



In a world dominated by social media influencers and artificial intelligence (AI), traditional mentorship risks fading — caught between evolution and replacement. Digital platforms offer quick access to advice but lack the depth, accountability, and personal investment provided by real mentorship. (AI-generated graphic by *NCO Journal*)

# The Sage's Dilemma

## Are Social Media and AI Reshaping Traditional Mentorship?

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**G**rowing up in the '80s and '90s — or as my kids call it, the 1900s — I was drawn to movies that revolved around the classic teacher-student dynamic, especially in martial arts. *The Karate Kid* was one of my favorites. Characters like Mr. Miyagi were skilled instructors and wise mentors, blending practical lessons

with deeper philosophies. As a kid who couldn't afford karate lessons, those movies sparked something in me.

Despite my admiration for mentor-student bonds, however, I never sought one out. I was reserved and too hesitant.

That situation changed when I joined the Army. I

quickly realized that mentorship was not just a feel-good movie trope. It was a real and essential part of personal and professional success. Receiving guidance from experienced leaders made all the difference.

Today, things are shifting. In a world dominated by social media influencers and artificial intelligence (AI), traditional mentorship risks fading — caught between evolution and replacement. Digital platforms offer quick access to advice but lack the depth, accountability, and personal investment real mentorship provides.

Traditional mentorship remains essential to professional development, fostering deep, meaningful relationships that digital tools and AI-driven advice can't replicate. Leaders must actively engage in mentorship to preserve its value, and mentees must recognize the importance of seeking guidance beyond quick algorithm-driven solutions.

## Early Reflections

When I was a specialist, people told me finding a mentor would be crucial to my career. The catch? It was up to me to seek one out. Mentors were not just walking around looking for Soldiers to take under their wings.

Army doctrine supports this notion, stating that “the developing leader often initiates the relationship and seeks counsel from the mentor” (Department of the Army [DA], 2019, p. 6-11). This didn't make sense to me. Why didn't leaders actively offer mentorship if it was so important?

Eventually, I realized why. A mentor isn't just any senior leader. A mentor must be someone whom you respect, trust, and believe can help you grow. If random leaders assigned themselves as my mentors, I doubt the relationships would have worked.

Even with that understanding, I hesitated to ask others outright. I might add another task to their already full plate. So, instead of formal mentorship, I relied on what I called *mentoring moments*: quick interactions where I asked senior leaders specific questions without making an official arrangement.

Over time, I found myself on the other side of the equation. Soldiers came to me for advice. It's one of leadership's most rewarding aspects. There's something special about knowing someone values your perspective enough to seek it out. When your advice leads to real, positive change, that's special, too.

Looking back, I wonder how many of my leaders I robbed of this experience because I was too reserved to seek guidance. That reflection gives me a new appreciation for mentorship. Reviewing my early Army years, it's clear how much mentorship has changed.

## Mentorship's Shifting Landscape

When I joined the Army, social media was in its infancy. It was a place to reconnect with old friends, check in with family, or take an embarrassing number of quizzes until I finally landed in the right Hogwarts house.



Mentors aren't just any senior leaders. They must be people whom you respect, trust, and believe can help you grow. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Thomas X. Crough)

Today is a different world. Social media has evolved into a hub for networking, professional development, and informal mentorship. Soldiers can join online groups, follow influencers, and crowdsource advice on nearly anything. This accessibility seems like a win, but what happens when digital engagement replaces real, in-person mentor-mentee relationships?

Every day, I see Soldiers posting questions in military-focused social media groups. They ask about everything from career progression to leadership challenges.

There's nothing wrong with seeking advice online, but it makes me wonder. Why aren't they turning to their leaders first? Are they worried about being a bother? Do they lack confidence in their leadership? Have their leaders, maybe without realizing it, made themselves seem unavailable or indifferent?

The truth is probably a mix of all these factors, but there's a bigger question. What does this shift mean for the future of mentorship?

## A Critical Observation of Digital Mentorship

The way people approach mentorship is changing, and it's concerning. Social media influencers, content creators, and AI-driven tools such as Meta and ChatGPT provide easily digestible advice. They're appealing alternatives to traditional mentorship. Why struggle to build a relationship with a mentor when you can crowdsource answers or get instant responses from AI?

Here lies the problem: Convenience comes at the cost of quality. After all, just because advice is easy to get doesn't mean it's worth taking.

Consider how many Soldiers may turn to online forums and AI for career and leadership advice instead of seeking out experienced leaders for real conversations. That might seem harmless, but it could lead to superficial, one-size-fits-all solutions rather than meaningful guidance.

For example, AI tools can generate technically correct responses but lack the human intuition, emotional intelligence, and ethical depth real mentors provide. Aboumoussa and Pfister (2024) warn that reducing mentorship to data-driven interactions strips away the personal connection essential for growth. When Soldiers rely too much on digital tools, they risk losing valuable critical thinking skills and missing out on the kind of mentorship that fosters real development.

Alternatively, research consistently shows that traditional mentorship delivers better results. Van Dam et al. (2018) found that real mentorship, not just casual online advice, leads to stronger performance, better retention, and higher morale.

Hill et al. (2022) support this, showing that structured mentorship improves career progression and job satisfaction, especially in high-pressure fields. More importantly, these studies reinforce that meaningful mentorship isn't just about answering questions. It's about building relationships that support long-term growth.

None of this means social media and AI don't have a place. They are great tools for expanding perspectives and increasing access to information. However, they should complement mentorship, not replace it.

A well-placed social media post or AI-generated suggestion might spark a new idea. However, it will never replace the depth of a real conversation with a leader who understands your challenges and genuinely cares about your success.

## Reclaiming the Mentorship Concept

So, where do we go from here? If we want to keep traditional mentorship alive, leaders must be more approachable and show they're willing to invest time in developing others.

Furthermore, Soldiers shouldn't feel like they're a burden for asking for help. Seeking mentorship is one of the best ways to show respect. It tells mentors that mentees value their experience and insight enough to learn from them.

Mentorship isn't just beneficial for the mentee. It's a two-way street. When strong mentor-mentee relationships exist, the entire organization benefits.



Today, social media has evolved into a hub for networking, professional development, and informal mentorship. Soldiers can join online groups, follow influencers, and crowdsource advice on nearly anything. This accessibility seems like a win, but what happens when digital engagement replaces real, in-person mentor-mentee relationships? (U.S. Army photo by Patrick Buffett)

Soldiers gain confidence, improve their skills, and engage more actively in their roles. Doctrine supports this. Organizations that prioritize mentorship see better knowledge transfer, smoother onboarding, and higher retention rates (DA, 2024).

More importantly, mentorship ensures that Soldiers pass down Army values and the Warrior Ethos through real experiences and personal investment (not just through regulations and doctrine). Mentorship isn't just about career progression. It's about building a culture of leadership that lasts.

### Final Thoughts

Social media and AI are not going anywhere. When used wisely, they're valuable tools to support



Structured mentorship improves career progression and job satisfaction, especially in high-pressure fields. Meaningful mentorship is about more than answering questions — it's about building relationships that support long-term growth. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Nicholas Brown-Bell)

mentorship. They should complement real mentorship, not replace it.

Digital platforms can help connect mentees with potential mentors and provide quick insights, but they're no substitute for genuine human connection. No algorithm, influencer, or AI chatbot can match the power of a guiding hand, reassuring word, or leader who truly cares.

So, here's the challenge. If you're a leader, be the mentor who makes a difference. Make yourself approachable, invest in those around you, and pass on the wisdom no social

media post or AI tool can replicate.

For those mentees still on the fence about seeking a mentor, don't hesitate. Remember, the *Karate Kid* would have ended differently if Daniel LaRusso had learned the crane kick from a Facebook reel instead of Mr. Miyagi. ■

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