Building Leaders of Character….One Protégé at a Time

Good ideas often happen over a cup of coffee. We've all been a party to this: taking a break from work, talking about "What If's". What if I were in charge for a day? And all of a sudden an idea sparks and hangs in mid-air for a moment. You have a decision to make: do I let it fall and disappear, or do I grab on to it and see what happens. This was the start of the CG Academy Mentor Program. Chatting over coffee; and $60K, 53 mentors and 109 protégés later and we're only on Year Two.

Why did we create this program?
Research and our own experience tell us that mentoring is a key component in successful leadership development programs and is seen as critical to leader development at all levels of an organization (including, in our case, undergraduates). In general, mentors offer two kinds of support to protégés, career-related and psychosocial (activities that influence the protégé's self-image and competence). Often we expect that any experienced leader can successfully mentor others to become leaders. However, most studies of successful mentoring programs assert that mentoring is a specific skill that needs to be trained and assessed. One expert in the field states the importance of mentor training: "It would appear that unless the mentor is an expert in all ways, it is the mentee who becomes the guinea pig." At the Academy and the Leadership Development Center we assert that we build Leaders of Character. To do this effectively, we need to build mentoring excellence at the Academy.

How did we create this program?
First, we discussed outcomes. Starting any successful program you need to begin with the end in mind: What did we hope to gain? Second, we looked at structure: How can we build mentoring excellence at the same time providing mentorship to protégés? In order to build skills-based mentoring excellence we needed to free up time for potential mentors, and time is money. So, when a grant opportunity appeared we applied. The proposal was to create a systematic program to develop, role-model, assess, and improve mentorship for student protégés. We proposed a comprehensive mentorship program that creates Lead Mentors who will train, coach, and assess 1st line mentors, who deal directly with student protégés. This would be a multiplying force over time as the core team of Lead Mentors increases, the number of 1st line mentors increases, and the number of protégés effectively mentored increases. Through funding of course and collateral release, these Lead Mentors were carefully recruited and selected, received rigorous mentorship training, and are responsible for assessment of the mentorship program. By valuing people's time and demonstrating that this program is important enough to buy their time, we had hoped to raise the perceived level of impact.

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Outcomes:
- Create Mentoring Excellence at the Coast Guard Academy.
- Develop a higher capacity for leadership development in students through mentorship.
- Develop the Coast Guard Leadership Competency *mentoring* in participant mentors and protégés.
- Provide opportunities for cadets of diverse backgrounds to feel more included in the Academy.

➤ Assess the mentoring program and its impact on leadership development.
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What did we do?
We wanted to start the program at a manageable level, because we weren't going to get it perfect the first time and hoped to mitigate some of the risk of our mistakes. The more we read and learned about successful mentoring programs, the higher our hopes soared. The program had to be voluntary for all participants; each mentor and protégé had to want to be there. Protégés had to have some choice in who their mentor would be, so we needed to find ways to get the candidates together to make informed decisions. The training had to be a rigorous, experiential skills-based approach; less theory, more hands on application that would not promote a one-size-fits-all approach. The mentor had to be skilled enough to tailor his or her mentoring style to the needs of each protégé. And there had to be accountability and commitment to the relationships. If a mentor was not holding up his or her end of the bargain, the mentor could be fired.

[picture insert]

Lead Mentor
1st LM   1st LM   1st LM
Protégé Protége   Protégé Protégé   Protégé Protégé
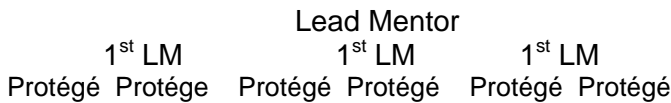
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What did we learn?
We are a quarter of the way into Year Two of the program and have learned a great deal. Participation must be optional; once you mandate the program, both the mentor and protégé shift from commitment to compliance and both the program and the mentoring relationships lose authenticity. Training for the mentors is absolutely essential for facilitating healthy dialogues and allowing the protégé to lead. The program should have some structure to set expectations and establish minimum standards to give each relationship the opportunity to grow, but not too much structure that alters the natural path – we refer to this as "unstructured structure." Most mentors joined the program to further develop their mentoring skills and meet their desire to interact with students. The program delivered on both accounts and is still growing. According to our Year One assessment results, 90%+ of mentors and protégés indicated that the program met their needs and they were satisfied with the program; 100% would recommend the program to others; and 100% attest that the program pushed them to learn and grow. In Year Two the program continues to grow and develop. Year Two saw a 30% increase in mentors and an 18% increase in cadet protégés. Additionally, our training program is now in demand for other mentoring programs at the Academy.
Sometimes the best ideas are hatched over a cup of coffee…

Look for future articles on our training program, matching strategy, and other lessons learned.

Quote from *protégé: "This is the best program at the Academy because the cadet and mentor are on level ground. They both volunteered so each other knows that they are here by choice and I'm not keeping them from something more important."*

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Leadership Competencies Addressed: *Mentoring, Taking Care of People, and Self-awareness and Learning*