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Leadership is an investment – be a mentor

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Army Staff Sgt. Stephen Littel, right, the master gunner for the 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, and Army Spc. Malakki Jewell, a gunner for multilaunch rocket systems with 2nd Battalion, 18th Field Artillery Regiment, talk about Jewell's future appearance at his battalion's Soldier of the Month board during a visit to Camp Hovey, South Korea, Jan. 6, 2017. Littel and Jewell are father and son who are based out of different U.S. military installations and recently deployed to South Korea at the same time. (Army photo by Staff Sgt. Warren W. Wright)

We have some fantastic supervisors within our military's enlisted ranks. What we lack are quality mentors. What follows is not an argument on the difference between managers and leaders. It is an attempt to urge leaders to invest in relationships with their subordinates. I know the importance of these relationships as it is an aspect of leadership in which I previously lacked awareness and skill.

I had many service members join my teams when I was a young sergeant. I followed our processes by the book — starting with the initial counseling to lay out expectations on professional culture, performance and addressing problems through the chain of command. Each month we reviewed performance and pointed out any notable successes and areas for improvement. We might identify training opportunities or set Soldiers on a college track to boost their skill sets, which was all geared toward improving their work and sending them on to the next assignment a little better than when they arrived.

I was a good supervisor, but I shortchanged many of these people because I was shortsighted. I know better now.

To be the kind of leader I want to be requires much more investment in my subordinates and in myself. Supervisors can follow organizational doctrine and be successful, but good mentors have to open many more doors to increase their knowledge and arm themselves with useful tools they can leverage to develop their people beyond professional acumen.

We all have dreams and are eager for someone to believe and invest in those dreams. Many of the young people I have encountered have goals beyond a stint or two with the Army, and from a big-picture perspective, those goals should be encouraged and developed. There are a finite number of senior positions for our young people to work toward, and it is a highly competitive climb.

However you decide to approach your mentoring role, it should genuinely reflect who you are and play to your strengths and expertise. My military background lends a specific approach to planning, which I incorporate whenever I take on a new protégé. Here are a few steps that work for me:

Find and focus the vision

Mentoring starts with trust and genuine conversation about goals and aspirations. The “five-year plan” is cliché but it is important to visualize the end state. I urge my protégés to develop a vision statement we can discuss and refine as the plan takes shape. Vision statements should incorporate the whole person, including health, leisure, education and family as part of the conversation. These elements impact what would otherwise comprise significant gaps.

Draft measureables

Your protégé needs to define each element of the vision statement individually. Maybe that includes attaining a specific graduate degree or credential. It might also spell out a specific management position. In the end, you’ll have a series of clear conditions or statements that demonstrate how to achieve the vision. Not only do these statements allow you to measure effectiveness, they are great tools to help your mentee maintain the right azimuth.

Backward plan

For each condition, there are steps to take along the way. If the goal is to become a managing director, then identify and map the positions from that goal. Think like a person whose goal is to run a marathon. In order to reach 26 miles on date x , they must be able to run 20 miles by date y . Continue

working backward to connect the target with the present and repeat for each condition to build a solid map.

Prioritize

Not all conditions are equal within the vision formula. Talk about the importance of each and categorize its priority within the overall equation. Some goals may change over time, particularly as they overlap or conflict.

Gather outside investors

Just because you have formulated a great plan on paper, don't forget others get a vote because they are also affected. It is a good idea for your protégés to talk through this plan with their stakeholders — spouses or other important people in their lives. Stakeholders who understand the vision and the map are more likely to support the effort, and they understand each element's priority so they can decide where and when to lend support. Don't be surprised when the map changes based on stakeholder input — buy-in is a good thing.

Conduct routine azimuth checks

Every person and plan requires varying levels of coaching along the way. Sometimes that might mean revisiting the plan biweekly or monthly. You're looking for factors that may necessitate slight changes to the plan, or to offer advice on adjustments to reach certain steps. You may find over time that the current plan looks much different than the original, but don't worry because it is your protégé's map to reach his or her vision.

Don't make them drink

This level of investment isn't for every person you work with. You have to decide, based on each individual, how much time and effort makes sense. You might encounter a person who doesn't share your or the organization's values, or is simply there to meet an end of their own design. These are examples of people who require a leader to supervise over the short term; this is an opportunity to save white space for others. Lead them to water and let them decide whether to drink; it is their plan and they assume the risk and reward.

What you have at the end of a successful journey is immeasurable.

Sgt. Maj. Tom Clementson is a senior military leader in U.S. Army Public Affairs, specializing in reputation management, and crisis and leadership communication.