avoid.
16. Help them set up a **small team** to which they'll hold themselves accountable for their development. This "personal board of directors" might meet as a group or simply offer one-on-one support.
17. Invite them to some of your **key meetings**. These might include your staff meetings, important customer interactions, or nonconfidential meetings held by your own manager. Prepare mentees (and the other attendees) beforehand, and debrief the meetings with your mentees afterward.
18. Conduct "**Windshield University**." Have fruitful discussions (mentoring sessions) driving in your car to and from meetings and other events.
19. **Return** your mentees' phone calls and e-mails **within 24 hours** whenever possible, even to say "*I got your message and will get back to you.*"
20. **Fax** them potentially useful **articles**.
21. **Critique** their **resumes**. Provide specific suggestions and examples for any changes you recommend.
22. Offer to **edit** a letter, proposal, or other **document they write**.
23. **Suggest a presentation** they could make to a group.
24. Show your mentees how to **pull learning** from people and situations they experience, even those that seem, on the surface, irrelevant to them.

*Perhaps the most crucial skill of all when it comes to personal growth is learning how to create a learning environment wherever you are. . . . Treat people in ways that make them want to coach you, support you, give you feedback, and allow you to make mistakes. Seek out feedback on your impact and information on what you might do differently. Experiment. Take time to reflect, absorb, and incorporate.*

— Morgan W. McCall, Jr.  
**High Flyers**, page 229

- 25. Let them **listen in** on appropriate **conference calls** with customers or colleagues. Be certain your callers agree.
- 26. **Go with them** to events (e.g., conferences, cultural events) important to them.
- 27. Be a “**shadow consultant**” on parts of projects they’re doing. As you discuss their steps, decisions, strategies, and feelings, you’ll have live data on their knowledge, abilities, and attitudes.
- 28. Suggest a safe non-job, community setting to **develop** your mentees’ **skills**. Ideas include joining Toastmasters or leading a youth project.
- 29. **Read** about your mentees’ backgrounds (e.g., women’s issues, history of their race or culture).

One master mentor had this suggestion. Instead of only reading about your mentees’ cultural history or concerns, read a book which that cultural group read growing up. For example, instead of only reading what sociologists or anthropologists say about Vietnamese culture, find and read a copy of a book-length poem, ***Kim Van Kieu***, read by many Vietnamese.

- 30. Give them one-on-one sincere, frequent, specific **praise**. State at least four praises for every correction you offer. Create an inclusive environment that says: “*I believe in you and know you’re very able.*”
- 31. Ask mentees to **take the lead** on your mentoring sessions: propose

- an agenda, keep the meeting moving, summarize agreements, etc.
- 32. Send mentees a **card** on their birthdays or other milestones. Write an inspiring note; perhaps include a **quote** from someone or a book you value.
- 33. Think of your mentoring sessions as “**mini-laboratories**.” Coach mentees on how they come across and affect you in these labs.

*As mentors, we’d like to be a bird on the shoulders of our mentees and observe them as they leave our sessions and implement the strategies the two of us discuss. Although we may occasionally see them perform their skills “on the outside” and (with their permission) get feedback about their performance from others (such as their managers), we’re stuck with two main sources of data: what they tell us about their performance and what we actually observe happening in front of us in the sessions.*

*Instead of seeing this as a limitation, work with these data. Observe your mentees carefully. Are they late to your sessions or always saying “Yes, but...”? They’re probably also doing this with others, thus sabotaging their success. Note how they talk and act, have them practice skills (e.g., persuading or influencing) on you. Pay attention to your reactions, and give mentees honest feedback on how they present themselves.*

— Dr. Linda Phillips-Jones, Psychologist

- 34. **Co-author** articles with your mentees. Give them at least “junior author” status.

35. **Ask their advice** about a project or problem on which you're working.
36. **Tell how you used** your mentees' advice in solving your problem or in completing your project.
37. Explain some of the “**unwritten rules**” you've learned about being successful in your organization.

*I taught him some of the informal rules that don't show up in the [employees'] handbook: Always leave a job or group on good terms; you'll probably be working for those people again sometime. Learn what the 'open door policy' really means to your manager. Never bad mouth your boss. Always give public credit to the team; you didn't do it alone. Never, ever do something unethical around here; ask if you aren't sure.*

— Senior manager-mentor

38. **Teach** your mentees, step-by-step, a **process** (e.g., getting a group's buy-in on an idea) that you know very well.
39. Write at least one **encouraging note** or e-mail to each mentee during your partnerships. Include at least three well-thought-out sentences.
40. Have your mentees **teach you** something.

*If you're mentoring a young person, have him/her teach you how to use your computer in new ways. Most will have a faster or newer idea to use with basic operations, graphics, games, or*

*the Internet. You'll not only be humbled as you learn from someone younger than you, but they'll learn something about teaching, and given the right attitude, your trust quotient will go way up.*

— Successful youth program director

41. Inspire your mentees by having them **observe** you (or someone else) doing something challenging and difficult.
42. Help them research, then write up or draw a chart of several **career paths** they might take within your organization (or elsewhere).
43. Suggest that they **interview** at least five individuals happy with particular career decisions and five who have had second thoughts. Ask them to present the findings to you and perhaps the other mentees.
44. Ask mentees to **give you specific feedback—positive and corrective**—on something you **wrote** or on an **action** you took.
45. **Observe** them giving **presentations**. Get permission to give them feedback—privately.
46. If you can't attend your mentees' presentations, ask them to **videotape** themselves and let you **see and critique** the tapes.
47. **Read a book or article** they recommend, and offer to **compare your reactions** with theirs.
48. Loan mentees helpful **books**, **tapes**, or **CDs**.

- 49. Help your mentees feel valued and respected by you by **asking frequent questions** about their views, activities, and backgrounds.
  - 50. **Practice** upcoming situations they face.
- In your **practice role-plays**, try three twists: the first time, play your mentees' roles, modeling approaches they could take. Next, take the other parties' roles. Start by acting their opponents' parts in a supportive way. Finally, play them again, this time in challenging ways so your mentees can increase their self-confidence in handling difficult situations.
- 54. **Refuse all calls** and other interruptions during your mentoring sessions. Let your mentees know that they take precedent over such intrusions.
  - 55. Provide **visibility** for your mentees. Let them **be seen with you** at meetings, or have them make **presentations to your group**.
  - 56. Make "**process comments**" during your interactions. Don't assume they understand all they experience with you.

- 51. Occasionally **call unexpectedly**, just to check in.

One mentee described how shocked and happy he was to receive a few unexpected phone calls from his ultra-busy, high-level mentor. *"I couldn't believe he took time to phone me, sometimes from airports. He'd say something like, 'I was just thinking about you and wondered how such and such turned out.' I think that may have been the best part of our relationship. He made me feel important and valuable."*

- 52. **Link up with other** mentor-mentee pairs for lunch or another activity. Notice how your mentees interact in these social situations and later discuss your observations with them.
- 53. Have your mentees **shadow** or observe you as you work. Make it impactful through "structured

- shadowing." Prepare them beforehand, do the activity, and debrief afterward.
- 54. **Refuse all calls** and other interruptions during your mentoring sessions. Let your mentees know that they take precedent over such intrusions.
- 55. Provide **visibility** for your mentees. Let them **be seen with you** at meetings, or have them make **presentations to your group**.
- 56. Make "**process comments**" during your interactions. Don't assume they understand all they experience with you.

Offer such process comments as the following:

*"I just put my phone on 'call forward.' This time with you is too important for me to be interrupted."*

*"Watch how Henri and Melvin interact in the meeting. They're competing for one new management slot."*

*"Notice in this draft memo that I started with what I'd like from the person, followed by the reasons why."*

- 57. With your mentees, **team-teach a concept or process** to a gathering of other mentors and mentees.
- 58. Have your mentees complete **specific tasks on your projects**. Be certain these tasks *build the mentees' skills* and are *in keeping with their objectives*.

59. Help your mentees learn how to informally **measure** their “baseline” and progress on **acquisition of knowledge or skills**, or on **changes in attitude**.

Examples of **self-measures**: For a skill such as *writing clearly*, show them how to choose a number (say 3) on a scale of 1 to 10 that describes where they are *now*, then a second number (say an 8) for where they’d like to be *by the end of* your mentoring partnership. Although the numbers are subjective, they’ll give you and your mentees a relative measure of progress.

60. Introduce them to more **formal tests and other measures** of abilities, interests, values, and personality characteristics. Help them find places to take such instruments.
61. With permission from your mentees, **praise them to and in front of others**.
62. Help your mentees identify potential **career or business risks** they’ll face in the next few months (e.g., risks related to deadlines, quality, communication, and ethics). Together, plan ways to minimize them.
63. **Laugh** together, often. Exchange jokes and cartoons, and relate funny stories about yourselves.
64. On rare occasions, if asked, **intervene as an advocate** for your mentees with people and situations that are very difficult for them.
65. **Study how they conceptualize** issues and problems.

**Understanding how your mentees think:** Have them explain how they made decisions and what they considered along the way, then note any patterns and inconsistencies that need work. Also **ask** thought-provoking, open-ended **questions** that help your mentees think in new ways. (“*What if that didn’t happen?*” “*Imagine this scenario . . . What would you do?*”)

66. **Check** with your mentees from time to time on the quality of your mentoring relationships. Ask if you’re interacting often enough, their views of the help you’re providing, and how things could be improved.
67. If your mentees agree, **have lunch or coffee** with them and **their managers** (or teachers, if they’re students).
68. If appropriate, ask to **meet key members of your mentees’ families** so you can gain a deeper appreciation for their history and situations.
69. Send your mentees to **represent you** at meetings. Prepare them well for the task, including how to introduce themselves, what they’re authorized to do/not do, and what notes to take.
70. Help your mentees identify **classes and workshops** to take.
71. **Take a course or workshop** with them.

One mentor said her mentee suggested they take a tennis class together. The mentor, who thought of herself as very

unathletic, reluctantly agreed. They began an experience that turned out to be fun. When the mentee had to quit because of her job schedule, the mentor persisted with the lessons and began to excel. Now she has a new leisure activity and sees her athletic side in a new light.

72. Do **volunteer work** together. Serve on a committee or provide physical labor for causes that you and your mentees support.
73. **Prepare in advance** for D-Day (Departure Day). As it nears, ask, “*What do we still need to accomplish before we end our formal partnership?*” “*How do we want our relationship to be (extended formal, informal, friendship, other) after our official close?*”
74. Have an **official “ending”** of your formal mentoring relationships. If you’re on your own (or there’s no formal program event), invite your mentee to a final get-together or a closing phone call.

One mentor of youths said he always gives his mentees a letter during their closing meeting, which is usually over lunch. In the handwritten letter, he writes the many positive qualities and abilities he’s observed in the mentee, what the relationship has meant to him, one or more successful future scenarios he pictures for the mentee, and invites the mentee to keep in touch. Do you think those letters are ever thrown away?

75. Join other mentors to plan a **closure celebration** for mentees who successfully complete their mentoring relationships. Have some participants share what their involvement has meant to them. Consider giving certificates or other mementos.

This list is only a sample. You’re probably doing many innovative things with and for your mentees that don’t appear here. THE MENTORING GROUP would love to learn from you and share your ideas with other mentors. Please e-mail, fax, write, or call us.

*The best advisors, helpers, friends always are those not who tell us how to act in special cases, but who give us, out of themselves, the ardent spirit and desire to act right, and leave us then, even through many blunders, to find out what our own form of right action is.*

— Phillips Brooks

## RESOURCES

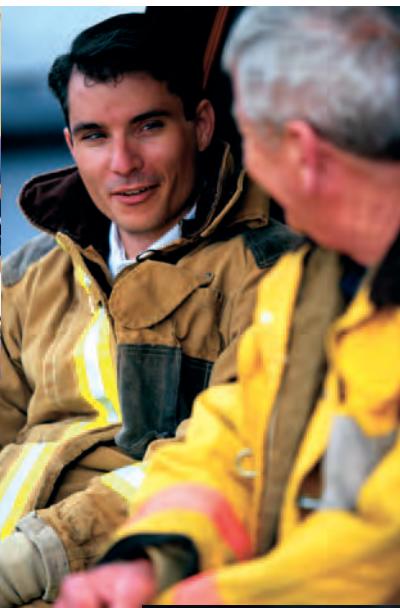
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## **About the Author**

Dr. Linda Phillips-Jones was a licensed psychologist, the author of various publications, and a consultant to a wide range of organizations. Dr. Phillips-Jones passed away in December of 2006 after a valiant six-year fight with four rounds of cancer. CCC/The Mentoring Group continues to promote Dr. Linda's mentoring vision through her publications and philosophy on mentoring.

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