

Effective mentors focus on building supportive relationships, not fixing people.

Research conducted in 2001 by the National Resilience Resource Center at the University of Minnesota highlighted this important principle. The study investigated mentoring practices of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, one of the most reputable mentoring programs for adolescents. Several key findings of their research also apply to adult mentors and mentees.

Authors of the study discovered that mentoring relationships usually fall into two general categories: “prescriptive” and “developmental.” Let’s compare the two.

Prescriptive relationship: “I’m here to fix you.”

- Mentors see themselves primarily as an authority figure.
- Mentors believe their primary purpose is to direct mentees toward the values, attitudes, and behaviors the mentor considers positive.
- Mentors set the goals, the pace, and the ground rules for the relationship.
- Mentors are more problem-oriented, focusing on fixing deficiencies in the mentees’ attitudes and behaviors.

Developmental relationship: “I’m here to support you.”

- Mentors see themselves primarily as a friend and guide.
- Mentors believe they are to provide support and opportunities mentees lack.
- Mentors focus their involvement and expectations on developing a reliable, trusting relationship. Then, as the relationship grows stronger, mentors expand the scope of their efforts.
- Mentors involve mentees in the decision-making process of their activities, giving them a “voice and choice.”

The study reported that in prescriptive (fix-it style) mentoring relationships, adults and youth found the experience frustrating and non-supportive. Less than a third of the mentor-mentee matches met consistently and only 32 percent of the relationships still existed after 18 months.

However, in developmental (supportive style) mentoring relationships, over 90 percent of the relationships were still going strong after 18 months. Mentors and mentees continued to meet regularly with ongoing positive results.

So how do we put these lessons into practice? Considering these research findings, volunteer mentors should:

- Focus on building the relationship, not on fixing or changing the mentee.
- Do fun things together that naturally offer “teachable moments” as you model Christ-like attitudes and values.
- Listen more, direct less. Ask questions that help your mentee think things through, draw conclusions, and come up with their own solutions to problems.
- Deliver feedback in a constructive way and with genuine care.

At times it might be appropriate for a mentor to be prescriptive if the mentee is about to make a critical

mistake. But for the most part, effective mentors listen first, ask questions second, and advise third. Telling people what to do causes them to become more dependent, while helping them find solutions for themselves fosters independence.

Remember the example of Jesus, who influenced His disciples through His life as well as through His words. It was not Jesus who initiated teaching His disciples to pray. They came to Him because the power of prayer they saw in His life revealed the deficiencies in their lives. He didn't have to point out their need to change. Just being around Jesus increased their desire to change.

For information about mentoring opportunities in your area, call 800-251-7411 to speak with Prison Fellowship staff. They can also help you register for PF's free mentor training course.

