

Mentoring in SIL and Wycliffe Bible Translators

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INTRODUCTION

My experience, as one who has been mentored throughout my career in SIL and WBT and as one who sought to be a mentor, has brought me to the firm conviction that mentoring should be a way of life in our fellowship. I will try to explain something of why I have come to that conviction and also to describe something of what I mean by saying that mentoring should be a way of life for us.

If we took the concept seriously and put it into practice, I believe it could go a long way toward meeting member care needs, leadership needs, and making us more productive. Also, it would make us more successful in partnership with nationals. These comments relate mostly to working relationships, but they can also apply to some situations outside of them.

MENTORING FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

Beginning at our SIL training at Norman [U. of Oklahoma] and extending throughout our nearly 50 years in SIL, there have been those not only training and supervising us, but also showing concern for our welfare and development, seeking to help us along the way. This is essentially what I mean by 'from top to bottom'. Actually, my mentoring has also included some from outside our organizations. My comments, however, will be mostly limited to those in some kind of working relationship, including colleagues not formally SIL members. I now see that the mentoring was informal and, for the most part, I was unaware of it. As I became aware of what happened, however, I came to believe that it was probably the most important factor in my development, productivity, and wellbeing. Similarly, as I was given increasingly wide responsibilities, I came to feel that perhaps the most important contribution I could make was to seek to pass on my mentoring experiences.

Most of us have one or more supervisors, and also one or more for whom we are in a supervisory relationship. My fundamental thesis is that for each of those, the principles of mentoring should apply for as long as the supervisory relationships continue. This, again, is what I mean by 'from top to bottom'.

I see two aspects of supervision that should involve mentoring: evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the one supervised, and guidance in planning.

The mentoring aspect of supervision means evaluating strengths and weaknesses relative to the job one is supervising, as well as the broader career plans and potential of the person involved. As the supervisor learns the strengths and potential of an individual, he or she needs to encourage the individual to move in directions that will develop them. That those directions may imply

positions way beyond the scope and responsibility of the supervisor should not prevent this encouragement. The supervisor can encourage an individual to pursue training or possibilities for which he sees the potential. They may go well beyond what the individual would have dreamed, but planting the seed can encourage them to think in those directions. The supervisor can also facilitate those possibilities by recommendations to the appropriate parties. I believe this is probably the most effective way to identify potential leaders, trainers and specialists in any number of needed fields. All supervisors can see themselves as steps along the way to realize the maximum potential for each individual they supervise.

More difficult, perhaps, is the responsibility of supervisors to help their staff recognize areas in which they are not strong and to guide them accordingly. This guidance might include steps to remedy any weaknesses, or it might be to help the individual prepare for and move to a responsibility more suited to his or her strengths. This might even involve a career change from language to support work or vice versa, or from translation to promotion-type activity, for example. Sharing evaluations with the one supervised needs to be done with great care. We are all fragile creatures and our self-confidence is easily destroyed. The right to confront is earned by first building trust. In general, the evaluation should start with affirmation. We should look for things to commend and point out strengths, and hold criticisms until we have built a relationship of confidence. This builds a context into which areas for growth and the implied adjustments can be fitted.

The discussion of evaluation makes clear that supervision in planning should include not only the annual or even long-range planning for the current role of the individual, but also long-range career planning. The supervisor should encourage his staff to share their dreams for the future along with their concerns. Those, in turn, can be combined with the direction the supervisor sees as potential for his staff. These mentoring aspects of supervision depend on the interest and readiness of the staff to accept the supervisor's involvement and inputs beyond the immediate job responsibility. They cannot be forced. Nevertheless, they can be offered. If the staff has no interest or openness to it, then it needs to stop there. It really depends upon the kind of relationship that develops between the supervisor and the supervised.

INGREDIENTS FOR MENTORING

My experience with the informal mentoring I had suggests a number of ingredients in the relationship that will promote and enhance its effectiveness. Although this mentoring is informal, I believe it should be intentional on the part of the supervisor. The supervisor, at least at the outset, should consciously seek to include the mentoring aspect in the relationship with the staff. The man who was probably my most effective mentor clearly taught me how he could make every part of our relationship a means of my learning and development. He included me in events that broadened my perspective although there was no need for my inclusion in terms of the success of those events. Once this perspective is well established in the supervisor, much of it becomes subconscious though ever present.

Effective mentoring must be based on caring which, of course, comes from the spiritual fruit of love. I believe this can and should be cultivated in every case. The supervisor needs to show interest in the staff's concerns, both work and non-work. This should include family, health, spiritual progress, well-being and the future. Such caring is primarily signalled by listening. It is very easy to listen just long enough to think of a 'solution' or 'example' from one's own experience. Listening needs to continue until the staff feels heard, not just until you feel you understand. Usually the signals are fairly clear when a person feels the supervisor has heard and understands the concern, whether or not a solution is at hand. Such listening could result in large, and perhaps unreasonable, expenditure of time. The supervisor needs to find a balance in stewardship of both his and the staff time. I think my understanding of such a balance has come primarily from observing how those who mentored me did it. Part of good listening, I believe, lies in encouraging autobiographical information, including lifestyle and value discussions.

In balance with listening, the supervisor needs to share him or herself. Discussion of circumstances can easily elicit your own vision. As you debrief situations or concerns, your own related experiences can be a real encouragement and help. I have been repeatedly encouraged by supervisors-mentors who have told me about their experiences and how they handled them, including their mistakes. I felt if that this person, whom I respected and admired greatly, had been through experiences similar to mine, had made mistakes, and yet had weathered them, there was hope for me. This, of course, involves making oneself vulnerable.

This brings us to humility, which I believe is essential to effective mentoring. Sharing of one's life, including mistakes and failures as well as successes, can be an important part of giving the staff hope. At this point, the supervisor is not relating as a superior, or one in charge, but as a friend.

Finally, mentoring requires modelling what you want to see the one mentored become. In our circumstances, I believe this involves a firm commitment to the task God has given us and to our vision, both on the broad level and on the level of the particular area of assignment at the time. It requires a balanced spiritual life that must be lived (rather than talked about). It requires an obvious integrity, a life consistent with our values. In my judgment, a balanced lifestyle is very important, including diligence and discipline in setting priorities (in my observation we do not have trouble with this) but also with flexibility which includes time for rest, relaxation, family and restoration. (I believe that we, as an organization, are very weak in this area.)

MENTORING APART FROM SUPERVISING

One important part of mentoring is recognizing when it is over. Most of this discussion is in terms of mentoring in work relationships. Whenever the supervisor or staff moves to a different position, that particular type of mentoring relationship ends. Where there is interest, however, a different kind of mentoring relationship can continue. I have been deeply grateful to mentors who have followed me beyond their area of responsibility, signalled their interest, and have been open to continue interaction. I have often looked to one or more of them for guidance. It is important that when the supervisor ends a relationship, openness and willingness for ongoing interaction should be signalled. The one who has been mentored has the choice to either follow this up or not. I have

had some very satisfying ongoing relationships both from the perspective of the mentor and from being mentored. They have both been important to me. Although this discussion does not include much on specially arranged mentoring relationships apart from the work place, I have found several such relationships quite satisfying. When someone has rather broad experience and finds a person who is interested in regular interaction, they can gain a good deal from regularly scheduled sessions to discuss topics agreed between them. In most cases, probably the potential mentor needs to signal openness to such sessions (perhaps at weekly or monthly intervals for an hour or so each time) and then leave it to the individual as to whether they follow up on the suggestion or not.

As I indicated at the beginning of this discussion, I believe mentoring should become a way of life for us. One endemic characteristic in our organization is that most people are overloaded. Even though one may feel mentoring is worthwhile, even important, the time investments required in the mentoring aspect of our relationships may seem impossible. My conviction is that this conclusion comes from a mistake in setting priorities. It is better to let other things go undone, though they too may seem important, in order to include effective mentoring from top to bottom. I am convinced that in the end, the result will be that more is done more effectively.

Mentoring in SIL – a sequel

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Enthusiasm for this topic and requests for more discussion of it have been most gratifying and heartening. This is an attempt to comply with the requests. One respondent asked for a definition of mentoring up front. I suppose there are many, but for our purpose here I think a description Dr. Larrie Gardner gave at a workshop on mentoring defines well what we are discussing.

“Mentoring happens when one person makes himself/herself and her life experiences, and attitudes, knowledge, skills, and resources available to another for the purpose of maximizing that person's growth in his/her life setting; communicating not only task-information but life skills, values and character.”

There was an expressed desire for more description of how the principles have been applied, via case studies. One asked if anyone has ever described how Kenneth Pike went about it. I have not seen any such description so I will seek to do that from the perspective of my own experience. Probably anyone who ever worked with or near Pike was mentored by him, so my experience reflects that of many.

Kenneth Pike

Although I have benefited from a good number of mentors, I consider Ken Pike the most intentional in his mentoring. I believe this though he never used the term with me. It began when Ethel and I were first year students at Norman. Although there were some 300 students in that course Ken found time to show personal interest in us more than once that summer. Later, as a beginning staff member, I would be startled to see him in the doorway of my office, suggesting we go for a cup of coffee. In the dining room Ken would describe his current research and, to my astonishment, treat me not only as a colleague but as a peer. If not his research the topic could be SIL matters, philosophy, personal matters, sports, politics, or anything else. He always incorporated me into the discussion as if I had something to contribute. Those times moved from frightening to fascinating to inspiring.

Another year, at the beginning of a summer, Ken asked me to go with him to the main campus to call on various university faculty and administration. I watched how he developed and maintained relationships and reported on SIL matters and his current research. He made sure I had a part in the interview, asking me to tell about some aspect of Chinantec or something else I was involved in. Walking from one office to the next he would debrief on what had happened in the interview, interpreting what he had said and why, how he understood the response, what he concluded about the atmosphere at the university and the people involved, and how we should respond. Often he would ask my interpretation first. In the debrief, he would commend something I did right or tell me about something I said that was unwise, and why. Although I felt highly honored, it took me a long time to understand that Pike was deliberately preparing me for the future, as he evaluated where he saw that I could fit.

It wasn't all mentoring for roles. Our conversations ranged the gamut of life, including: his theological and philosophical perspectives, how he guarded time for being with his son, how to deal with intransigents, how to play hard (he was really good at that). Somehow he always seemed to have the right questions to elicit what I thought, and then had the right examples from his own experience that would apply to the situation, whatever it was.

One summer I became dissatisfied with the way a certain course was taught and developed a proposal for a new course to replace it. Ken looked at it carefully, asked questions, set some careful boundaries and then said, "If you'll do it, I'll support it," and left it to me to implement.

He always pushed me beyond what I thought I could do, and then supported me in doing it. After the first linguistics workshop in Mexico he asked me to give a paper to the summer LSA meeting on an area of Chinantec phonology that fascinated him. He carefully coached me on how to go about it and then left me to it. After the paper he didn't participate in the public discussion, but you can bet he carefully debriefed me later, interpreting what had happened.

On his visits to Mexico after I became Director, he placed himself absolutely under my authority and guidance as to his activities, although he was President of SIL. Similarly, after he asked me to direct Norman SIL, he insisted on not going to the main campus for the early summer visits, lest he somehow inhibit my being recognized as now in charge. Later I had to plead with him to accompany me, for the sake of friendships he had made over the years. When Kenneth Pike asked someone to take responsibility he did not second-guess the way he/she met that responsibility. He might, and did, disagree with some things I did or proposed, and he would oppose them in appropriate ways, but never once did I doubt that he was for me.

He would look for ways to be helpful. The first Board meeting after I became Executive Director was in Adelboden, Switzerland. On the first Sunday Ken suggested we take a hike. On the side of a mountain path we sat and looked at Scripture and prayed, and had a long talk. I don't remember what we talked about or what he said. I just remember I knew he really cared.

That relationship became foundational in my philosophy of administration and leadership. Whatever else I could or could not accomplish, I wanted to invest in developing and encouraging those who crossed my path. I believe the number is legion of those who would say something similar about their relationship with Kenneth Pike.

Other Examples

Here I will discuss some aspects of mentoring via examples with which I am familiar. Not all of them involve me. I omit names to protect confidentiality.

Staff meetings afford an opportunity for group mentoring by sharing with the group the leader's vision and philosophy in the context of whatever the current topics may be. To keep the whole group aware of what is going on in the broader context not only helps each member understand where his/her individual task fits in but also builds a sense of ownership. The first time I was put on the Executive Committee in Mexico I had lots of ideas and many questions about the way things were done. I will ever be grateful to my elders who, rather than rebuke my brashness, patiently explained the background involved and why certain policies were as they were. Once one of them helped me get an idea into shape for presentation at the branch conference, though to this day I don't know whether or not he was for the idea. They were mentoring me.

Personnel reviews should not be limited to issues related to the person's current role, but should also include personal aspects of his/her life. One instrument I have used is called 'things to talk about,' which includes a list of possible personal concerns and plans and asks the members to indicate what they'd like to include in the review. Usually such opportunities are valued by the member and afford the supervisor an opportunity to affirm the member in a personal way. Some surprising things can come out in terms of the direction a member would like to take, sometimes in a very different direction from the one they are currently taking. More often it affords opportunity to encourage the member to prepare for greater responsibility for which the supervisor has seen potential. Far from focussing on climbing the corporate ladder, most of our people, in my experience, lack the self-confidence to take initiative toward further training or

toward more responsibility. I have seen people do outstanding study programs, or function outstandingly in leadership positions, which they would never have done if someone else hadn't initiated it, expressing confidence in them. Such people may need pushing if they are to serve up to their potential. I planned on our first furlough to pursue an MA, but had no confidence that I was up to a PhD program, or even that my leaders thought I should pursue one. Eventually Pike was very explicit in communicating his expectation that I should continue. That was both very encouraging and frightening. Later, in the midst of the program, I really wondered again, and this time my supervising professor gently and implicitly showed his assumption that I could and would complete it.

Mentoring should, I believe, be ongoing, possibly continuing after the work or other day to day relationship is over. I have seen it done by letters or even special visits to the mentor to seek advice or counsel about some situation or concern before the people involved. A relationship of confidence can continue indefinitely in encouraging the development of people, which is what mentoring is about. For this to happen two ingredients are needed. First, the person wishing to receive further mentoring needs to take the initiative. A former mentor should never assume the person involved is interested in continuing such a relationship. On the other hand the mentor needs to clearly signal willingness by assuring the person of his/her availability, and that there is time available in the schedule to respond to any initiative the person wishes to take. Often the person feels the mentor is too busy, now that the work relationship is no longer there, but is deeply grateful once he becomes convinced the former mentor really wants to interact when that is felt helpful.

Listening is a key element in effective mentoring. It is only through listening that we really find out who a person is, and where they are in their personal and professional journey. More often than I would care to mention I have approached a situation feeling I had a pretty good understanding of it, only to find after listening to the perspective of the person involved, that my understanding had not only been very incomplete but also had led to wrong conclusions. In my experience most people can accept hard things they would rather not hear, if they feel they have really been heard with a sympathetic ear.

Patience is another key factor. Sometimes it takes a period of time over a number of sessions with many questions for the mentor to gain an adequate understanding of the person's situation such that becoming proactive in guidance or direction will be fruitful. Until then he should just listen and ask questions. This is especially true where sensitive personal issues are present, as they will inevitably be in some cases. I have seen valuable colleagues made productive by such patience. I have also seen colleagues move to other ministries through such patience and understanding. The motivation must always be one of caring and of love, never simply the task before one.

The focus of mentoring should be encouragement and affirmation. Probably none of us is so self-confident we don't need reassurance from someone we believe understands. Even the most confident of us need assurance that others understand us and what we propose, and usually we assume that when they do understand they will have suggestions for change. I have had people who reported to me conclude that I was not adequately evaluating their plans and work because I

didn't offer criticisms and changes. The fact is, not only was I fully satisfied and confident of their plans and activities, but also I felt they knew better than I what the needs were and how to go about meeting them. What I failed to do was say enough to show that I really had studied their plans. I needed to comment on some details, even though I had no suggestions for change.

Helpful mentoring, however, also needs to include correction, exhortation, even confrontation. The need for confrontation is probably the most difficult responsibility in mentoring. Sometimes it seems necessary for the mentor to face a person with a need to make changes in behavior or understanding for which he/she has not yet shown openness. Rarely, the time comes when with all the patience exercised, the mentor feels they remain on dead center and are getting nowhere. It may be necessary to overtly state that and suggest the mentoring be discontinued. I have seen it happen that in such a situation the person recognized he hadn't really been listening to the mentor, and with that recognition began to listen carefully and then the situation moved in a positive direction. I consider that kind of confrontation a last resort, to be done only when convinced it is necessary. I would guess the proportion for affirmation and encouragement versus correction and confrontation should be something on the order of 90 to 10. This is particularly so in the context of the high level of commitment and motivation of the people with whom we work.

We must recognize that mentoring, no matter how well motivated and skillful, will not always be successful. We cannot develop people; we can only facilitate development, and offer help when they want it. And when they do want it, we can not only help but we can become their advocates.

Mentoring should always be seen as a two-way street. I have worked with many people who had skills and gifts I lacked. Though I could be helpful in their development, I needed to also learn from them. Clearly my relationship with Ken Pike was entirely, from my perspective, one of learning from him. Even so, to my surprise, he would often seek my advice about this or that.

The examples I have alluded to thus far have at least begun with some kind of work relationship. I have also seen some mentoring relationships that resulted from brief contact where a potential was seen, the offer was made even though there was no work relationship involved, and regular sessions were scheduled for the purpose of passing along experience that would be helpful to the person being mentored. Such sessions, perhaps weekly for an hour or so, can be very satisfying to both parties. The mentor can suggest agenda, or the person can ask for discussion of topics of interest or concern. Such an investment can, in my opinion, be worth far more than whatever 'work' the mentor might have accomplished in those hours.

Mentoring as a way of life

Mentoring has been widespread in SIL. It has been effective in preparing members for increased responsibility. Intentional mentoring, passing along their experience by those who have it has, however, been uneven across our organization. To mentor newer members has not been automatically considered a responsibility of our more experienced members. Mentoring by all of us should not be merely fitted in as an extra; it should be an integral part of everyone's expectation, both with regard to those who report to him/her and also by them, in terms of being

mentored. It should be considered as important as meeting the responsibilities of any part of a position description or of achieving the goals associated with it. It should have as high priority as meeting those goals. In other words, mentoring needs to be a way of life that permeates all one does, not just an add-on. In addition to being central to the command that we love one another, it is central, I would say essential, to developing the human resources needed for the Bible translation task.

One might assume this is only for managers and other leaders. I don't think so. Everyone, whatever the role, gains experience over time, and there are always those to whom that experience should be passed along. The idea is that mentoring becomes a part of you, not a task. It is a part of the interest in and concern for the other person, which I consider the core of loving your neighbor as yourself.

So how do we make it a conscious way of life throughout SIL, not just for managers and other leaders, but for everyone?

I believe the answer is in explicit training in mentoring, but not as a course or workshop or a program in an entity. Rather, I believe mentoring should be consciously integrated into every preparation stage, into initial orientation, into pre-field training, into MDOC, and into leadership training. It needs to be consciously modelled at every level, and that, too, needs to be made the expectation. Something like 'things to talk about' (discussed with personnel reviews above), needs to be included in every annual review.

But how will this come about? Just saying so in a discussion such as this will not make it happen. Something as all-encompassing as this will not be achieved through assigning it to one training entity or other. Somehow there need to be those specifically charged and empowered to promote and facilitate the concept across all the structural boundaries, and to encourage coherence in implementing the training for it. I am encouraged from what I hear of steps being taken to bring such coherence to the many areas (including training) where responsibilities of separate entities or departments overlap. This does not mean training in mentoring should be centralized, but that the right hand knows what the left is doing in order to avoid omissions or unhelpful duplication, with the understanding that mentoring is central to our moving toward Vision2025.

Mentoring in relationships across cultures

The mentoring way of life must not stop with membership in SIL. It must characterize us in all our relationships, particularly with partners outside our organization that we are seeking to facilitate and equip to take the full responsibility for the Bible task, not only for preparation of the book but also ongoing publishing, literacy, distribution, availability, promotion and use.

We have plenty of challenge within SIL for sensitivity to cultural differences among us, mostly within what is known as the western world. These challenges make more complex the practice of mentoring. The cultural distance increases in moving to relationships with churches and other organizations of the non-western world, where the ongoing responsibility will lie. Most of the human resources for seeing Vision2025 realized are in the non-western world. We have the

privilege of appropriately passing along our experience and understanding in all areas, not just linguistics and translation. Developing relationships for effective mentoring across such cultural differences involves a depth of cultural learning and being mentored on our part that is far beyond just training in linguistics, translation, and literacy. That needs development beyond this paper, but I believe those relationships are vital to fulfilling our role in Vision2025, and indeed in seeing Vision2025 realized.

A veteran missionary I respect highly, as he reviewed the direction of his ministry said, “I became convinced that those years in Spain were but a preparation for what God had ahead. Instead of hands-on church planting, a core ministry itself, God was calling me to facilitate the national men and women for ministry, not through an academic process, but through discipleship and mentoring.” I am convinced that, though the academic aspects must continue in focus, the discipling and mentoring must be at the core of what we are about. Leighton Ford says that for leaders to grow there must be “senior mentors, who are very available to them, meaning not just time but vulnerability.”