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The Value of Lifelong Mentorship

Mentors are crucial to success throughout the entirety of a career.

Just as a mentor is vital to early careerists' success, a mentor also can support the professional growth of senior-level executives. For those just starting out in their careers, mentors can help guide the path toward personal career advancement, while for senior-level healthcare leaders, mentors can play an instrumental role in helping these leaders achieve their professional and organizational goals.

Today, healthcare is changing so dramatically that leaders at all levels are realizing the skills and competencies they developed in school or in their earlier years of work may no longer apply.

For example, mentors can provide seasoned leaders with insight on how to deal with politically sensitive situations in the marketplace. As leaders move up in their career, they will find themselves presented with increasingly complicated, complex issues and situations to navigate. An experienced adviser can fulfill the role of a confidential sounding board the senior leader can rely on to test different approaches or solicit

for insights into strategies or angles to consider.

Finding the Right Mentor

To find someone who will offer this type of advice and guidance, senior-level careerists should look to people they respect and admire—those they wish to emulate. Past colleagues are great mentors and people whom one likely can tap into for connections. In other cases, the senior-level executive may be looking for advice from a mentor with certain niche expertise, such as government relations or board governance. Someone who is employed at a different organization can be particularly valuable as he or she is removed from situations within the senior executive's direct circle of influence and may be a bit more objective about outcomes and approaches.

In my career, I've sought out mentors from among people I have been impressed with based on the work they have done and what they have accomplished. I also have chosen to not limit myself to a single mentor—instead, I have a number of mentors whom I can go to for advice.

To me, the most successful mentorships are those that have grown organically. The relationship stems from an interest

both parties have in each other. The would-be mentor identifies someone as having great potential and with whom he or she might wish to impart professional wisdom. From what I have experienced and observed over time, an informal type of relationship such as this tends to work better over the long term than a formal program that pairs people together. This is especially true for senior-level leaders who might benefit more from relaxed and authentic relationships.

A strong mentor, both for early careerists and senior-level executives, is one who believes in the mentee and has a sincere interest in the mentee's success. Such a mentor is someone who builds energy, sees potential in the mentee and can help consider and lower obstacles in that person's path. A strong understanding of what is occurring in the industry today is key. A mentor needs to be available and responsible and should be able to prioritize time to focus on the mentee.

Approaches to Consider

A mentoring strategy both parties should consider and practice is to continually ask questions of one another and seek to learn as much as possible. For senior leaders, it's not about having all of the answers but knowing what questions to ask. It's important early careerists ask questions that will engage the mentor. Likewise, mentors should not make

assumptions and provide direction without listening to the needs and interests of the mentee. As a mentor, it is necessary to understand how the mentee would approach certain situations and provide the appropriate advice for specific scenarios.

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However strong a mentor connection is, there is the possibility of the relationship fading. This can be due to the mentee no longer needing the same

level of guidance or because loyalties are forced to change as the market or organizational competitive dynamics shift. In general, when the mentor's advice starts to seem a little disconnected or out of touch with the demands of the current business environment, or when the mentor doesn't respond or follow up as readily as in the past, a mentorship is likely drawing to a close; however, it is important to continue to keep in touch. For example, senior-level executives should continue to correspond with their mentors and treat them as peers and colleagues after a mentorship has ended.

Senior-level executives should consider having a mentor throughout the course of their career. There may, however, be times in executives' careers when they

feel they do not have a trusted adviser. Sometimes, this is merely a matter of perception. Occasionally, a mentee will look back on a certain period and realize someone was there to take the mentee under his or her wing in an inconspicuous way. A colleague once told me he catches himself doing or saying things that a boss 20 years ago would do or say. He didn't realize how much he had been mentored and how much he had gained from that person until much later.

A Lasting Impact

Today, healthcare is changing so dramatically that leaders at all levels are realizing the skills and competencies they developed in school or in their earlier years of work may no longer apply. Both early careerists and senior-level executives are finding they need to reinvent themselves and may at times—particularly in periods of transition—need to be reminded of their value and contributions. A trusted adviser can offer perspective on the challenges being faced and the leader's ability to deal with such challenges. In all stages of a career, healthcare professionals should have the opportunity to partner with at least one person who is willing to advise them. As the saying goes, it can be lonely at the top and even more so when the hilltops and mountaintops of healthcare are crumbling and reshaping right under our feet. Seeking outside counsel is not a sign of weakness—it helps define not only the mentee, but also the field as a whole. ▲

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