Mentor

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EDDY WITZEL
MENTOR

Introduction

“You are the best mentor I have ever had.” Her words soaked into my soul like rain on a dry lake. I love mentoring and I want to be a good mentor. Lisa was someone I had admired for many years. She had so much potential. She could become what I could not.

Lisa and I were as different as night and day. I was a married white male with three boys. She was a single African-American female who trained and raised puppies to become guide dogs. I was routinely tired while Lisa had boundless energy. She had worked for me as a supervisor when she was selected for a one-year developmental assignment. I was so excited for her. She would be working directly for the most senior and successful African-American executive in our organization. I knew that he could see her potential and was doing what he could to encourage her.

Lisa needed a mentor for her career. I had directed her to someone, but that did not work out. I could mentor her some as her direct supervisor, but she needed someone outside her chain of command. When she won the developmental assignment, I volunteered to mentor her. “I would love to mentor you during the year away from our organization.” She eagerly accepted my offer, and we met periodically to discuss areas for her to learn and improve.

Lisa came across as arrogant and calloused; yet I could see the insecurity inside her. I began by addressing her self-confidence. I pointed out how she was overcompensating for her own feelings of inadequacy by being loud and boisterous. I then told her that she had the potential of becoming a senior executive. She needed to learn everything she could from her new boss.

We met from time to time throughout the year. I could see the growth in her self-confidence and she began to come across more professionally. It was at one of these mentoring sessions that she told me that I was her best mentor.

Eddy Witzel is a civilian engineer and team leader within the U.S. Navy.
“Eddy, you need to go see Lisa in the hospital. It looks like she has cancer and may not have long to live.” A friend from work had called me. I had been in meetings for a couple of days, so had not heard the news. The next morning I stopped by to see her. By then I knew the rumors of her breast cancer were true. She grabbed my hand and held on like she was falling off a cliff. I told her that I was her mentor and that before she made such a serious decision like coming to the hospital, she really needed to ask me as her mentor. She laughed and we both knew she needed it. The friend staying with her needed to run some errands, so I offered to stay.

I had prayed for her before I went to see her. A friend had reminded me, “You know she openly claims to be an atheist.” I longed to find a way to connect with her spiritually, but didn’t know how to bring up the subject. I sat there holding her hand when a volunteer chaplain walked into the room. He looked at the two of us and asked an obvious question: “Are you her husband?”

I felt honored, but she immediately jumped in like her loud boisterous old self: “No! He is not my husband. He is my boss!” Then she laughed nervously.

The chaplain asked if we wanted him to pray. She said nothing. I knew she was uncomfortable, so finally I jumped in: “Well, she needs it!”

“Well if Eddy says I need it,” Lisa conceded, “then you better pray!”

The three of us joined hands and bowed our heads. As the chaplain prayed, I thanked God for answering my prayer. I knew everything would be OK.

After the chaplain left, Lisa told me she was tired. “Is it OK if I go to sleep?” I assured her that I had my laptop with me and I would be just fine reading e-mail while she slept. All too soon the next friend arrived to be with her. She was peacefully sleeping when I left.

“Eddy, you need to go see Lisa. She is asking for you.” It had been a week since I had seen her. I had heard stories from many others who could not get in; she was feeling bad and often could not see anyone.

I stopped by the hospital to see her. “Sorry, your name is not on the list,” said the nurse at the desk. “Only those with their name on the list are allowed to see her.”

I didn’t immediately give up. “She has been asking to see me,” I explained. “Could you go ask her if she wants to see me?” The nurse reluctantly agreed.

“Yes, you can go in,” she said when she returned. “She wants to see you.”
I walked in the room and she was sitting on the side of the bed. Her legs were swollen to more than double their normal size and her stomach looked like she was ready for labor.

“Eddy, sit down here beside me.”

I sat down on the bed and put my arm around her while she grabbed my other hand. She introduced me to her sister. “Eddy is the one who makes me laugh.” She told me her chemo was starting soon and that she was going to get well. I told her that both of my parents had successfully beat cancer. Both of us were upbeat and positive, but I’m sure that both of us knew we were really saying goodbye. I knew she was tired so I left much sooner than I wanted to. I gave her sister my cell phone number and told her to call if she needed anything. I gave Lisa a great big hug and walked out of the room before she could see my tears.

The next day I got the call: “Lisa passed away this afternoon.” I later learned that she started chemo less than an hour after I left. She reacted horribly to the chemo and was throwing up and not in her right mind after that. I was the last visitor to see her while she was alert and feeling well.

Lisa’s memorial service was special. Her friends did a wonderful job planning the service. As I walked in, one of my employees asked me, “Eddy, are you going to say something? Please say something.” I assured her that if they gave an opportunity I would say something.

During the service, many friends shared their “secret” conversations with Lisa in the hospital. Yes, Lisa had accepted Christ as her Savior, and every morning one of her friends read her passages out of the Bible. As soon as they gave the opportunity to say something, I immediately walked up to the microphone. I shared the story of the chaplain and his asking if I was her husband. I told them I felt honored and how Lisa had just laughed!

After the service, I gave Lisa’s sister a big hug, and told her that I was her “brother-in-law.” She asked someone to get a picture of us together so she could go show Lisa’s mother her new “son-in-law”!

The doctor told the family that Lisa’s breast cancer could have been detected three years earlier by mammogram. I don’t know why Lisa didn’t have regular mammograms. There was a history of breast cancer in the family. Perhaps it was her poor self-esteem; she just did not feel she was important enough to take care of herself. It does reemphasize the importance of encouraging our friends and loved ones to get regular exams.

I have often reflected on Lisa since then; I had such big dreams for
her as a mentor. I wanted her to be a big important executive for the Navy. But then I have to ask myself: What if she had become that big executive but was no longer receptive to the gospel? Given the choice, would I rather see Lisa as a big executive or see her in heaven? For me the choice is clear. I can’t wait to see her in heaven and I know she will be there.

I told the story of Lisa because she represents the pinnacle of my mentoring experience. The story blends formal mentoring at work with my ultimate goal of mentoring people into God’s kingdom.

Management and leadership books promote the importance of mentoring. Welch and Welch (2005) say to “search out and relish the input of lots of mentors, realizing that mentors don’t always look like mentors” (p. 288). I am constantly looking for informal mentors. Every time I meet someone whom I consider successful, I look for ways to learn from them. I visualize what I would do in their shoes and explore their thought process in the decisions that I watch them make. When the opportunity arises, I ask for their advice. Often these successful people love to tell stories. And I listen intently as they relive some of the high and low points in their career.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) state that most leaders “were able to identify a small number of mentors and key experiences that powerfully shaped their philosophies, personalities, aspirations, and operating styles” (p. 188). Northouse (2001) identifies mentoring as the most critical type of relationship for career advancement. It was my careful listening to and watching informal mentors that allowed my career to advance. And the individuals that I intentionally mentored advanced in their careers as well. Kouzes and Posner (2002) express the importance of mentoring in finding your voice and clarifying your values. My voice and values are embodied in stories. I often share stories while mentoring or being mentored. Yukl (2006) devotes several pages to coaching and mentoring, while Bass (1990) devotes even more pages to mentoring theory.

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) point out the importance of emotional intelligence in mentors. They also state that most high-level leaders had cultivated their leadership strengths early in their career under the direction of a mentor. My own observations and experiences at work are consistent with these findings. My coworkers with mentors seem to go further than those without.

Mentoring reminds me of a ladder. A ladder helps you climb to new heights. A mentor will help you climb to new heights in your career, skills, or abilities.
References


