

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK POLICE DEPARTMENT

# Mentor vs. Supervisor

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In Law Enforcement

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The probationary period can be a stressful time for police recruits. Despite their successful completion of academy training, new graduates sometimes find it difficult to make the transition from their roles as police students, when their mistakes can be corrected, to street officers, when their errors can cost lives. Whether they lack skills or confidence, some recruits simply do not survive the probationary period; they quit or get fired, leaving their agencies without the officers that the organization invested a great deal of time and money to select and train (Williams, 2000). They have their time with their Field Training Officer (FTO) to attempt to make that transition. A good FTO will take on a mentor role to get that officer ready for the street. Once that average of three months is over, the new officer will be “thrown to the wolves”. Even officers who make it through the probationary period may find their careers stymied by a lack of opportunity, or other obstacles that keep some employees from advancing in their organizations. It is at this point that the new officer will look to their supervisors for the guidance and wisdom to set them down the right path of their career.

I will be addressing the viewpoint of continuing that mentor capacity into the supervisor role, instead of just a strictly supervisory capacity. I will cover the topics of:

- I. Definitions
- II. The Role of the Mentor
- III. Benefits of Mentor vs Supervisor
- IV. Problems with Mentoring Programs

## **Definitions**

Mentoring is traditionally defined as developmental assistance provided to a junior employee by someone more senior and experienced in the organization (Raabe, Beehr, 2003 p. 271). Mentoring can be a voluntary effort, or as is becoming more and more common, agencies are adopting formal mentoring programs. Mentoring is not a new concept, however. The term Mentor comes from Greek Mythology. It was the name of the old man Odysseus left in charge of his home and son in *The Odyssey*. Mentor helped the boy become a young man, and occasionally saved his life (Inzer, Crawford, 2005).

According to Raabe and Beehr (2003, p. 274), the supervisor has responsibility of the progress and work of the employee as well as the conformity of the employee's behavior to department policy. Supervisors are often considered part of the administration. The Growth Connection is a consulting firm out of Australia. They further differentiate that the supervisor has authority or "positional power" over the employee. Their perspective is on the meeting of short term targets, and day to day work whereas the mentor will guide, suggest, and coach, but try not to use power to direct actions. They usually have a longer term, more strategic focus on the protégé's development.

## **The Role of the Mentor**

The mentor is expected to pass on knowledge of subjects, facilitate personal development, encourage wise choices, and help the protégé to make transitions. The mentor is described as a friend, career guide, information source, and intellectual guide. Mentoring research in the United Kingdom reveals that mentor criteria fall into three areas: being a good role model, offering guidance and counseling, and possessing strong knowledge and experience within one's profession. As a role model, a mentor should be adaptable, understanding, reliable, conscientious, and articulate. To provide guidance and counseling, a mentor should have a supportive demeanor and good interpersonal skills and remain accessible (Williams 2000). With this in mind, the role of the mentor must include:

- identify the career goals of the protégé
- provide career advice and guidance, encourage their career and personal development to the fullest, share own insights into the organization, provide suggestions on activities and information that would benefit the protégé's growth,
- recommend pursuits that will develop specific areas in the protégé's professional advancement, and assist the employee by being a reference and advocate.

Throughout all the research done on mentoring, it has been further accepted that a mentor needs to be an advisor, confidant, advocate, cheerleader, and listener. The mentor should be confident, secure, sensitive to diversity, and a good communicator.

Jacobson and Kaye (1996) examined mentoring successes and failures to learn from past problems and to enhance learning opportunities. Some specific mentor roles emerged:

- A mentor's role is to promote intentional learning which includes developing people's capabilities through instructing, coaching, modeling, and advising, as well as providing "stretching" exercises.
- Mentors should share their failures as well as their successes through discussing the realities of the organization.
- Mentors should be storytellers, sharing their real-life stories. These provide valuable insights, and can establish rapport with the protégé.
- Mentoring is a synthesis of ongoing events, experiences, observations, studies, and thoughtful analyses.
- The mentor and protégé are a joint venture of sharing responsibility for learning.

### **The Benefits of Mentor Vs Supervisor**

It was previously established that traditional Supervisors have a sense of detachment among the troops. They are seen as being there to evaluate, assess, and discipline. A supervisor as a mentor can be seen as more as one of the troops, "out there" with them but has more to do. "Leading from the front" if you will. It establishes more of a sense of trust and respect amongst the subordinates; much in the same way

a military infantry squad leader performs the same tasks with their troops, but when it comes down to it, are responsible for their praise as well as discipline. As a Patrol Sergeant who tries to adopt the mentor philosophy myself, I have found that discipline is received with much less resistance coming from me. They take accountability for their behavior, and accept the consequences. I have even had one officer apologize for letting me down. In contrast, when I was still a patrolman, I heard an officer border on insubordination with their Sergeant through the closed office door when facing a write-up. The Sergeant had a traditional supervisor philosophy.

Whether an informal arrangement between two individuals, or a formalized, structured program sanctioned by the organization, mentoring involves the provision of wise assistance by a mentor and a protégé. Mentoring operates on the assumption that people relate more readily and positively to peer assistance than to supervisory direction. It provides a nonthreatening environment for learning and growth to occur. There are benefits not only for the protégé, but for the mentor, and the agency itself as well.

The protégé is the obvious and objected benefactor to a mentor philosophy. They automatically gain assistance in developing the self-confidence that is vital early in their career to surviving in the law enforcement field. They get career insights and guidance that would not have normally been available to them, enhancing the quality and quantity their job knowledge and training; preparing them for advancement toward their career goals. Most importantly, with the right mentor, they gain what the media seems to suggest is not a part of law enforcement anymore.

Honesty and integrity are core values that must be present for law enforcement personnel to perform their duties successfully. These should be present in the new officer, but need to be nurtured throughout their career. The mentor has the unique opportunity to ensure the protégé builds their career on these values. Neal Rossow states: “The challenge of today’s law enforcement leader is to ensure that the new recruit maintains a belief system where words like honor, fairness, integrity, nobility, leadership, and character are not just words, but a way of life.”

The mentor benefits too. To be an effective mentor, they need to stay current on department policies, procedures, and practices. Staying current not only helps the protégé, but can prepare the mentor for career advancement as well. They take personal pride in helping to develop the future of the department. They are viewed as valuable in the agency, and respected by colleagues. New ideas and perspectives can be discovered by both the mentor and protégé; therefore broadening the mentor’s perspective on issues. The fresh perspective can energize and invigorate the mentor, renewing their commitment to the job and profession. By fulfilling the role of teacher, a mentor’s legacy will influence more than just that one protégé as the protégé advances and teaches/trains others.

Agencies benefit from mentoring as well. More officers complete their probationary period. There is increased job satisfaction and sense of camaraderie which leads to higher morale overall. With the increased job satisfaction, retention is improved because the officer will be more inclined to pursue advancement within their own agency if they had a positive experience with a mentor. As supervisor, the mentor

should be teaching the protégé how to do the mentor's job as well as their own, so that it is an easy transition when the protégé does advance.

### **Problems with Mentoring Programs**

The biggest problem with mentoring programs is that it is subjective. It depends on the quality of the mentor, the quality of the protégé, and each of their opinions on whether they benefitted from it or not.

Izner and Crawford (2005, p38) cite that Cotton, Miller, and Ragins studied the effects of marginal mentoring, the type of mentor, and quality of relationship and program design on work and career attitudes. Their study determined the following:

- Mentoring is good if the mentoring, formal or informal, was highly satisfying for the protégé.
- Informal mentoring was better than no mentoring.
- Formal protégés who reported being in highly effective mentoring programs reported more positive career and job attitudes than formal protégés who reported being in less effective programs.
- Protégés in effective mentoring programs reported more satisfying mentoring relationships than protégés in ineffective programs.
- Programs whose purpose was to promote protégés' careers had a significantly stronger relationship with attitudes than programs whose purpose was to orient new employees.

- Programs with guidelines for frequency of meetings were more effective.
- Programs where the mentor voluntarily entered the relationship were marginally more effective.
- Protégés whose mentors were in other departments were significantly more satisfied.
- Good mentoring may lead to positive outcomes, bad mentoring may be destructive, or in some cases may be worse than no mentoring at all.
- Even the best designed program may not compensate for a pool of marginal mentors.

There are also conditions that impede constructive mentoring. Potential mentors may be opposed to the concept because they never received mentoring, or they are experiencing career blocks that take away the desire to promote junior colleagues; the “burn out”. Potential protégés may be skeptical if they do not trust senior managers’ motives, if they do not respect the competence and advice of senior colleagues, or if they do not have the attitudes and interpersonal skills to initiate relationships with potential mentors. Senior management resistance can stem from a results orientation that overrides interest in people development objectives.

## **Conclusion**

No organization, system, or person is perfect. If they were, there wouldn’t even be a need for my profession. Being a supervisor is no easy task. Being a law

enforcement supervisor adds the extra element of being responsible for your subordinates lives, as well as productivity. While there are benefits to traditional supervision, and some aspects should still be incorporated into the job, the mentor philosophy offers more benefits overall. It promotes a sense of team, while still allowing personal growth and advancement. From my own attempt of applying the philosophy, I have seen the increased quality of work as well as productivity and the increased pride and excitement in the job, myself included. My "troops" have said they find it easier to come to me with problems, personal and professional, and as I mentioned earlier, they take more accountability for their actions, and accept the consequences. Through it all, however, they still have a level of respect for me as supervisor; they know there is "the line" not to cross, and that there are aspects of my job that they don't understand...but I'm teaching them.

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