

SKILLS FOR SUCCESSFUL MENTORING:

Competencies of Outstanding Mentors and Mentees

by Linda Phillips-Jones, Ph.D.

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Author, *The New Mentors and Proteges*

Effective mentoring requires more than common sense. Research indicates that mentors and mentees who develop and manage successful mentoring partnerships demonstrate a number of specific, identifiable *skills* that enable learning and change to take place. This strategy booklet describes these skills and provides a tool for you to assess yourself informally on each skill.

The Identification of Mentoring Skills

For years, individuals assumed that the process of mentoring was somewhat mysterious. These relationships just happened, and “chemistry” had to be present. It was impossible (even somewhat sacrilegious) to analyze and describe the specifics of what was going on in these arrangements. Analyzing and putting names to behaviors would theoretically kill them.

Some people were able to find mentoring relationships, while many individuals were unaware of how to get started with mentoring and missed out on one of the most powerful development strategies ever devised.

Linda Phillips-Jones (1977) studied hundreds of mentor-mentee partnerships as well as individuals unable to identify any mentors in their lives. The conclusion: mentoring was much more examinable and yet more complex than first thought.

On the “demystifying” side, Phillips-Jones discovered that effective mentors and mentees use *specific processes and skills* throughout their relationships. Further, the skills and

processes can be *learned*, and relationships can be better—more enjoyable, productive, and even time-efficient—as a result.

Additional research by The Mentoring Group revealed that unless a fairly *structured process* and specific skills are applied, mediocre mentoring relationships occur. Not much happens, and participants become frustrated with their well-intended but haphazard efforts. Worse, disappointed participants become convinced that mentoring doesn’t work.

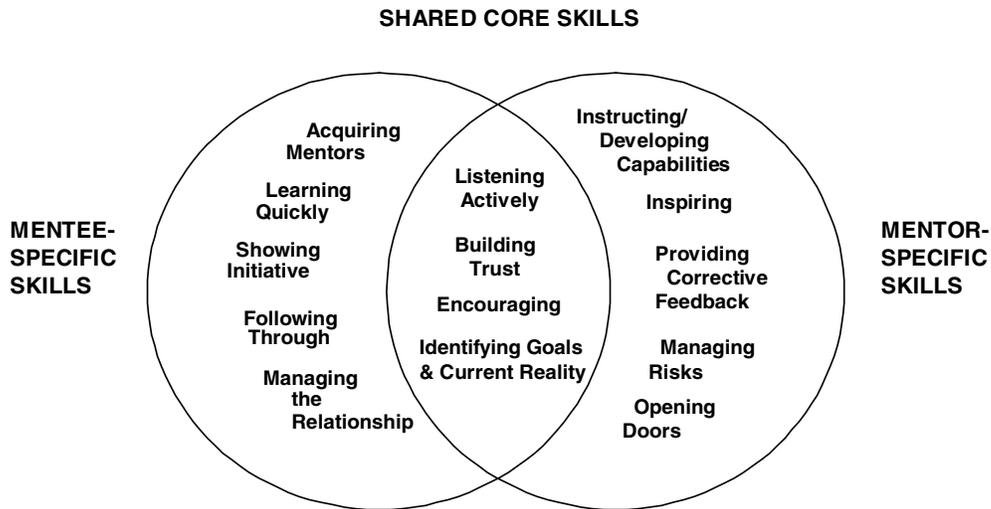
On the positive side, when individuals use these skills and add structure, important, satisfying changes take place in the lives of both mentees and mentors.

A skill is a learned, *observable behavior* you perform that indicates (to someone else) how well you can do something. The set of skills described here constitutes your overall ability to mentor and be mentored.

If you possess these skills to an adequate *quality level*—and if you use them as *frequently* as called for—your chances of having mutually satisfying and productive mentoring relationships will be greatly enhanced. The model on the next page illustrates the *shared* core skills used by both mentors and mentees and the *unique* skills needed by each group.

To help you be a more skilled mentor and mentee, look at the model, review the descriptions of these mentoring skills and the behaviors that make up each one, and start using the skills with the people in your life.

THE MENTORING SKILLS MODEL



Core Mentoring Skills

Both mentors and mentees should utilize the following *core* skills in their mentoring partnerships.

1. Listening Actively

Active listening is the most basic mentoring skill; the other skills build on—and require—it. When you listen well, you demonstrate to your mentors and mentees that their concerns have been heard and understood. As a result, they feel *accepted* by you, and trust builds. The way you indicate you’re listening intently is by performing several observable behaviors. For example, if you’re an excellent listener, you:

- appear genuinely interested by making encouraging responses such as “*Hmmm . . .*” and “*Interesting . . .*” or sometimes reflecting back (paraphrasing) certain comments to show you’ve grasped the meaning and feelings behind the message;

- use appropriate nonverbal language such as looking directly into people’s eyes, nodding your head, leaning slightly toward them, frowning, or smiling where appropriate;

- avoid interrupting mentors and mentees while they’re talking;

- remember and show interest in things they’ve said in the past (“*By the way, how did the meeting with your manager go?*”); and

- summarize the key elements of what each of you said.

Resist the impulse always to turn the conversation to *your* experiences and opinions and to find *immediate solutions* to problems you may be hearing. Listen carefully first; problem solve much later. If your mentors and mentees have a habit of immediate problem solving, see if you can help them be better listeners and problem explorers.

2. Building Trust

The more that your mentors and mentees trust you, the more committed they'll be to your partnerships with them, and the more effective you'll be. This trust develops over time—if your mentors and mentees observe certain appropriate behaviors on your part. To become trustable, you must:

- keep confidences shared by your mentors and mentees;
- spend appropriate time together;
- follow through on your promises to them;
- respect your mentors' and mentees' boundaries;
- admit your errors and take responsibility for correcting them; and
- tactfully tell your partners if and why you disagree or are dissatisfied with something so they'll know you're honest with them.

Particularly with cross-difference (e.g., gender, culture, style, age) mentoring, trust-building is crucial and has to be developed over time.

3. Encouraging

According to Phillips-Jones' research, the most valued mentoring skill is giving encouragement. This includes giving your mentoring partners recognition and sincere positive verbal feedback.

Mentors and mentees at several Fortune 500 companies revealed in interviews that positive verbal reinforcement—praise—was rare and even publicly discounted in their organizations. However, most admitted enjoying being recognized for accomplishments and abilities and receiving positive feedback—provided such attention was sincere and not overdone. Interviewees said they wished such behaviors were a greater part of their organizational cultures.

When was the last time you received too much praise? If never, you're not alone. Effective mentors encourage their mentees, which in turn helps increase the mentees' confidence and enables them to develop.

At the same time, successful mentees make a point of positively reinforcing their mentors, which serves to keep the mentors focused and motivated. Provide genuine, positive feedback to your mentors and mentees on a regular basis.

While there are many ways to encourage, and mentors and mentees can differ in the types and amounts of encouragement they like, you can:

- compliment your mentoring partners on accomplishments and actions;
- point out positive traits (such as perseverance and integrity) in addition to their performance and accomplishments;
- praise them privately, one-on-one;
- commend them in front of other people (being sensitive to any cultural and style preferences regarding public praise);
- express thanks and appreciation;
- write encouraging memos or e-mail and leave complimentary voice mail; and
- let them know how you use any help they give you.

Be certain that your praise and encouragement are sincere. In mentoring, err in the direction of *too much* praise, rather than too little. Some human development experts recommend a ratio of four or five praises for every corrective remark.

4. Identifying Goals and Current Reality

Whether you're a mentor or mentee, you should have a personal vision, specific goals, and a good grasp of current reality. As a mentor, be clear on and talk to your mentees about their visions, dreams, and career/life goals. They'll be interested in your current reality (your view of your strengths and limitations as well as the current reality of situations within your organization) and want help recognizing theirs as well.

As a mentee, you also need this skill. Before asking for help, you should know your tentative goals, strengths, what development you need, and the *specific* assistance you'd like. You should discuss these with your mentors. The more aware you are of these, and the more accurately you can convey them to potential helpers, the more likely they'll be to assist your next steps. To demonstrate this mentoring skill:

- know what's important to you, what you value and desire most;
- recognize areas in which you're able to perform well, very concrete examples of behaviors you can perform at the good-to-excellent level;
- identify specific weaknesses or growth areas observed in yourself and ones noted by others;
- set tentative one- to five-year goals to reach in your personal life and career; and
- describe accurately the reality of your abilities and situations.

Effective mentors and mentees are constantly fine-tuning this self-knowledge, incorporating new feedback and observations on a regular basis. Peter M. Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, mentions these skills as part of "personal mastery," which he calls a journey, not a destination.

One effective individual, a former engineer who was currently a division manager (and a mentee in two mentoring partnerships), demonstrated her skill of identifying goals and current reality by writing this:

"My long-range goal is to be a general manager or vice president within ten years. My technical skills as an engineer and my skills (as an operations manager) are strong. I now manage 75 men and women. I'm weaker in sales and marketing."

"I expect to reach my goal by continuing to build our business, gaining some strong marketing and sales OJT in a temporary lateral assignment, getting coaching from my two—and probably future—mentors, providing formal mentoring to at least one promising individual a year, and hopefully, running one of our factories in about five years. My back-up goal is to leave and start my own company."

Model this skill by continually working on your own goals. Show your mentors and mentees how to take a less than ideal current reality and *pull* that reality toward their goals.

Critical Skills for Mentors

In addition to the core mentoring skills described above, mentors use several specific competencies in an attempt to help mentees develop.

1. Instructing/Developing Capabilities

Probably all mentors do some teaching or instructing as part of their mentoring. The skill is especially important in formal mentoring. This seldom means that you'll give formal speeches and lectures. Instead, your instructing will usually be more informal—from modeling specific behaviors to conveying ideas and processes one-on-one, in a tutoring mode. You'll:

- be a "learning broker" as you assist your mentees in finding resources such as people, books, software, websites, and other information sources;

- teach your mentees new knowledge, skills, and attitudes by explaining, giving effective examples, and asking thought-provoking questions;
- help your mentees gain broader perspectives of their organizations including history, values, culture, and politics;
- demonstrate or model effective behaviors, pointing out what you're trying to do; and
- help them monitor performance and refocus steps as needed.

A key part of your instruction is teaching *the mentoring process*. You can do this by making *process comments*—pointing out, naming, and otherwise getting your mentees to recognize which aspect of mentoring you're doing at the time—and why.

Whoever cares to learn will always find a teacher.

— German proverb

2. Inspiring

One skill that separates superb mentors from very good ones is an ability to inspire their mentees to greatness. By setting an example yourself and helping your mentees experience other inspirational people and situations, you can help them onto future paths that excite and motivate—even beyond their original dreams. Mentors vary in their ability to be inspiring. See if you can:

- do inspiring actions yourself which challenge your mentees to improve;
- help them observe others who are inspiring;
- arrange other inspirational experiences for them;
- challenge them to rise above the mundane and do important things in life; and

- help them recognize inspiring actions they took in the past and ways to excel again.

It's always tempting to tell mentees what to do and, in fact, to have them follow in your footsteps. Your challenge as a mentor is to ensure that your mentees identify and pursue *their own form of greatness, not necessarily yours*.

Some outstanding mentors **use language**—stories, metaphors, and powerful phrases—to inspire their mentees. Is this a mentoring behavior you could hone during the coming months?

3. Providing Corrective Feedback

In addition to giving frequent and sincere positive feedback, effective mentors should also be willing and able to give mentees *corrective feedback*.

When you observe your mentees making mistakes or performing in less than desirable ways, you should be direct with your mentees, letting them know what you perceive and providing some better ways for handling the situations. It will probably be better for them to hear it from you than from others. This is an aspect of the mentor's protection skill, Managing Risks, described later.

One of the *first things* you can discuss with your mentees is *if and how* they'd like to receive this feedback. People are more willing to hear corrective feedback if they've given permission and know in advance it's coming. At the same time, you'll be more likely to give feedback if you're invited to do so. Attempt to:

- use positive, non-derogatory, business-like words and tone of voice with mentees when their behaviors or products aren't satisfactory;
- give corrective feedback in private;
- give the feedback as soon as feasible after the performance;

- give specific (as opposed to vague) feedback on behaviors; and
- offer useful suggestions for them to try next time, offering to be a resource when that time occurs.

Use the Encouraging skill much more often than the skill of Providing Corrective Feedback.

4. Managing Risks

Another distinguishing characteristic of effective mentors is their willingness and ability to protect their mentees from disasters. One of your tasks is to prevent your mentees from making *unnecessary* mistakes as they learn to take *appropriate* risks. This skill of Managing Risks builds closely on the core skill of Building Trust, identified earlier. Some refer to this risk-management process as helping mentees “step out on the branch, then fly when ready.” You’ll:

- help your mentees recognize the risks involved in actions and projects, including some risks (and mistakes) you’ve experienced;
- make suggestions to help them avoid major mistakes (business, career, financial, personal, and other) in judgment or action;
- help them learn to prepare well, get wise counsel, then trust their own decisions and actions; and
- if requested in difficult situations, intervene as your mentees’ advocate with others.

Mentees and mentors in many corporations have identified Managing Risks as an *increasingly important* mentoring skill.

Typical Risks

Your mentees probably face **business risks and career risks**, potential danger zones in which they could make large errors and possibly jeopardize their positions, careers, or organizations. Here are some examples:

Business Risks

Dealing incorrectly with customers
Missing deadlines
Underestimating project costs
Doing something unethical
Compromising on quality

Career Risks

Offending certain people
Taking the wrong position
Staying in a job too long
Not being able to sell others on one’s own ideas
Failing to learn and improve

Some of these risks your mentees will recognize, and others only you—with your wisdom and experience—recognize. Still other challenges will seem more risky to your mentees than they really are. Offer to help your mentees identify and determine how to handle these risks with *recognition, prevention, and recovery* strategies.

5. Opening Doors

Mentors are usually in a position to provide visibility for their mentees. This means opening the right doors that allow them to meet people and to demonstrate to different audiences what they can do. *Research has shown that when mentors vouch for mentees in this way, their work is much more likely to be well received.* To open doors, you’ll:

- put in a good word to people who could help your mentees reach desired goals;
- personally introduce your mentees to appropriate contacts;
- make certain your mentees’ abilities are noticed by others;
- give your mentees assignments or opportunities that enable them to interact with important colleagues, suppliers, or customers; and

- suggest other resources for your mentees to pursue.

You'll probably open doors for your mentees only when you believe they're ready to go through them. Since your reputation may be affected by your doing this, you'll first want to see your mentees as capable and trustworthy. Explain this process to your mentees as part of the development effort.

One mentee raved about how his mentor opened numerous doors for him. The mentor took him to two key meetings, allowed him to co-author (with the mentor) several papers, set up an opportunity for the mentee to make a very visible oral presentation to a group of decision makers, and nominated him for a highly competitive leadership development program within the organization.

Critical Skills for Mentees

In addition to the core skills described earlier, mentees need to be competent in several areas.

1. Acquiring Mentors

Becoming a successful mentee isn't a passive experience. In the spirit of career self-reliance, you should be very active in selecting and negotiating with *several* mentors who can help you succeed. Good mentors now have a wide choice of potential mentees, so you must skillfully handle the acquisition process. For example, be able to:

- identify a desirable pool of individuals who potentially can provide you with mentoring;
- actively search for several mentors;
- “sell” potential helpers on the idea of providing mentoring to you (in addition to—or as opposed to—others they might help);
- convey your specific needs and goals to prospective mentors; and

- negotiate the mentoring arrangements with your mentors, including agreements on goals, expectations, length of the relationships, confidentiality, feedback processes, and meeting schedules.

For detailed tips on acquiring appropriate mentors, see ***Strategies for Getting the Mentoring You Need***. For more ideas on career self-reliance, read the excellent book, ***We Are All Self-Employed***, by Cliff Hakim. (Both are listed in **Resources**.)

2. Learning Quickly

Mentors enjoy working with mentees who learn quickly and take seriously any efforts to teach them. Typically, your mentors want you to be a “quick study.” You should work hard at directly and indirectly learning *everything* you can as rapidly as possible. Try to:

- apply the knowledge and skills presented to you, and be ready to tell your mentors how you applied them;
- observe carefully and learn indirectly from the modeled actions of your mentors and others;
- study materials (those given by your mentors and materials you seek out) related to your development areas;
- integrate new things you learn into your own conceptual framework for problem solving; and
- receive feedback nondefensively. (You should ask for specifics and be appreciative of the feedback. If your mentors have misperceived a fact, diplomatically tell them.)

As your mentoring relationships proceed and mature, you'll probably have ample opportunities to debate and disagree with your mentors. In the beginning, you should display a strong learning attitude, be willing to consider new ideas, and show an openness to be proven wrong.

Unclear about how to become a “quick study”? Try what one dedicated mentee did. She earned a degree in education and English then decided to go back to college and enter pre-med. The math, physics, and chemistry were daunting—her weakest areas by far. Not wanting to fail, she spent at least eight hours every day reading chapters, re-reading and marking them with a yellow highlighter, typing outlines of the chapters, and studying them alone and with study partners. At least two additional hours each day she found an empty classroom and wrote and rewrote math, chemistry, and physics formulas on chalkboards until she could recite them in her sleep.

A quick study? No, a slow study at first. But eventually she got it—and her 4.0. How committed do you think her professor mentors were to her success?

3. Showing Initiative

The newest approach to mentoring encourages the mentees to manage the relationships and show considerable initiative (see the skill, *Managing the Relationship*, on the next page). Even with this new trend, some mentors will attempt to lead the relationships and expect you to follow. Others will expect you to drive the process from the beginning.

Either way, they’ll expect you to show the *right amount* of initiative. They’ll observe the things you do *on your own* to develop. At times, most mentors will expect some following from you, particularly when your activities could have ramifications for them (e.g., approaching one of their valued contacts). As an effective mentee, you:

- know when and when *not* to show initiative;
- ask appropriate questions to clarify and get more information;
- pursue useful resources on your own;

- take informed risks (stretch beyond your usual comfort level) in order to acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and
- go beyond what your mentors suggest; that is, take their ideas and show creative or ambitious ways of using them.

Mentors vary in the amounts and timing of initiative they like from their mentees. Discuss this early in your relationships to establish preferences and expectations and to negotiate arrangements that work for all.

4. Following Through

These days, it’s a mentors’ market. Mentees who don’t follow through on tasks and commitments are often dropped and replaced with mentees who do. To demonstrate this skill:

- keep all agreements made with your mentors;
- complete agreed-upon tasks on time;
- try out their suggestions and report back the results;
- explain in advance if you want to change or break an agreement; and
- persist with difficult tasks even when you’re discouraged.

An informal poll of mentors by Phillips-Jones revealed that several were frustrated with mentees who failed to follow through on agreed-upon tasks. Some mentors even refused to enter new mentoring partnerships. They concluded that they were working harder on their mentees’ lives than the mentees were doing for themselves!

5. Managing the Relationship

Even when your mentors try to take a strong lead, you're the one who should manage the relationships. It's *your* development, and you must take responsibility for its process and outcomes. To go through this journey, you can:

- describe the general process of being mentored—how it works and why it's powerful;
 - stay up to date with each of your mentors on issues between you, goals to reach, satisfaction with your meeting schedules, etc.;
 - analyze the current status of your mentoring partnerships, and determine where to go next with them;
- prepare for the end of your mentoring relationships; and
 - leave the formal relationships on amicable terms, even if the relationships continue on an informal basis.

Carefully track your mentoring relationships, and make suggestions as needed.

Final Thoughts

These are the critical skills needed by mentors and mentees for effective mentoring relationships. As a closing exercise to reinforce your learning, complete the mentoring skills self-assessment on the following page.

There are countless ways of achieving greatness, but any road to achieving one's maximum potential must be built on a bedrock of respect for the individual, a commitment to excellence, and a rejection of mediocrity.

— Buck Rodgers
Manager, professional baseball

MY MENTORING SKILLS

Directions: Assess your potential to be a successful mentor and mentee by rating yourself on the following mentoring skills. For each skill, circle the appropriate number. Total the numbers for each part (I, II, and III), and read the interpretations.

Mentoring Skill	Quality of Skill			
	Excellent	Very Good	Adequate	Poor
Part I. Shared Core Skills				
1. Listening Actively	5	3	1	0
2. Building Trust	5	3	1	0
3. Encouraging	5	3	1	0
4. Identifying Goals and Current Reality	5	3	1	0
	Subtotal Core Skills _____			
16-20	Excellent core skills; you could coach others; concentrate improvement efforts on fine-tuning your style			
11-15	Very good skills; continue to polish those skills that will make you even more effective and desirable as a mentor or mentee			
6-10	Adequate core skills; work on your less-developed skills in order to have better relationships			
5 or under	You'll benefit from coaching and practice on core skills; acquire training or coaching, and observe others who have strong skills			
Part II. Mentor-Specific Skills				
1. Instructing/Developing Capabilities	5	3	1	0
2. Inspiring	5	3	1	0
3. Providing Corrective Feedback	5	3	1	0
4. Managing Risks	5	3	1	0
5. Opening Doors	5	3	1	0
	Subtotal Mentor Skills _____			
20-25	Excellent mentor skills; you could coach others; concentrate improvement efforts on fine-tuning your style with particular mentees			
15-19	Very good skills; continue to polish those skills that will make you even more effective and desirable as a mentor			
10-14	Adequate mentor skills; work on your less-developed skills in order to acquire strong mentees and have better relationships with them			
9 or under	You'll benefit from coaching and practice on mentor skills; acquire training or coaching, and observe others who have strong skills			
Part III. Mentee-Specific Skills				
1. Acquiring Mentors	5	3	1	0
2. Learning Quickly	5	3	1	0
3. Showing Initiative	5	3	1	0
4. Following Through	5	3	1	0
5. Managing the Relationship	5	3	1	0
	Subtotal Mentee Skills _____			
20-25	Excellent mentee skills; you could coach other mentees; concentrate any improvement efforts on fine-tuning your style with particular mentors			
15-19	Very good skills; continue to polish those skills that will make you even more effective and desirable as a mentee			
10-14	Adequate mentee skills; work on your less-developed skills in order to acquire strong mentors and have better relationships with them			
9 or under	You'll benefit from coaching and practice on mentee skills; get training or coaching, and observe others who have strong skills			

RESOURCES

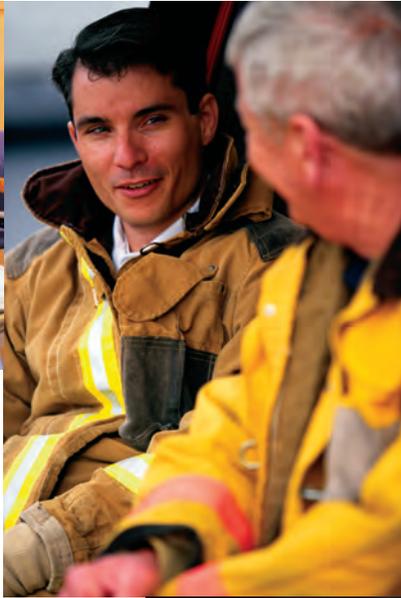
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About the Author

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.

This booklet appears as a chapter in ***The Mentoring Coordinator's Guide, The Mentor's Guide, and The Mentee's Guide***. For copies of any of these ***Guides***, contact CCC/The Mentoring Group, 13560 Mesa Drive, Grass Valley, CA 95949, www.mentoringgroup.com.

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