Be a Mentor – Get a Mentor

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Nearly every new teacher is urged to have a mentor to help guide them through their early years in the profession. Indeed, the U.S. Army stresses that every leader must have a mentor. But in my nearly four decades in uniform, not once was I told how to get a mentor or how to be one. So, is it any wonder that very few music educators have a true mentor?

*“Mentoring is a relationship between two people with the goal of professional and personal development. The ‘mentor’ is usually an experienced individual who shares knowledge, experience, and advice with a less experienced person, or ‘mentee.’”*

It’s important to focus on the definition above and maintain the goal of professional and personal development. To that end, true mentorship requires planning and preparation by the mentor and active participation by the mentee. Here are some steps to follow:

- Have an initial meeting (in person or by Skype or some other online platform) to discuss goals and a general plan for the relationship. This serves as an informal contract of what each party will do and ensure there are shared objectives. During that initial meeting:

\* The mentor must pledge total confidentiality. To be able to truly help with professional and personal development, the mentee must be able to reveal those areas he or she feels they need to improve. If those weaknesses or insecurities are ever shared with others, the relationship is effectively over.

\* Encourage the mentee to inform their supervisor about the relationship. A good boss will be thrilled and informing them avoids any perception of improper interference by the mentor.

\* Agree on frequency of the sessions and what the basic format will be. I like to spend the first half of any session focusing on the assigned reading (more on that later) with the second half being a more open discussion of current challenges, future goals, etc. As to frequency, monthly seems to work well. Any more and it becomes too routine. Any less frequently and it’s hard to establish continuity and build a shared knowledge base.

- Assign readings prior to each session. These readings should reflect what the mentee wishes to accomplish. I like to alternate books about leadership, change management, and personal growth with books about music and music education. Even if you have read the book before, read it again and make notes about salient points or things you’d like to discuss.

- Be willing to revise the plan, in consultation with the mentee. If a different approach is needed in terms of frequency and the type of assigned readings, adjust and adapt to their needs.

- Stay current in your knowledge of the profession. If you are no longer an active teacher, as each day passes, the relevance of your perspective and advice diminishes unless you proactively stay informed. Substitute teaching, attending workshops, and maintaining your professional memberships can help. War stories and “when I was there” tales may be fun for you to tell, but that’s not true mentoring. Remember, your goal is the “professional and personal development” of the mentee, not reliving your past.

Hopefully, you are thinking that being a mentor could be intellectually and personally satisfying (it is!) and you’re anxious to begin. Here’s the key point – it will usually fall on you to initiate “first contact.” While every new teacher is told they need to have a mentor, most are reticent to approach a master educator assuming that they are too busy or too important to bother with a new music teacher. Think about yourself as a twenty-something. Those experienced or retired teachers seemed so remote (and old). It’s up to us to search out these young music teachers and make the offer. Invite them to lunch or for a happy hour and see if they are interested in committing to a professional development relationship.

One other thing. While this has so far focused on the needs of new teachers, we shouldn’t forget the more experienced ones. They are often making difficult transitions to jobs with different demands than they faced at the start of their career. At the same time, because of their seniority, their bosses may not realize that they too must be taught and developed. What a blessing it would be for one of these future leaders of our profession to be able to spend developmental time with a master teacher and administrator.

For those who need a mentor (that’s pretty much everyone!) here’s the secret to getting one. Ask around and observe those who are “who you want to be when you grow up” and just ask them! I’m currently working with seven wonderful men and women and every one of them just asked.

I often joke that the Army must have really disliked me because now they send me a monthly check if I don’t come to work. If you are fortunate enough to be a retired music educator, being a mentor is a way for you to give back to the profession that has given you so much.

Contact Colonel (Retired) Thomas Palmatier at [www.ThomasPalmatier.com](http://www.ThomasPalmatier.com) if there are topics you’d like addressed in a future “InService” article.