



What is Mentoring?

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Mentoring means sharing wisdom. It requires two roles, the sender and the receiver, and age and experience do not necessarily determine who is in which role. We can gain insights from any of the people we talk to or work with. For mentoring to be effective, both roles need to listen carefully and be fully engaged in the discussion. Mentoring can occur in all types of interactions, from the exchange of a few brief comments, to an extensive discussion. Effective mentoring may require follow-up: “I was thinking about what you said yesterday...” or “Here’s an alternative approach that occurred to me.” Follow-up is especially valuable when the topic is complex and time is required for reflection. Mentoring often happens and neither role knows immediately that it has occurred. This paper expands on these thoughts with some personal examples from the author’s professional career.

1 THIS PAPER OFFERS A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

What I offer here is based on my personal experiences in the professional environment. I do not draw on any theory or any research into the nature of mentoring and learning, but from personal interactions with others that either immediately or on reflection had some influence on the way I conduct my professional endeavors. The experiences described are selected from the many that I believe improved not only my abilities as a consultant in acoustics and noise control, but generally as a problem solver. I cannot offer experiences where I mentored others, because I never know how another has been affected by something I said.

2 MENTORING IS A LIFE-STYLE

As I thought about mentoring, I realized that it happens more as a result of how you live your life than of what specific efforts you make to “mentor.” How do we learn from each other? Schooling, training courses, seminars, etc. are often meant to help us learn, but I think the real learning comes from interactions with each other – from good, robust dialog. Devoting the

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energy required to really focus on what you say and on what you hear is the key. Providing detail in concepts you offer, and asking questions when you do not understand are the key behaviors for learning interactions.

3 THREE SITUATIONS WITH MENTORING POTENTIAL

3.1 Incidental or Serendipitous

These are the learning experiences that just happen; possibly from off – hand comments, or brief interactions that make indelible impressions which may become apparent only with time. Dick Bolt unknowingly left me with a different perspective on sharing expertise. Early in my career at Bolt Beranek and Newman, I worked on highway noise. A supplier of highway noise barriers had arranged to come by the office to talk with those of us in the highway group about noise barriers and how they might be constructed to be more effective. Several of us were skeptical about sharing what we knew; after all, being paid for our knowledge and advice was how we made a living. We all gathered in one of the BBN conference rooms, and the noise barrier salesman explained how he wondered if alternative constructions might provide greater sound reduction. For some reason, Dick was with us. While I wondered what, if anything I should say, Dick jumped to the white board and began drawing different possible barrier cross-sections, looking for ways to increase the number of diffractions. From that moment on, I thought that if Dick Bolt was eager to share his knowledge, then I could too. In the succeeding years, I have often provided ideas, despite not immediately being paid for the effort. Over my career, I believe this willingness has, in the long run, built trust and ultimately more business.

Two other examples:

Ted Schultz was writing a background report for one of my projects. He dropped it on my desk and said, “Sorry it’s long, I didn’t have time to make it short.” I’ve often repeated that statement – good, concise writing takes time.

I was reviewing noise laws from many different jurisdictions for Andy Harris. They were scattered disorderly across my work table, though the project was completed and the budget essentially used up. I asked Andy what he wanted with them and he replied, “Why don’t you charge another hour and file them so we can find them again if we need to?” My take-away: don’t be too compulsive about budgets; an extra hour to be organized is worth it in the long run.

3.2 Explicit

By explicit, I mean the response to a question or a posed problem. I was analyzing the possible noise reduction effects of a building that Massport was proposing to build along the Logan property line with East Boston. It was to be three stories, and the noise sources – taxiing aircraft – would be moving around many locations on the tarmac. I was concerned about the possible degrading effects of wind blowing from the airport toward East Boston, and went to discuss the problem with Ken Eldred. We talked some, and he basically said, there could be all sorts of unpredictable billowing turbulence, it wouldn’t happen that often (winds from the East), so sticking with the basic barrier diffraction equations should be fine. I did. The building was

constructed and when I was in East Boston afterwards, the taxiing aircraft were noticeably quieter.

There are some people I go to for specific types of questions or concerns. I am sometimes aware that some aspect of a project may touch on political sensitivities and have found several people I trust implicitly to provide insight. I can always count on Ted Baldwin to help me think clearly through an issue when I suspect there might be some subtle sensitivities. I have learned much from my discussions with Ted.

3.3 Experiential

This is learning simply by working closely together. Over the 39 years of my career, I have worked with more people than I can count. In my early years, I worked closely with Grant Anderson and learned from him how to break a complex problem into manageable tasks. Later, Grant, Chris Menge and I brainstormed how to optimize noise barrier design considering both cost and benefit. It was for me a learning experience in team work; each one of us contributing to developing the barrier optimization techniques that are now built into the Transportation Noise Model, TNM.

Working with Chuck Dietrich was an advanced course in clear writing as I assisted him respond to comments in an EPA automobile noise regulation docket. He took the time to go over what I had written word-by-word, discussing why use of a different word here or there would be better, eliminating ambiguities and redundancies.

My first noise measurement field trip with Chris Menge introduced me to what I think of now as the Chris Menge method of data collection: collect and document every conceivable piece of data and information possible. You never know what small bit of data will save you after you get back in the office and start to analyze the results. Often, having those extra photographs or site sketches and notes may mean you can make sense what otherwise would be confusing data.

Of course, Andy Harris, Bob Miller and Carl Hanson have all influenced my thinking and approach to professional life in many positive ways. I could not name all the ways, but a few come to mind. Andy has always had a healthy skepticism about relying on standard approaches to problem solving. He would look for better, more direct solutions, and his clients benefitted. Carl's tenacity has been an inspiration. When I first met him in 1973, he had decided to become an expert in rail noise and vibration. In the end, you might say he "wrote the book." Bob's love of people and kindness to all is a characteristic that positively affects everyone around him – as well as smoothing the process through difficult projects.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

"Mentoring" could also be called "learning from experience." The examples I have described are from a very few of my many learning interactions with a very large number of thoughtful people. I have learned from clients as well as from co-workers. I can only assume that others have had occasion to learn from my way of working and thinking. I draw two fundamental lessons from this brief reflection on my career of working with others. First, you

may never know when you have helped another advance their understanding or their thought processes; that is, when you are mentoring. This lack of knowing means one should try always to provide the most thoughtful responses; give others the respect of your undivided attention. Second, try to be open-minded and pay attention – be engaged or you may miss a comment or idea that could add immense value to your life and how you view the world. I heard Francis Crick say that he never wanted to be the smartest person in the room. I also heard the same said of Antoine de Saint-Exupery. This view seems a bit selfish, but it does make the point that associating with people who know things you don't is of great value – if you are willing to listen.

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