

# Take the Next Step: Become a Mentor!

BY LAUREN J. CAISSE

We've all seen the commercials on television about being a mentor: being a Big Brother/Big Sister, the United Way, the National Mentoring Partnership ([www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)). Mentoring also occurs in the workplace and in various professional organizations for various reasons, such as helping new employees settle into a new company, creating and sharing knowledge, and developing critical skills to advance a career and to improve retention.<sup>1</sup>

## What is a "Mentor"?

A mentor is a trusted friend, counselor, or teacher; usually a more experienced person. In the professional sense, "mentoring" is pairing a newcomer or less-experienced person with a more experienced person who can advise and serve as examples as they advance in their careers, education, and as they build their networks.

## Formal vs. Informal Mentoring

### Formal Mentoring

A large number of companies have formal mentoring programs in place. At one firm that I previously worked at, a formal correspondence was sent out companywide touting the benefits of the new mentoring program that was being kicked off and asking whether employees wanted to be a mentor or a mentee. The response was strong: Many employees responded that they wanted to be one or the other. Once the deadline passed, mentors and mentees were paired up. There were stringent requirements: The mentors and mentees had to sign a form committing to meet for at least two hours per month for an entire year and submit monthly reports of their progress to the human resources department. Sadly, however, the program was not open for contracts or procurement personnel.

### Informal Mentoring

In contrast, many of us are the recipients or givers of informal mentoring. When I started my career with the U.S. government as a contracts specialist more than two decades ago, I had the great fortune of having a wonderful informal mentor, though I did not know it at the time. He was a seasoned contracting officer who spent tireless hours working with me, showing me the "hows" and "whys," training me, and providing me with guidance. The agency that I was in was on a shoe-string budget at that time and being sent to the Air Force Institute of Technology and the now-named Army Logistics University was not an option at that time; though what I learned as a mentee provided a very strong foundation for what I learned at these schools a few years later.

My mentor is the one who pushed me to excel: He gave me the encouragement I needed to finish my bachelor's degree (I was going nights), to not allow for mediocrity, and to strive for win-win contracts and negotiations. To this day, I tout his "fair and reasonable" approach in all of my dealings with my internal clients, my external clients, and my subcontractors. This fair and reasonable approach has fared me well. My mentor challenged me. Instead of answering my question directly, he would ask, "Where do you think you should look for that answer?" I'd give him a couple of thoughts and he'd respond with, "Try looking there and come back to me." I'd look and get back to him with my findings and we'd discuss them. The first few times this happened I was very frustrated. But I quickly learned to do my homework up front before going into his office with my questions. Often times he would not even give me an answer. Rather, we would hold discussions as to what the outcome would be if we did "x" or if we did "y." Reflecting back, he taught me advanced critical thinking skills.

My mentor believed in me, whether it was giving me a job recommendation to the private sector or writing letters of recommendation to an MBA program or law school. My mentor was always interested in what I was doing, both professionally and personally, even after he retired first from government service and then from the private sector. We never had a set time schedule to meet or specific topics of discussion; it was very informal and usually revolved around the projects that I was currently working or my question of the day as an enthusiastic contracting professional wanting to learn all that I could. I can truly see that he was my mentor, though we never labeled the relationship as such.



## Why Do We Need Mentoring?

The contracts profession is one such that kids, teenagers, and college students don't say, "I want to be a contract manager when I grow up!" In a way, the contracts profession is one that many of us have "fallen" into: the military rotated us into a contracts department; we landed in a contracts or procurement department by total accident and decided that it would be a great profession; or we started our careers elsewhere in a company or government organization and learned that there was a whole department that revolved around procuring needed materials, equipment, and services and managing contracts and subcontracts and it seemed pretty interesting.

## Benefits of Mentoring

There are numerous benefits of mentoring, on both a professional level and a personal level. Being a mentor is a great way to give back to others what you have learned.

## Employee Satisfaction

"Studies have shown that employees that participate in mentoring programs have a higher job satisfaction. Higher job satisfaction leads to increased productivity and reduced turnover."<sup>2</sup>

## Employee Retention

"Studies have shown that employees that are mentored stay on the job longer than those that are left to sink or swim."<sup>3</sup>

## Knowledge Sharing

Share your knowledge, especially with those who may never have worked on the other side of the fence. There are many contracting professionals that have never worked in the federal government in the 1102 series. Hence, these professionals may not know what the "1102 series" refers to (contracting personnel) or the intricacies of working within the federal government, especially the Department of Defense. Some examples include:



- How funding is derived at and what the numbers and letters in a funding document mean;
- How the *Federal Acquisition Regulation* is relatively new in that it only became effective on April 1, 1984; and
- How civilians fit in with officers and enlisted personnel.

### Experience Sharing

Sharing both the good and the bad experiences you have had in your career can be an invaluable tool to a mentee, whether it be why a certain position in a negotiation worked well or did not work well and what you might have done in hindsight, or in drafting effective requests for proposals, purchase orders, contracts, or subcontracts.

### Career Growth or Succession Planning

Mentoring programs provide an effective way to provide a career growth path to your employees. Growing your employees into more senior positions is an effective way to reduce hiring and turnover costs and keep employees continually striving to be the best that they can be. Mentoring is an effective mechanism for grooming employees to fill key roles as part of your organization's succession plan.<sup>4</sup>

On a smaller scale, advise on what classes or seminars would be beneficial, and what organizations the mentee could benefit from.

### Inspiration and Encouragement

Sometimes a mentor needs to just lend an ear or provide that little extra encouragement to the mentee. This, in and of itself, can go a long way.

## Conclusion

By becoming mentors, we can further the contracts profession. Whether it is through a formal mentoring program or an informal arrangement whereby you share your knowledge and experience, mentoring can truly benefit the profession. It doesn't take hours a week or even hours a month to be a mentor.

In November 2006, I received a phone call from my mentor's son informing me that my mentor had passed away the previous day. I was deeply saddened. At his wake, I learned from his wife and son that he had talked about me often. I was introduced to his grandchildren as "This is the Lauren that your grandfather always talked about." What an honor! **CM**

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Richard F. Fopiano, Lt. Colonel (Ret).

Send comments about this article to [cm@ncmahq.org](mailto:cm@ncmahq.org).

### ENDNOTES

1. See [www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/Mentoring.asp](http://www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/Mentoring.asp).
2. See [www.mentorscout.com/about/mentor-benefits.cfm](http://www.mentorscout.com/about/mentor-benefits.cfm).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*