

THE VALUE OF HAVING AND BEING A MENTOR

By Dr. Lin Stepp

A mentor is an individual who helps and guides another individual's professional development. Webster's defines the term as a trusted counselor or guide and, according to the Free Management Library, the primary role of a mentor is to help another person progress in their career and do their work more effectively. A mentor, ideally, is an individual who is already experienced and successful in a professional role who is willing to spend time to guide, advise, and support another individual new to the profession.

In every professional field, those individuals who have mentors generally rise to a higher level of success more quickly. In addition, organizations and employers that rank the highest with their members are those who have been found to have strong, proactive mentoring programs. Gunderson stressed that in only a few hours a month, a mentor can give invaluable help to an aspiring colleague. Having active mentors or mentoring programs within an organization has been found to improve member attitude and productivity, to enhance recruitment to the organization, and to increase retention. Taylor wrote that mentors help protégées to develop competencies, learn the norms of a corporate or professional culture, introduce mentees to important individuals that might benefit their career, and provide important emotional support and encouragement.

Obviously, the idea of creating mentorships within area RWA organizations has significant merit. Steven Bell wrote that finding a mentor is often the key to getting published for a new writer. Breaking the ice into publication is a challenge, and anytime someone with experience can help another through that process, innumerable tangible and intangible benefits accrue. The biographies of well-known writers often give fine tribute to those individuals who mentored and helped them to attain success.

What makes a good mentor? In an extensive study of research articles on the subject, here are the main attributes I found that define what a good mentor is.

- (1) A good mentor first has extensive personal success in the field in which they are offering mentoring help. Ideally, in the field of romance writing, an effective mentor has had a significant body of romance novels published and has had enough years in the writing profession to understand the writing and publication process.
- (2) A good mentor has the appropriate background and experience needed to help the mentee. The closer in content a mentor's work is to the mentee's the more successful the mentor will be in helping with content assistance and with important contacts. In RWA, obviously all well-published romance novelists can easily assist aspiring novelists, but when genre content can be similarly matched the relationship could be enhanced.
- (3) A good mentor helps the mentee navigate the less obvious parts of the workplace and helps them become initiated into the norms, language, and inner system of the professional publication structure. This is much harder to learn on one's own, and a mentor can be an invaluable aid in this area.
- (4) A good mentor offers positive, supportive encouragement. Writing is a lonely business, requiring extensive working time in an environment without collegial support or praise. A good mentor makes this process much lighter with positive encouragement, helpful information, and supportive contacts.

- (5) A good writing mentor helps a mentee to clarify their ideas and goals, to develop good work habits, and to network into important contacts that can lead to publication. A published writer can help an unpublished writer to clearly define their genre and can help steer the aspiring writer toward the right publishing routes for their work.
- (6) A good mentor must be willing to take the time to work with their mentee. Most sources suggest that the mentor must jump-start and initiate the mentoring relationship. This means meeting individually each month for a few hours to network and talk with the mentee and being willing to fully read the mentee's work. Simply hearing someone tell about their current writing project or reading a few pages of their writing cannot provide the information needed to become fully involved in a strong mentoring role.
- (7) A good mentor must be sincerely interested in another person's growth. This takes a level of unselfishness and commitment not always found in the world today. Yet many mentors have said that nothing can match the satisfaction that can be gained from sharing experiences and expertise to help another succeed. Most writing mentors experience an intense joy in seeing their mentee rise to success and in knowing that they had a part in that journey.

The organizational structure of RWA creates many opportunities for general mentoring help, but often local chapters fall short in providing one-on-one mentoring relationships. One of the reasons for this may be gender-related. Historically, women have not enjoyed access to mentors in the same way as men, and the bulk of RWA members are women. It is difficult for women to find mentors among other women. Many researchers believe the competitiveness of the glass ceiling holds experienced and competent women back from mentoring and encouraging less experienced colleagues. Successful women often feel that they have climbed to the top of their field professionally, or attained success, through their own efforts with no help from others, so why should they help anyone else? Competitively and, perhaps, in unconscious low self-esteem, they fear all rivals. Their own insecurity in their level of success holds them back from reaching out a hand to another woman who they view, unconsciously, as a potential rival.

Men, for whom the playing field has always been more level, have always more readily helped other men in mentoring roles. Terms, like the "good-old-boy" network, have arisen from out of the help network that has long existed between men. And the actual term mentoring arose among professional male networking organizations. Traditionally, women have always had less access to networking and mentoring help. Another factor in why women have been limited in attaining mentorship is linked to deep-seated gender schemas and societal norms about how women should behave. Rankin suggested that women with strong leadership qualities – strength, decisiveness, assertiveness, charisma, and a strong, disciplined work ethic – are often negatively perceived and not adequately encouraged by other women. It is as though an overly ambitious woman has stepped out of line in some way by aggressively pursuing success, and she will often be subtly sanctioned by other women for doing so. Most research studies have found that these tendencies among women are not well-recognized or well

understood. However, it is more fully understood that it takes a strong, confident woman with a comfortable self-esteem to successfully mentor another woman.

If we, as RWA members, are not effectively mentoring within our local RWA chapters, we may be missing out on a valuable opportunity to either serve as a mentor or to be helped in a mentoring partnership. Since two of our primary objectives in the RWA are to provide an avenue of support and fellowship among romance writers and to help new writers get published, mentoring could be an invaluable tool to be utilized within our local chapters. Each chapter could pair new, productive, unpublished writers with experienced, well-published writers in mentoring partnerships. Of course the main question will be if the published writers in a local RWA organization will be excited about sharing what they have learned with another aspiring writer and will be willing to take the time to work with a new writer committedly, or if they will simply continue to hold their knowledge to themselves, forcing other aspiring authors to just eventually find their own way into the field on their own.

If you have no mentor and cannot find one, there is a beautiful website by an Irish romance novelist, Tracy Culleton, that may be a help to you in your journey as either a mentor or a mentee. The website is <http://www.fiction-writers-mentor.com/> Culleton wrote that she had to find her own way into the world of publishing but that she was excited now about mentoring and sharing what she had learned with others. Her website demonstrates this viewpoint and is very informative. Culleton's willingness to freely share her expertise and knowledge is the heart and spirit that would be inspiring to see within all our local organizations.