

Mentorship: Understanding a Leader's Investment

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Master Sgt. Fa'amanu Teofilo provides guidance to Pvt. Dilikan Santos during a field training exercise. Both were with 4960th Multifunctional Training Brigade, 9th Mission Support Command. (U.S. Army Photo courtesy of 9th Mission Support Command Public Affairs)

It goes without saying that we as leaders have many duties and responsibilities within our Army. Of course, these duties and responsibilities are far too numerous and broad to list in this short article. Each of them warrant a certain priority or level of importance in regards to our personal and professional daily routine as we assist in leading our Army. Whereas a particular duty or responsibility may be of utmost importance to one leader or be considered the lowest priority to another, without fail as leaders we all do have one common responsibility, which is equal and should be each and every leader's top priority - to take care of SOLDIERS.

As leaders we must "invest" in our Army, that investment is the development of the next generation of great leaders that will guide the future of our Army. This leader development cycle begins early in our careers when we self-identify at least one strong leader we would like to emulate and eventually allow to them become our mentor. Over a period through our training, education, and experience we begin to develop as leaders who are capable of leading other Soldiers. It is well known that we do not get everything in regards to leadership from our NCO Education System so we often question and seek guidance from our mentors on how to properly lead and develop Soldiers of our own. Somewhere in this process, if we truly were trying to be the example of standards, discipline and expertise, one of our Soldiers saw those traits in us and they in turn selected you to become their mentor, and so the mentorship cycle began. Our survival as the top military force depends on this cycle to be never ending and for leaders to understand that developing the next generation of leaders must be a priority to all. In order to remain the most powerful, respected and feared military in the world this investment is really our greatest contribution to the Army. Without this investment and the continual development of strong outstanding leaders, our Army will not continue to lead the way for others to follow or to be feared if crossed.

So what is a mentor? Out of the Merriam-Webster online dictionary I found two pertinent definitions. Both of these definitions are simple, concise, to the point, and easily understood by all Soldiers. Of note, both the noun and verb forms of mentor are relevant to our discussion as a professional and must be clearly understood.

men-tor *noun* \ˈmen-ˌtôr, -tər\ : someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person

mentor *transitive verb* : to teach or give advice or guidance to (someone, such as a less experienced person or a child) : to act as a mentor for (someone)

Also important to understanding mentorship, is understanding what the Army's definition of mentorship is. According to Army Regulation 600-100 (http://www.apd.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN3758_AR_600-100_FINAL_WEB_.pdf), Army Profession and Leadership Policy, "Mentorship is the voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience that is characterized by mutual trust and respect. The focus of mentorship is voluntary mentoring that extends beyond the scope of chain of command relationships and occurs when a mentor provides the mentee advice and counsel over a period of time. Effective mentorship will positively impact personal and professional development."

Becoming a mentor is more than just leadership. Sure you must be a leader in order to be a mentor, either a formal or an informal leader, but you may not necessarily be a mentor based solely on the fact that you are a leader. Becoming a mentor is determined by your success as a leader and a Soldier's desire to follow in your path, through your guidance and counsel. Human dynamics plays a role in our development. As we grow and learn throughout our military career, naturally we tend to want to follow and emulate those people we identify as strong leaders who will guide us in the right direction and who we view as being successful.

Throughout our careers, we will encounter many different types of leaders with many different leadership styles and qualities that either makes them the "gold standard" of leadership in our eyes or an example of what "not to be" as a leader. Of these many leaders, only a small number will stand out and leave a lasting impression on us both personally and professionally. Some will be good leaders that we remember periodically as we relive and retell our past. Even a smaller number will be great leaders from which we will truly learn and will often recount their lessons and apply their leadership techniques and styles in similar situations we face. Then there are those very few that become your "mentor." Those carefully selected leaders become the persons which you will continually contact in order to provide you with the occasional answer or guidance and assist you through your problems, be they personal or professional. You may not always agree with them or even follow their guidance but you will trust whole heartedly in their thoughts and use their experience and advice to determine your actions. It is in that relationship based on trust when you realize that you truly have a mentor.

Mentors are selected by the Soldier

While true mentorship entails a commitment by both the mentor and the mentored, the selection of a mentor is determined by the Soldier, it cannot be based upon position, rank or military occupational specialty. Those few "spotlight leaders" can put themselves out there and even ask or volunteer to become a mentor but without the Soldier identifying and trusting the leadership qualities possessed by the leader they will never be selected or recognized as a mentor. Regardless of how bad you may want to become a mentor for a young Soldier, if that Soldier does not have the faith and confidence in you as a leader they will not accept you as a mentor. Ironically, this is not always a two way street, often times a leader becomes a mentor without the knowledge of or ever being approached or questioned. This is possible due to the leader's positive leadership qualities that are recognized and sought out by subordinates. Young Soldiers follow and emulate their qualities out of a desire to become the same type of positive influence on their Soldiers throughout their career. At this point the mentor has essentially become one of those few great leaders we learn from. While this indirect form may be considered mentorship, it is not truly as effective nor will this form ever truly reach the full potential as a fully established mentoring relationship.

Over the course of my career, I have chosen four mentors. I chose each at different points throughout my service and each were chosen for different reasons. All four possess similarities but each has a special quality unique to their person or leadership style. Of these four, there was only a verbal discussion or commitment to mentorship with one, possibly two of them. I feel this is important to note and supports the fact that in the end, the Soldier chooses the mentor. After talking to many Soldiers and my mentors concerning this topic I realize that my selection process, reasons and needs were no different from any of theirs. Two of my mentors really have no idea of the position that they hold in my career, one may have offered himself (volunteered) to become my mentor with no actual commitment from me, and only the remaining one of the four has the knowledge and agreement by me to serve as my mentor.

Also important to note in these relationships is the wide variety of Soldiers chosen to be my mentors. One was a lieutenant colonel at the time with whom I had little actual personal interaction but he was someone that I admired for his commitment to our profession, his passion for his service. The second was a newly promoted sergeant major who was an authoritative type leader who understood that Soldiers occasionally need "tough love" while also allowing them to develop and learn. He possessed combat experience, professionalism, pride in self and unit and loyalty. The third is a peer who has had a tremendous impact and influence on me long before he ever knew it. This leader has unquestioned loyalty, his competence as a leader and Soldier is beyond reproach and his dedication to Soldiers is what drives him on a daily basis. He truly is one of the most professional leaders I know. I probably selected him as a mentor around the time he was a sergeant first class and to this day he may not even know or realize that I consider him a mentor and a friend. The fourth offered himself as a mentor and chose to mentor me. We both share in this commitment and understand our roles. I most often choose the fourth mentor when I need guidance. Like all the others, I admire his loyalty but it his love and dedication to Soldiers that I recognized early. He has the ability to lead Soldiers and get their very last 100 percent, push them to the brink, and then bring them back. Most of all, he has the ability to develop Soldiers by allowing them to lead themselves, even if they are unaware of it at the time. All four have had long and storied careers in the military. The lieutenant colonel has gone on to become a general officer, the other three have all become sergeants major. One has since retired but still remains closely associated with the military and leading

Officer, the other three have all become sergeants major. One has since retired but still remains closely associated with the military and leading Soldiers.

Leadership qualities must be seen and recognized in both, the mentor and the mentored.

I have realized that for a mentorship relation to begin, leadership qualities must be seen and recognized in BOTH parties. These qualities are discovered through time, training, combat and most importantly through counseling, both formal and informal. All good leaders counsel their Soldiers daily, out of this counseling, leadership traits and qualities are recognized and developed and so begins the mentorship relation. As I look back on my time as a mentor and as a mentee, informal counseling has been the most influential factor on both sides. A really good mentor always has time or makes time to listen and offer advice when sought out.

As the leader trains, develops and leads his or her Soldiers, a great deal of time is consumed with both forms of counseling. Through this counseling a relationship of trust and commitment is formed and when the conditions are right the leader becomes more than a leader, they gradually become a mentor. This is the time when the leader identifies the strengths and weaknesses of their Soldier and begins the process of developing or correcting these attributes. Through counseling the Soldier identifies the care and dedication of the leader and the leader identifies the commitment of the Soldier as a professional and in their efforts to become a leader.

In selecting those Soldiers I desired to mentor, much to my disappointment, it has not always happened. For some reason(s) some of the Soldiers I chose or volunteered to mentor did not see the appropriate leadership qualities in me they sought in their mentors. While disappointed, I never expressed my disappointment or held their decision against them. Instead, I looked back on my leadership style for that particular Soldier and attempted to identify where problems might have existed and worked on correcting those issues in the future with other Soldiers. This can be a bit of an ego buster and could become either a positive or negative influence on your own development. It is not easy to accept that you did not have what it takes to be a mentor for a young Soldier. As a leader you must look back and correct or improve whatever problems may have led to this decision, you must also realize that not every Soldier wants or is ready to have a mentor.

The same can be said for those leaders you chose to be your mentor. Remember true mentorship is a voluntary commitment between both parties. Just because you have recognized the qualities in one of your leaders that you desire in a mentor does not mean the leader view you as having the same potential. Then again this leader may not want to become a mentor for any number of reasons. The most common reason being their apprehension in regards to the level of responsibility and impact a mentor has on another Soldier's life. While they may be great, some leaders are not necessarily prepared for this type of responsibility and commitment.

Mentorship does not stop with the military

As an effective leader you must get to know their Soldiers and get involved in their lives. This is not always a simple or straightforward task. Many Soldiers are introverts when it comes to their personal lives and attempt to keep their families and personal lives separate from the military without realizing that it is virtually impossible to do so. Young Soldiers outwardly want leaders who train and teach them but they often want a leader to stay out of their personal lives and let them make their own decisions concerning what happens off duty and in their home. Inwardly they quietly, sometimes unknowingly, desire that leader who displays a genuine concern for them and their family on a personal level. This is where leadership goes beyond mere military basic requirements and crosses that line between being a good leader and becoming a mentor.

As a mentor, you will often be confronted with developing a Soldier socially, financially, educationally and with his or her family in addition to developing them as a Soldier. Long after your service in the military your mentee will contact you regularly on many facets of their personal and professional lives. This, in my opinion, is where the relationship changes you from leader to mentor. When the relationship between you and your Soldier goes beyond what happens at "work" and the Soldier looks to you for your guidance in life-changing decisions that affect not only his or her career but their family and their future, you have progressed beyond being a great leader.

I remember not too long ago as I was giving a young Soldier a ride home, he began discussing with me some of his problems. This Soldier was not the best I have ever had but I did see and recognize great potential and desire in this Soldier. As we continued the drive he mentioned many problems in his life; finances, health, career, marriage and his relationship between his wife, the military, and himself. Throughout the conversation I learned a great deal not only about this Soldier and his problems but also 'from' this Soldier. Naturally as a leader I began to give him my guidance on all of the problems he mentioned. I associated all of his problems and my guidance with terms he could easily understand. As we talked and worked on his issues I was careful to let him do some self-discovery and problem-solving (...develop Soldiers by allowing them to lead themselves) while guiding the conversation. Somewhere in the conversation I realized we had both made that commitment to become the mentor and the mentored. It was a huge burden and responsibility that I gladly accepted. Over the next few hours, days, weeks, and months, I often worried if I had given him sound advice.

Now it has been well over two years and the Soldier has gone on to become a solid leader that has taken my advice and gone on to do great things for our Army. He has strengthened his relationship with his wife, was promoted into the NCO ranks, has improved his overall health and now has his personal finances in order. Most importantly he has now become that great leader that is sought after to become a mentor for his Soldiers. Two important things happened in this conversation with my Soldier that began our mentor relationship. First, I was able to provide good, acceptable, leadership advice that was positive for the Soldier. Second, I also learned and grew from the conversation. I realized my responsibility and ability to be an effective mentor and at the same time learned some things about my own interpersonal skills through the advice I was giving the Soldier....some self-discovery and problem-solving of my own.

For almost 240 years our Army's greatest resource has remained the individual Soldier. Trillions and trillions of dollars are spent each year on research, weapons, technology, logistics, security and countless other combat multipliers yet simply put, our greatest resource and the our decided advantage over our enemies remains to be the Soldiers who enlist and follow their leaders with loyalty and commitment. As leaders we must "invest" in our Soldiers, continually developing and growing them into leaders themselves who will someday serve as our next generation of great leaders and "mentors".

Our investment is simple: develop our Soldiers through strong values-based leadership and mentor them in order for them to take our place and advance our Army to even greater heights. This investment sounds simple enough but it is more than just words and showing up to work. Becoming a mentor is much more than just being a good leader, you cannot come to work one day and say "I think I will mentor someone today." Mentorship is an unwavering, lifelong commitment between you and the Soldier. There may eventually be lapses in physical or verbal connection but the connection will remain, growing stronger over the years to a point that you're coaching and advice seems to become more like a conversation between friends.

If you would like to learn more about this topic I recommend you take the time to read Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (http://www.apd.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/adp6_22.epub) and Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22 (http://www.apd.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/adrp6_22.epub), *Army Leadership*. In addition to these Army publications, I recommend reading John C. Maxwell, *Mentoring 101* and especially Command Sgt. Maj. J.D. Pendry's, *The Three Meter Zone*. This last book was recommended to me by my mentor and I have given it to every Soldier of mine when they are promoted to the ranks of the NCO. If you have read it, great, read it again; if not, I highly recommend it.