

Whether you are an in-prison mentor or a reentry mentor, building trust with your mentee is critical. Trust encourages truthfulness. If a person fears that revealing past failures will provoke condemnation, he or she will be prone to hide things. On the other hand, if a person trusts he or she will be accepted no matter what, it is much easier to reveal long-standing struggles and seek help.

Challenges to Trust

As a mentor, you will need to earn your mentee's trust. Those who have been incarcerated often enter relationships with their guard up. This caution often comes from painful past experiences in which they were:

- Belittled, abused, or neglected
- Abandoned by people they trusted and cared about
- Raised in an emotionally and/or physically unpredictable and volatile environment
- Betrayed or victimized in some other way

Because trusting others brought pain in the past, mentees may be hesitant to let themselves become vulnerable again. You can expect them to keep their guard up until they are pretty certain you are different from those who previously hurt them.

Are You Trustworthy?

There are many things about reentering society that seem overwhelming to prisoners — like getting a job, staying free of addictions, or reconciling with a broken family. Trust means knowing that if my efforts don't produce the hoped-for results, my mentor will be there to say, "Don't give up. I'm in this with you."

Here are some ways to help build trust in your relationship:

1. **Spend time together regularly.** Demonstrate your commitment to the relationship by setting aside specific time in your schedule to give undivided attention to your mentee's needs.
2. **Listen closely.** Don't be in a hurry to give advice. Instead, listen without interruption, noting all the details and observing the mentee's emotions and demeanor.
3. **Share appropriate personal experiences.** Admitting your past struggles shows you are human and helps increase closeness in your relationship.
4. **Tell the truth.** Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) is an important part of integrity. Your mentee will want you to talk straight and be real.
5. **Give positive, caring support.** Your mentee will mess up at times. Recognize the poor choices and talk about some ways to respond differently next time. Pray with and for your mentee as you walk together through these struggles.
6. **Keep confidences.** Never share with anyone else what your mentee tells you unless you have permission. The only exception is if there is evidence the person may harm others or himself.
7. **Admit your mistakes.** You can't be perfect, so accept that you will make mistakes with your mentee at times. By being up front about your mistakes and asking forgiveness, you will demonstrate humility, accountability, and credibility.

8. Follow through on your promises. This is crucial. Before you make a promise, think it through carefully and make sure you can keep it.

Hang in there, be patient, and pray continually for God's grace. Keep on displaying all the characteristics of a trustworthy person. Eventually, the barriers will come down and you will gain your mentee's trust. This is when your mentor-mentee relationship will become most rewarding and productive.