



# FireOpsOnline.com

Officer Development Series – *Leadership Skills*



## Mentoring

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

All “great” fire departments have some form of a Mentorship Program. It’s arguably the best way to train new officers and/or compensate for the inevitable loss of experience, skill and knowledge that occurs when senior members retire and probationary firefighters take their place. In a perfect world, veterans will have ample time to work with *probies* and pass on valuable information, but this isn’t always the case. Today, fire departments across the country are facing abnormally high turnover rates. We are losing seasoned firefighters, and financially challenged municipalities aren’t as quick to replace them. This affects the transfer of knowledge, as well as the preservation of fire service traditions and values.

If your Department doesn’t have a formal Mentorship Program, the first step your organization may want to take is to identify the challenges your department, as a whole, is facing. Perhaps morale is down. Maybe the overall performance of a specific group or company is unacceptable. Or maybe everything is running perfectly and you want to train your new recruit(s) to the high standard that others have previously set. Whatever your reason or challenge, the goal should be to prepare your team for victory and encourage new recruits and new leaders to step up. This, in part, is what a Mentorship Program can help you do.

A Mentorship Program can be specifically designed to do many things, including:

- Educate and prepare new firefighters for the job by developing their skill set;
- Instill the right values and improve the attitude and performance of the mentee’s;
- Help preserve the rich history and traditions of your organization and the fire service;
- Provide a program, standard, and mechanism for evaluation of specific members;
- Encourage all members to be proactive in developing the overall team;
- Increase confidence levels of all who participate in the program; and
- Increase morale by getting others involved.

Some departments have designed mentorship programs around new firefighters, others focus on preparing new officers to make the transition from firefighter to company leader, and help develop their field-leadership and critical decision-making skills. A truly great department will have both. If your department isn’t sold on the idea of this type of program, that doesn’t mean you can’t develop one specific for your company.

In Greek mythology, Mentor was the name of the person whom Odysseus (a.k.a. Ulysses) entrusted the care of his son, Telemachus, when he set out on his journey. Mentor was Odysseus' wise and trusted counselor and became Telemachus' tutor. Hence, a mentor is an experienced individual who can serve as a counselor and educator.

A critical step in developing a mentorship program is to first admit that your department or company's success is not determined by you alone. Your success will ultimately be determined by the collective efforts of your overall team; therefore, your effectiveness will multiply if you develop and implement a quality program.

At a young age, you learned about Inertia – Objects in motion tend to stay in motion and objects at rest will remain at rest until an outside force moves them. This is as true with people as it is with a ball rolling down a steep hill. Mentors should understand that their job is to be that outside force that moves another person (or other people) to take appropriate actions.

As a new officer, you may choose to personally mentor your probationary firefighter(s), but this isn't always the best option. There are too many responsibilities an officer will have that go beyond teaching a probie how to pack hose or do housework. Although a mentorship program will do far more than that, it's a wise move to use the resources you have available. With this thought in mind, matching experienced firefighters with new recruits will provide you with a great opportunity to get more members involved.

### Qualities of a Good Mentor

Mentors should possess certain qualities. They must be experienced in what they are teaching, goal oriented, calm, caring, positive, and honest. A mentor must also demonstrate strong communication abilities and be available for interaction on a daily basis. Not being available to provide counsel and guidance will ultimately end up defeating the purpose of a mentorship program. Additional qualities a good mentor should possess are:

Mentors make a difference: It's easy to cut an apple and see how many seeds are in it, but there's no way of telling how many apples can come from just one seed.

- Adequate to above-average training, coaching and counseling skills;
- A history of strong work ethic and a positive attitude;
- A belief in the mentorship program and a commitment to organizational development;
- The ability to relate with and respect others, regardless of personal differences, or rank;
- A good understanding of the goals of your company and organization.

The goal is simple; find the right mentor who can instill the right attitude, teach the right things, and prepare his/her mentee to do the job correctly. This is best accomplished by matching the mentee with someone who has been doing that job, "correctly," for years.

How many individuals can one person mentor? This is a difficult question to answer without knowing the particulars of your department, but many experts in corporate America believe the

ideal number is somewhere between one and five. Five “key individuals” seems to be the maximum that a good mentor can handle before being spread too thin. The problem is, key people don’t have the words “I’m a key person” tattooed on their forehead. You have to first identify them.

### What to look for in a Mentee/Protégé

It goes without saying that most of the time you may not have a choice. The probationary firefighter will be the one you want to work on developing. This is obvious. But let’s say your group is encountering the challenge of overall poor work performance. In that circumstance, you may want to choose specific individuals to train. If this is the case, consider the following. Your overall objective is to reduce the learning curve, motivate, and equip others with the tools they will need in order to reach their full potential. Doing so will not only benefit them, but the team as a whole. With this in mind, here are 8 things to look for when choosing a Mentee.



1. **Eager to Grow/Change** – Desire is the key to motivation, and motivation is the key to change. The person you choose absolutely must be willing to grow and should have accepted the fact that “for things to change, *they* have to change.” Begin eager to grow and change also means being “teachable,” which only occurs when the person is humble enough to admit they don’t have all the answers.
2. **Willing to Invest Time** – We’re all busy, but busy people are the ones who get things done. Look for busy people, but not people who are too busy doing destructive activities that aren’t consistent with those of a successful person. If the person is disrespectful and acts as if they don’t have time to meet with or talk with you, this is a problem that goes beyond mentoring and should be dealt with accordingly. You should seek to mentor people who would value this time and ACT on the knowledge that is passed down to them.
3. **Positive Attitude** – Without the right attitude, the efforts of a mentor will be wasted. The mentee should be excited about the opportunity that they are being given. It makes sense to choose a person who is coachable and wise enough to recognize that there is no future in any job. The future is in the attitude of the person who holds the job.
4. **Respectful** – Few things are more bothersome than putting forth an effort that is unmatched by the person you are trying to help. A respectful person is one who appreciates the fact that others (in this case, you) see promise in them.
5. **Purposeful** – Does the prospective mentee have a specific intent to apply what they receive from you? If not, you run the risk of spending your “quality” time with the wrong person. To have purpose, means the mentee will be willing to work in a way consistent with a person to achieve the desired end result.
6. **Confident** – This is the least important of the eight because many times, confidence comes with knowledge, and that’s what the mentor will be providing. With that said, every successful person must have some resemblance of confidence. Success and

confidence go hand in hand. People are just naturally attracted to someone who is confident and in control.

7. **Loyal** – Investing time and effort on someone who has not displayed a sense of loyalty to your organization could come back to bite you in the end. Loyalty should not only be a requirement for those who join your department, it is also a requirement for success in general. Master motivator, Zig Ziglar, went as far as to say, “Loyalty is #1 key to success.”
8. **Willing to be Accountable** – Accountability is the best way to measure the progress of a mentor’s work. Accountability is the modern day form of a progress report. Mentors and their protégés should communicate regularly to assure the actions the mentee are taking are those which will produce the results that benefit the mentor, the mentee, your company, and the department as a whole.

When choosing the individuals to be mentored in your program, remember that these people are your ladder to success. Investing in them will provide a win-win scenario, benefiting you and your department as much as it does them.

### How to Mentor

With regards to mentoring, the first rule of thumb cannot be overlooked. It is, *Begin with the end in mind*. In other words, you must have a clear picture of what you want your protégé’s to become. To do this, you must clearly communicate those intentions to the mentee, who should have the same end goal. Once this is established, you can begin the process of Mentoring. Below are some suggestions to help get a mentor started.



Here are 6 steps to effective mentoring.

1. **Choose your mentee’s** – Using the selection process outlined above, choose the firefighters who would benefit the most from this program. Again, you may not have a choice, probationary firefighters are the obvious individuals who need this type of program. Either way, you should still follow these steps.
2. **Begin the connecting process** – Reach out to the mentee and discuss your intentions. Make sure this individual, or group of individuals, are on the same page as you. Clarity is the key. The goal is to connect, communicate, then train regularly.
3. **Begin to equip them** – Once you know what talents, skills and abilities your mentee(s) possess, and you have discussed the end result you are both seeking, it’s time to equip them with whatever tools they are missing. Leading by example is often the best way to equip someone with the desire to improve. I would encourage you to use this simple 4-step process when teaching mentee’s how to do a specific task.
  - 1) You do it, they watch,
  - 2) You do it along with them,
  - 3) They do it, you watch
  - 4) You let them do the task alone.

4. **Enable them!** – Let mentee’s see what they can become. Elevate and empower them to “do more” by giving them more responsibility. Give them the opportunity to fail, and teach them the right attitude about failure. Explain that, the greatest successes in history are very often the biggest failures as well. These people ultimately succeed because they never give up.
5. **Encourage them!** – Mentoring is a source of positive enforcement. Encouragement will breed courage. I have often said and wholeheartedly agree that a person will raise or fall to your level of expectations for them. Also remember that you should always affirm publicly.
6. **Inspire and encourage them to be “self-motivated”** – You can do this by casting a vision. Intimidation doesn’t motivate people, but accomplishing their dreams and goals does. Once you discover what a person wants, use that to provide fuel for the fire – and to inspire! If you are an officer mentoring a firefighter who wants to also become an officer. That, alone, could be the motivation the individual needs to stay focused.

**A person will raise or fall to your level of expectations for them.**

---

### **A Final thought on Mentoring**

People rarely improve when they only have themselves to copy. When it comes to mentoring, remember that those who surround themselves with people that are smarter, more talented, and more driven than they are, profoundly increase their chances of success. Don’t ever reach a point in your career where you foolishly believe you don’t need a mentor of your own. Every day, remind yourself that you will not learn anything new by talking. If you are going to learn anything at all, it will be through asking the right questions to the right people, and listening.

### **Counseling**

Counseling, although similar to mentoring, is completely different. In the fire service, counseling is offered when personal issues affect an individual’s work performance.

Recognizing when counseling is needed and proactively addressing the issue without being intrusive requires greater knowledge and skills than an average team leader possesses. As a mentor, or company officer, when you become aware that one of your department members’ performances are being affected by personal issues, it is wise to take that person aside and ask if there is anything they need to talk about. Based on the answer you receive, you should be able to determine if this is an issue you can help by following the steps above or if this is a case where professional counseling is needed – if the later, it’s best to offer support, follow your departmental policies, and leave professional counseling up to the professionals.



Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso of the Kearny, NJ Fire Department, is a speaker, fire service instructor, and regular contributor of Fire Engineering magazine. Frank is the author of three books including *Common Valor*, *The Mentor*, and the best-selling fire service textbook *Fireground Operational Guides* (PennWell, 2011, co-authored by DC Mike Terpak). Frank can be reached via his website [www.frankviscuso.com](http://www.frankviscuso.com)